

A.F. MONTOYA

My Mafia
Protector



A CHANCE ENCOUNTER MAFIA ROMANCE

MY MAFIA PROTECTOR

A.F. MONTOYA

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“I’M GETTING MARRIED!”

I was in the middle of job applications, only half paying attention to what she was saying until she blurted that out. Elation swelled in my chest and I gave her back my full attention.

“Really?”

The joy in her voice was striking. Since it was coming from my sister who, in the last few years, had been struggling with her emotions, I was ecstatic to hear it. I’d been getting seriously worried about her before she met Anton.

“Yes! He asked me over dinner last night! He said I could have it as big and lavish as I wanted, as long as we held it here in Russia. Oh, Anya, you’re going to love it. It’s so much better than we remembered.”

My face fell, and unease settled through me. It’s not that I didn’t want to go to Russia. My sister and I were adopted from there when we were three and we’d always wanted to see where we came from. She went first because she’d always been the adventurous one. I, on the other hand, had a crippling fear of flying and couldn’t work up the nerve to get on a plane to visit her. I didn’t want to miss her wedding, but...

“You’re sure? What about the Richardsons?”

The Richardsons, as we referred to them, were our adoptive parents. Things were... strained with them. Nina and I often felt like they only adopted us as a political stunt. They

weren't cruel; they were just... uninterested. They gave us food and clothes, but they weren't really warm people. We still talked to them occasionally, but we weren't close. I just wanted any excuse I could find to get her to change her mind and have the wedding here so I wouldn't have to get on a plane.

She scoffed. "Who cares? They'll probably send a card or something like they do on our birthday."

I grimaced. That was probably true. Once we turned eighteen, they stopped bothering trying to know us. They were nice enough to send a card with money in it every year, but that was about it. They still paid for us to go to college though and they kept us off the streets, so I didn't want to dismiss them completely. Unlike Nina, who took it way too personally. She'd always been the more fiery twin.

"Y-you've been saying all your life you wanted to get married in New York City. I don't want you to give up on your dream and regret it later..."

"Nah, too expensive. Besides, Moscow is gorgeous, you'll love it. It's got that old world charm you love right alongside the more modern stuff. I've gotta call Khloe and tell her."

Swallowing hard, I shook my head helplessly. "I, uh, can't really afford to fly to Russia right now, Nina. Are you sure—"

"Oh! You don't have to worry about that. Anton said he'd handle it. He's paying for Khloe's ticket, too. I told you he's really well off, right? He said to ignore price tags and just have fun planning the wedding. I mean, who does that? He's so perfect, it's crazy. Anyway, we need to start planning. There's so many things to do and not a ton of time to do it. He wants to be married by the end of the year."

She kept going, spouting off her ideas rapid fire as I struggled to come to terms with it. She knocked down every excuse I had. If I didn't go now, I'd be that horrible sister who ditched her twin's wedding because she was too scared to get on a plane. I couldn't do that to her. We'd been attached at the hip since we were in the womb. I wouldn't be the person who ruined her wedding.

I had six months to figure out how to get on a plane. The idea made me queasy even six months away. How was I going to do this?



THE NEXT SIX months were busy. Right after graduating from college, Nina went straight back to Russia to meet with her fiancé and start planning her wedding. I started job searching, but given my quiet demeanor, interviews were difficult and I didn't have much luck. I managed to get a temporary job at a call center servicing accounts for a big company. It wasn't what I'd hoped for and I struggled with confrontation, but it was all I could find.

Between the new job and searching for something better, I was helping Nina in any way I could. I handled the invitations, bought decorations she couldn't get out there, basically anything I could deal with without being there in person. I convinced her that since I was just starting at my job, I couldn't take too much time off so she wouldn't make me travel out there any sooner than the wedding itself. She was put out about it, but she said she understood.

As the clock ticked closer to the wedding day, I grew more and more apprehensive. I even tried calling the Richardsons for advice. Randal didn't have much to say, but Carol was a little more understanding. Sort of.

“Did you tell her you'd rather not go?”

I sighed, fiddling with the edges of the throw I'd tossed over my legs. “No, I can't do that. She'd be heartbroken.”

“Well, I don't know what you want me to say, Anya. You're going to have to decide if you are more afraid of planes than you are of hurting your sister's feelings. I'm sure she'll get over it in time.”

Unlikely. The wedding wasn't bringing out the best colors in Nina. She was stressed to the max trying to get a lavish wedding planned in a foreign country where she didn't even speak the language. We'd been trying to learn, but she mostly

did apps on her phone when she was bored. I took a few courses in college, but I was in no way fluent. I was still better than her, though, which was why she was demanding I come out at least a week before the event to help talk to vendors. I didn't know why she couldn't ask her fiancé for that kind of assistance, but she barely listened to me anymore.

“Have you considered seeing a therapist? I've heard there are some good ones who help with overcoming anxieties. I'm sure they could help you if you really want to get on that plane,” Carol suggested.

I shuddered and grimaced. “I guess I can look into that. I'm not sure I can afford it, though. I'm not making a lot at my new job right now and I've been saving a lot for the trip.”

“Oh, well, if you need some money for an appointment, we'd be happy to help. Mental health is nothing to play with, you know that.”

Like I said, they weren't cruel; they were just kind of... plastic. It wasn't overly comforting, but they never failed to offer to pay for things as long as they supported the idea, and mental health awareness was one of Carol's campaign focuses.

“That's really nice, thank you. I'll see if I can get some time off to see someone about it.”

The noise in the background picked up, and she called out to Randal. “Randal! It's too loud! I told you to get your hearing checked before your next counsel run! Randal! Are you even listening to me?” She sighed heavily. “I need to run. Let me know if you decide to do the counseling and I'll send a check. Oh, and send me an address for the wedding. Randal and I can't attend, but we'd like to send something. Is there a registry?”

I gave her the information she needed, unsurprised that they weren't going. They cared more about their work than anything else on the planet, so we never expected them to come. Hanging up, I stared at the phone.

I wished I had someone to talk to about this. I didn't have a ton of friends. Most of the people I considered my friends

were Nina's friends who just talked to me when I tagged along with her. I was nothing like my sister, with her outgoing exuberance and spirited nature. I was her polar opposite. Quiet and unassuming, I didn't ever argue or send back food and I never, ever had any kind of adventures. I wished I could have even an ounce of her bravery. Just once, it'd be nice to do something wild and crazy without an intense amount of anxiety.

I was scrolling through options for therapists when my phone rang, and Nina's face popped up. I smiled softly. It didn't matter how long it'd been since we last spoke; I was always happy to hear from her.

"Hey."

"Anya! Thank goodness. I need your help."

My brow furrowed. "What's wrong?"

"Well, apparently in all this planning, I forgot that we needed a rehearsal dinner. I need you to come out sooner than we thought. I can't do this by myself."

My stomach dipped. "How soon?"

She huffed. "Like yesterday! Seriously, I'm not asking that much. It's only two and a half weeks away from the wedding anyway. What's a week early going to hurt?"

It'd hurt a lot. There was no way I'd be able to find a therapist and get enough help to get on that plane in four days.

"Nina, I have work—"

"It's not even that good a job, Anya! You're my sister! My wedding should be a priority! Anton was nice enough to get your ticket changed, so you'll be on the same plane as Khloe. Just get out here! I need help!"

It almost felt like she'd forgotten completely about my fear of flying. I couldn't blame her. She was obviously stressed, and we normally did all the big stuff in our lives together, but I wished she'd be a little more understanding. I couldn't disappoint my sister, though. We were a team, always had been.

“A-Alright. Send me the information, I’ll... I’ll be there.”

She let out a relieved sigh and the sister I remembered came back for a second. “Thank you. I really appreciate your help. Anton has all that information, so I’ll have him send it. I’ll see you soon. Oh, I’ll be sending a list with the stuff I want from home, make sure to bring it with you in your luggage. And don’t forget the napkins I had you pick up, and—”

She kept going, listing off all the things I’d need to bring with me. I wrote it all down, but my thoughts were consumed with getting on that plane. I didn’t know if I could do this.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, it’s unavailable? It’s my plane!”

The pilot looked petrified. And he should be. I was supposed to be flying home today on my private jet and he was telling me it was impossible. Nothing was impossible, not for me. Throw enough money at something and people will fall over themselves to fix it. Except for this idiot, apparently.

“I apologize, Mr. Romanov, we’re doing the best we can, but there’s engine trouble and—”

“And you’ve had a week to fix it. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re doing this on purpose.”

He paled, trembling before me. We’d already been here a week longer than we’d intended thanks to this and I had things to attend to at home. I had neither the time nor the patience to deal with this man.

“Ivan.”

He stepped up beside me, a menacing look on his face. He’d handle the pilot, and we’d find a new one to fix the problem. There was no shortage of pilots who wanted the job. I paid them well enough.

“W-Wait! I-I couldn’t get the engine fixed, but there is a flight going to Moscow in a few hours. It’s commercial but there is first class available and I’ve made reservations for you and your... men. On me, for the inconvenience.”

I scoffed. “On you? I pay you.” Making an irritated sound, I glanced at my watch. I didn’t really have much choice. I had

some people causing trouble with my supply line, and I needed to be home to handle it. “Fine, but as soon as you fix my plane and deliver it to my home, you’re fired.” Amongst other things. I’d kill him now if I didn’t have somewhere to be.

He nodded quickly, looking relieved. “Absolutely, no argument there, Mr. Romanov. I printed off your itinerary and—”

He went to hand it to me, and Ivan and Grigori stepped in front of me to block him. I turned my furious gaze back onto him and he swallowed hard, his hand shaking as he offered the paper to Ivan.

“Th-there’s a first-class lounge and I put in your meal preferences...”

Turning without acknowledging him, I stalked away. One day, maybe, I might be able to meet someone who wasn’t overburdened with incompetence. I’d yet to meet anyone like that, but then again, this was America. I doubted I’d be able to find anyone to have an intelligent conversation with here.

The idiot pilot aside, this trip had been mostly useless. I made some sales, but I never enjoyed working with Americans and preferred the mannerisms of my fellow Russians. Overconfidence and idiocy were the most common features of the American men I’d been working with. Even the women were empty-headed and shallow. I needed to escape this god forsaken place, even if I had to get on a commercial flight to do it.



THE PILOT WAS GOING to die a slow and very painful death. While we had no issue checking in for our flight, he failed to mention the hoops we’d have to jump through when it came to American security. I do not wait in lines and I have no interest in being so close to the commoners that I had to listen to their incessant droning. I had a private jet for a reason, and it was to avoid all of this nonsense.

We'd finally managed to get through security and Ivan was scoping out the direction of the first-class lounge when someone lightly touched the back of my jacket.

“Excuse me.”

On any normal occasion, a stranger touching me would be met with immediate disfigurement. However, when I turned around, I stopped abruptly. The woman who stood behind me was no threat. She was tiny, the top of her head barely coming up to my chin. Dark blonde hair trailed over her shoulder, so long it nearly reached her waist. Huge blue eyes gave off the impression of innocence as she looked up at me, her pretty pink lips parted in surprise. It wasn't unusual. I had that effect on most people. Surprise usually followed by terror when they realize who I was.

“Yes?”

She blinked rapidly, sucking in a breath before giving me a small smile. “I think you dropped this.”

She held out a passport. Grigori moved to take it for me, but I blocked him, stepping closer to the woman. My fingers brushed hers as I took it from her, my eyes narrowed as I studied her. She didn't look like someone who might be sent to harm me, but it wouldn't be the first time they sent someone beautiful to distract me long enough to get the job done. The woman didn't do anything though, didn't even step away when I flipped open the passport to check it. She just bit her lip, bouncing on her toes nervously.

I only glanced down for a second. It was indeed my passport. Since the idiots at security made me take everything out of my pockets, it must have fallen when I was gathering everything again. I could get into Russia without it, but it would've made things more difficult, and I was already in a sour mood.

“Spasibo.”

“Pozhaluysta.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Ty govorish' po-russki?”

She scrunched up her nose. “Only a little. I'm learning.”

A smile tugged at my lips. We were standing in the middle of the airport, surrounded by regular travelers. In most situations, this would anger me and I would be itching to leave, but I found myself curious about this woman and waved Ivan away when he tried to direct me towards the first-class lounge.

“What else have you learned?”

She pursed her lips, thinking it over. “Menya zovut Anya. YA ne lyublyu griby.”

I chuckled. It sounded like something you’d learn in school. Her Russian was elementary and slow, but she was doing her best and that was a lot more than any other American I’d encountered so far. Besides, her poor accent was adorable, and I liked to hear my mother tongue passing through her lips.

“Priyatno poznamoit’sya, Anya.”

Her cheeks turned a light pink, and she dropped her gaze, a shy smile on her face. “Nice to meet you, too.”

I wanted to speak with her more, but we were interrupted by another woman calling her name before I could say more.

“Anya, will you hurry up? If you miss the plane, Nina will be pissed!”

A flash of what looked like fear crossed over her face and fury settled under my skin. Whoever this woman was, Anya was fearful of her, and I didn’t like that. She glanced over her shoulder nervously, nodding once before turning back to me.

“I... I need to go. I hope you travel safely.”

My eyebrows jumped, and I even heard Grigori cough to hide his chuckle. No one wished me a safe trip. I had too many people in my life wishing my plane would burst into a ball of flames. Anya didn’t know she was speaking to a dangerous man, though, and I preferred to keep it that way for now. It was unlikely that we’d see each other again, and I didn’t want the moment tainted by fear.

“I tebe togo zhe. YA nadeyus’, chto my vstretimsya snova.”

She tipped her head, not quite catching that one, so I repeated myself in English for her benefit. “You as well. I hope we meet again.”

The smile she graced me with settled it. I would be seeing her again, even if I had to travel back to America to find her.

The first-class lounge was as expected. We were well catered to, and it was quiet. I managed to get a message out to Ilya about the change in plans. He was understandably irritated for me and assured me he’d handle the pilot himself. While we waited, my mind strayed back to Anya. She seemed too innocent to be out on her own. I noticed no ring on her finger and the woman she followed down the hall looked to be the same age. No guardian that I noticed. It was almost criminal to let such a sweet woman wander around alone. She even approached me, completely oblivious to the fact that everyone else around us was giving us a wide berth, either knowing who we were or understanding the energy coming off of us enough to avoid us.

The attendant informed us that our flight would be boarding soon. They boarded first-class right away, so we gathered our things and followed her to the terminal gate. She excused herself to inform the attendant at the desk of our arrival, and Grigori let out a sigh.

“Why bring us here if they are not prepared?”

Ivan snorted. “Because they are American and stupid.”

Since we spoke in Russian, we weren’t worried about someone overhearing us, though I was more cautious after my encounter with Anya. She didn’t speak enough Russian to eavesdrop, but she did remind me that we weren’t the only Russian speakers here. I looked around suspiciously, wondering if anyone here was a threat who might be listening.

Familiar dark blonde hair caught my attention, as did the sob that escaped her. “I can’t, Nina.”

My shoulders tensed. She sounded incredibly upset and when she shifted, I could see how pale her face was. She stared out the window towards the plane for a moment before squeezing her eyes shut.

“I know, but—”

Whoever she was speaking to wasn't listening to her, and I could see the despair on her face.

“N-No. I know I did, but... No, I'm not trying to upset you, I just—” Her chin trembled. “I'm scared...”

She flinched, pulling the phone away slightly as the person on the other end yelled so loudly I could hear it from where I stood. What kind of vile person would berate someone who was obviously frightened? I was aware that I did that on a regular basis, but Anya wasn't an idiotic waste of space who was looking to make my life difficult. She was trembling, fat tears slipping down her cheeks.

“Okay... Yes, I— I know. I'll... I'll get on the plane. I'm sorry—”

Whoever she was speaking to must have hung up, because she pulled the phone away with a frown. Her gaze lifted back to the plane, and she whimpered, turning slowly and walking off to the bathroom. Once she disappeared, I strode up to the attendants speaking at the counter. The one who brought us here spun around, flashing me a nervous smile.

“It will only be one more moment, Mr. Romanov, I—”

“I want to upgrade a passenger.”

She frowned. “But you're already in first class.”

Americans are idiots. “Not me. The woman who was standing over there earlier. Her name is Anya. I want her seat moved next to mine.”

The one behind the desk looked suspicious. “I'm not sure that's—”

The attendant next to me spun around, shaking her head wildly. At least she was smart enough to realize that saying no to me never ended well. She forced a smile, nodding at me.

“Absolutely, Mr. Romanov, right away. Let me just show you to your seats and I’ll handle it myself.”

Grunting, I glanced at Ivan and Grigori. They followed me onto the plane behind the nervous attendant, taking the seats directly behind me. I’d demanded a window seat so I wouldn’t have to deal with anyone, but the window seats were singles and I wanted to be close to Anya, so I agreed to let the attendant move us to the middle so we could sit next to each other. If she was as frightened as she seemed, she’d need a distraction. That was something I was more than happy to provide. If I got my way, she’d spend the entire flight underneath me and wouldn’t even notice we were flying.

“WOULD PASSENGER Anya Richardson please come see the gate agent? Anya Richardson, please come see the gate agent.”

I’d just finished rinsing my mouth out with the mouthwash a concerned flight attendant handed me. She’d been in the stall next to me and pulled it out of her travel bag while I was wiping my face with a wet paper towel. I was so nervous I lost what little breakfast I could force down my throat this morning. I was grateful I didn’t have to get on the plane with vomit breath, but I wasn’t entirely certain my stomach was through emptying itself yet.

The gate agent made the announcement again, and I sucked in a shaky breath. Maybe they were going to ask me to rebook or tell me that the flight was full and I couldn’t board. One could hope anyway. I grabbed my backpack, avoiding looking out the window at the massive jet that sat there waiting to whisk me to my doom.

The gate agent looked harried, a few passengers arguing with her about a change in seating. She shook her head, apologizing and offering them the seats they wanted on a different flight, and the hope grew. If I told Nina they rebooked me, maybe I could say it was canceled and avoid this whole thing.

The agent looked over at me and frowned. “Yes? How can I help you?”

I forced a small smile. “I heard my name called over the PA. Is everything alright?”

Something flashed across her face before she smiled at me. “Yes, everything is fine. We’ve moved your seat, that’s all. Here is your new boarding pass.”

I took it from her with a frown. “Oh, I didn’t—”

She didn’t wait for me to finish speaking before picking up the phone on the desk and making the announcement that the flight would begin boarding momentarily. The fear compounded, and I stepped back from the desk, trying to force myself to take deep breaths. The hope was dashed that I’d be able to get out of this. I already tried calling Nina, but she was dealing with wedding details and started screaming at me for wasting her time. I had to remind myself that she was under a lot of stress because she didn’t normally speak to me that way.

I stood to the side, watching the passengers slowly file toward the gate. I didn’t want to get on. I was frozen in my spot until a hand grabbed my arm roughly and shoved me forward.

“I can’t believe you called Nina to whine about getting on a plane. Don’t you know she’s dealing with a lot right now? You’re the world’s worst sister, I swear.”

Khloe was my sister’s best friend, and I couldn’t stand her. She was cruel and lacked any sort of patience whatsoever. I’d complain, but her manhandling was the only thing that was making me move right now. Besides, she’d make a scene if I tried arguing with her. I shuffled down the gangway, stumbling every once in a while when she shoved me again. It wasn’t until I stood just inside the plane that I glanced down at my new ticket. I frowned at it, grimacing as Khloe pushed me forward again.

“Will you just go?”

“I am, I just—”

“Can I help you find your seat?” A pretty flight attendant approached us, her head tipped and her hand outstretched for my ticket. I handed it to her, tugging at a lock of my hair.

“I think there’s been a mistake. I didn’t request an upgrade and—”

“Hold on, you got an upgrade?” Khloe nudged me aside, trying to grab the ticket from the flight attendant. The woman stepped back, her eyes on my ticket.

“There’s been no mistake, Miss Richardson. You’ve been upgraded to first class. If you’ll follow me.” She gestured behind her, leading me through the little galley to the next aisle. Khloe followed closely behind me, whisper-screaming at me for asking for an upgrade for me and not her. I shook my head, trying to explain that I didn’t, but she wouldn’t let me get a word in edgewise.

“Here’s your seat. Would you like me to take your coat?”

“I—”

I was overwhelmed, still trembling from even being on the plane in the first place, when my gaze drifted and landed on the person sitting next to me. A very familiar person.

“Oh!”

He was looking at some paperwork, a deep frown on his face, but when he heard me he glanced up, a slow smile stretching across his handsome face.

“I snova zdravstvuyte.” Hello again.

My face flushed. Was he the one who upgraded me? I’ll admit in our brief interaction, I found him fascinating. His thick brown hair was long on top and shorter on the sides, a designer beard stretched along his chiseled jaw. He had thick eyebrows and a strong nose, but it was his eyes that held me captive. Not their color, though they were a pretty chocolate brown, but their intensity. He seemed to exude power and ferocity and yet when he smiled at me, all that ferociousness melted into something more smoldering and exciting. That look combined with his nice suit and the heavy accent that made me shiver, and I couldn’t look away from him. For a second in that airport, all the fear disappeared, and I was swept into a moment that felt like we were the only two people on the planet.

Before I could reply to him, Khloe grabbed my elbow roughly, making me flinch. “Anya, switch seats with me.”

My heart sank. I had the momentary hope that sitting next to someone as fascinating as him would distract me on the flight, but her tone left no room for argument. Neither did the grip on my elbow, which she squeezed tighter for emphasis.

“I—”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. You’ll need to take your seat. We’re blocking the aisle,” the attendant interrupted. She looked a little nervous, her eyes darting between me and the man in the seat next to mine. I never did get his name.

Khloe scoffed. “I’m sure people do it all the time. Besides, she wants to. Don’t you, Anya?”

No, I really didn’t, but I didn’t feel like I had much of a choice. She was hurting my elbow and pushing me farther down the aisle, away from my seat.

A presence at my back surprised me, stopping me from going any further. His big hands rested on my shoulders, his voice deep and commanding.

“Release her.”

It wasn’t a request. It was a demand spoken with such disdain that if it was directed at me, I would be terrified. Khloe dropped my arm instantly, backing away from him.

“I wasn’t doing anything. She was giving me her seat. We’re friends.”

That was a lie, and I wished I had the courage to speak up for myself. I stared at my feet, clenching my hands at my sides. The man leaned closer to me, speaking low in my ear.

“The upgrade was a gift for helping me earlier. It would be impolite to offer it to someone else.”

That made me look up, glancing over my shoulder at him. He didn’t look angry. His face was soft and his grip on my shoulders was gentle. I didn’t want to offend him, not when he was being so kind. Dipping my chin once, I faced down Khloe and swallowed hard.

“I— I don’t want to switch seats.”

That was all the flight attendant needed to hear. “Miss, if you’ll please keep moving, and clear the aisle. We need to start our pre-take off checks now.”

Khloe seethed at me as she passed, but the man never let her get close to me, carefully tucking me against him when she stormed by me towards general seating. Another flight attendant approached, taking my bag and storing it for me while the man led me to my seat and removed my jacket for me. He handed it to the flight attendant before returning to his own seat next to mine.

“Th-Thank you.” It was barely above a whisper, still a little shaken from the confrontation, but he seemed to hear me fine.

“It was my pleasure.”

His voice was fascinating, the combination of the accent and the deep rumble making him sound intimidating and alluring at the same time. I opened my mouth to say something, eager to speak with him more, but the door to the plane shut with a thud and I jumped nearly three feet in the air.

All at once, the reality of where I was slammed into me and I felt my blood run cold. I can’t do this. I can’t–

“Breathe. You are in no danger.”

My attention swung back to him. He watched me, understanding written on his face. When the gears ground and I jumped and whimpered, he offered me his hand.

“You have no reason to fear, dorogaya. The plane cannot crash.”

My brow furrowed. “What makes you so confident?”

“Because I am on it.”

I glanced at him, trying to see if he was serious, and his smirk made me relax a little. He was teasing me, but it was a nice distraction. The plane lurched and slowly started moving backwards away from the gate, and I gripped his hand tighter.

“I– I–”

He shook his head. “Do not think of it. Focus on me. Tell me, what do you do for a living?”

I was shaking, sweat gathering at my temples even though my hands felt like ice, but he never faltered, asking me questions about my life to keep me distracted. I stumbled through my replies, my voice quivering. His unwavering support was soothing, and I almost wished I could crawl into his lap and hide, especially when the engines picked up and the plane started barreling down the runway.

Whimpering, I squeezed my eyes shut, my breath picking up. I felt like an idiot. I was sure I looked insane, but my stomach turned over and I had to focus on not throwing up all over the nice man who rescued me.

“Ask me a question. It will distract you.”

I still couldn’t open my eyes. I could barely think, much less come up with a good question. All I could manage was, “What’s your name?”

I felt his rough fingers drift along my face, cupping my cheek in his hand and turning me to face him. The plane lifted off the ground and a tear slipped over my cheek as I looked up at him. He smiled softly, brushing the tears away with his thumb.

“My name is Nikolai. Nikolai Romanov.”

SHE WAS TREMBLING. Her fear of flying obviously ran deep, and she struggled to draw in a breath. I kept my hand on her face, hoping if her focus was on me, she'd settle once we reached altitude.

“Nikolai... That’s a nice name. Do people call you Niko?”

Only if they wanted to die. Or they were my mother. I didn’t say either of those things, though. Instead, I tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “Would you prefer it?”

Some color returned to her face as she blushed, shrugging her shoulders. She jumped again and flinched when the landing gear was stowed with a grinding sound. I brought the hand she was currently using to squeeze mine in a death-grip to my lips, kissing her knuckles gently.

“You are alright. You said you recently graduated.”

She nodded, swallowing hard. I flicked my gaze to the flight attendant. She was watching us with an odd look on her face until she noticed my attention. They should have brought her a drink before we took off. She needed something to take the edge off.

The flight attendant looked around nervously before jumping out of her seat and approaching slowly.

“Did you need something, Mr. Romanov?”

“She needs a drink.”

The flight attendant nodded and disappeared before Anya could protest. She frowned, shaking her head slightly.

“I don’t—”

“It will help. You look pale, malyshka. You need something to warm your blood.”

Her eyes darted as she searched my face for dishonesty. I had no interest in getting her inebriated, though I was proud of her for being smart enough to question it. Women shouldn’t travel alone, it isn’t safe. I was reminded once again that she had no guardian outside of that horrible woman who boarded with her. She needed someone to protect her and for now, that was me.

“What does that word mean?”

That wasn’t what I thought she’d ask me, and I found myself smiling. “Malyshka? It means little one.”

Her face flushed. “Oh.”

The flight attendant came back, this time with a glass of champagne and another vodka for me. She set them down before hurrying back to her seat for the rest of the ascent.

I had to release Anya’s face to allow her to drink, and I wasn’t pleased about it. I encouraged her to take a sip, taking a heavy swallow of my own drink to show her it was alright. She seemed hesitant, and she grimaced, making me frown.

“Is it not to your liking?”

She bit her lip, her face only flushing harder. “Oh, I’m... I’m not sure. I’m not much of a drinker.”

Apparently, she was putting it lightly. She forced down the first glass when I turned to listen to something Ivan was telling me about the situation at home and by the time we were at altitude, she had finished her second and the flush in her cheeks was less about embarrassment and more about the alcohol in her system. It did seem to help her relax, though. She tucked her legs underneath her, leaning on the divider between us as she spoke to me. I found myself smiling more in

the last thirty minutes than I had in years, listening to her speak.

“I told her I was no good at it but she didn’t listen and it ended up looking awful.”

I chuckled. “It is her fault if she chose not to listen then.”

She nodded emphatically. “I agree. I wanted to tell her that but... I’m not really good at confrontation.”

I brushed my fingers along her jaw. “Somehow, that does not surprise me.”

She ducked her gaze, biting her lip. The alcohol loosened her tongue and I’d learned a lot about Anya since we took off. She was visiting Russia for her sister’s wedding, she was adopted, and I was right about her innocence. She didn’t tell me directly, but it was in her reactions to me that I could see it. She blushed every time I touched her and ducked her head a lot. It made me wonder just how far that innocence stretched. The thought made my cock stir, but I was too distracted by her to do anything more right now.

“Miss? I forgot to ask if you had any objections to the menu.”

The flight attendant was beginning to annoy me. She would pop up every few minutes, drawing Anya’s attention away from me. At first I believed it to be nervous energy, she was obviously aware of who I was and seemed to want to stay on my good side by being available when we needed her, but after a while I felt like she was distracting Anya on purpose. When I shot her a dirty look, she flinched, twisting her fingers as Anya looked over her menu.

“No, I don’t think...” She paused, and I frowned as a grimace flashed across her face. Taking the menu from her, I looked it over. It took me a moment to remember what she said when we first met.

“She doesn’t eat mushrooms.”

It was in a sauce on the main course. It was one of the first things I learned about her. Anya shook her head wildly.

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I can eat it. I don’t–”

“Give her mine. I will take the offered one instead.”

The pilot said he passed along my preferences when making these reservations so they should have had my meal set aside. The flight attendant nodded and hurried away just as Anya began to protest.

“No, I couldn’t take yours. You probably ordered it special, and it’s not like I’m allergic or anything. I just–”

Shaking my head, I ran my knuckle down her neck, effectively silencing her. She blushed fiercely, a tremble running through her that made me salivate.

“I will gladly share my meal with you, *malyshka*.”

I kept my voice low, loving the hooded look in her eyes. She was not unaffected by me and it was only the question of her innocence that kept me from pulling her into the restroom. If she was untouched like I believed her to be, a quick tryst in the bathroom of a plane was not worthy of her first time. She nibbled on her lip, her gaze dropping to my mouth before she looked away again. I smirked, turning her back to face me.

Leaning closer, I watched her eyes slip closed, her fingers delicately touching my wrist, keeping my hand against her face. I was just about to close the gap between us when the flight attendant popped back up again, startling Anya into jumping away from me.

“I’m going to set up your meal now. Would you like some privacy while you eat? I can put up the screen for a while.”

The flight attendant flinched again when she met my icy glare, swallowing hard before lifting her chin and smiling brightly at Anya, who looked confused.

“What screen?”

The flight attendant gestured in my direction. “Oh, well, there’s a screen between seats so that you can have privacy. I can set it up for you, if you’d like.”

Anya’s eyebrows drew down, and she glanced at me before her gaze skittered away. “If that’s... If that’s what Niko

wants.”

I heard Grigori snort behind me at the use of the nickname but I ignored him, glaring at the flight attendant who seemed determined to ruin every moment I had with Anya.

“I don’t. Don’t you have other people you should be helping right now?”

It was a warning. If she kept testing me, I’d take issue with it. She was already lucky she was still breathing. It was Anya that stayed my hand. I didn’t want to frighten her. Anya looked uncertain, searching my face again, but when I smiled at her, she relaxed and nodded.

“Okay. I’d like to leave it down. I’m just going to use the restroom before supper. I’ll be right back.”

Once she shut herself into the little bathroom, I raised my furious gaze to the flight attendant, switching to Russian because I knew she’d understand me.

“You are trying my patience.”

Her eyes darted around nervously. “I’m just doing my job...”

“You are being a nuisance and I grow tired of it. Consider yourself warned. Interrupt me again and you’ll regret it.”

She looked close to tears, and she nodded shakily, hustling off. She came back a moment later with Anya’s meal, setting it up nicely but she was gone before Anya returned. Ivan cleared his throat, drawing my attention.

“There’s been movement.”

I stood, both of us moving towards the back of the first-class cabin and out of the way of the flight attendants setting up dinner so that we could speak privately.

“Have they figured out who yet?”

“No. We’re still working on it. They did find the shipment with the tracker though. We should be able to track them to see where they are going.”

I nodded. “Good, send your brother in to follow it. I don’t want them finding it and us losing track of them.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket, moving to do what I asked. There was someone stealing from me and I was already planning their death. It would need to be violent enough to send a message to anyone else who thought they could get away with taking something from me. It’d been a long while since I had someone skinned, it might make the statement I was hoping for.

My mind on the enemy, I didn’t notice our irritating flight attendant pull Anya aside until they were already deep in conversation. The woman whispered harshly to her and Anya’s expression moved from confused to worried. When she glanced up at me and there was fear in her eyes, I felt my patience snap. The flight attendant just joined the list of people who were going to die today.

THE ALCOHOL HAD DONE a lot to take the edge off my anxiety and talking to Niko had wiped it out completely. He had this way of stealing all of my focus until the noises of the plane disappeared and it was just us two. It wasn't until I stepped into the bathroom that I remembered where I was. I almost changed my mind about using it, but the flight was long and I didn't have much of an option so I hurried through my business and almost ran into the flight attendant in my haste to get back to my seat.

“Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't—”

“Do you know who you're sitting next to?”

I frowned. “What?”

She took my arm, pulling me closer to the galley. It made me nervous, that was where the doors were, but she looked so intense that I forced aside the discomfort to listen to her.

“Listen, I'm not sure you're aware, but that man is dangerous. He's well known in Russia and other parts of the world. He's killed people for so little as sneezing in his vicinity. If I were you, I'd figure out some way to get his attention off you because once we land, I can't do anything to help you. I'm not sure I should even be talking to you now, but from one woman to another, I thought you should know.”

At first I thought she was mistaken. Niko had been nothing but kind and gentle to me. He spent most of the flight already keeping me calm and holding my hand, letting me babble and acting way more interested than I was sure he probably was

about the time I tie-dyed my sister's dress for her and ruined it. I couldn't see him as dangerous, but when I glanced in his direction a dark look crossed his face, his eyes narrowed on the flight attendant. She squeaked and spun, rushing back to the safety of the galley while I returned to my seat, a deep frown on my face.

When he sat back down next to me, I was a little worried I'd let it slip what the flight attendant said to me. I didn't want to get her into trouble, especially if he was as dangerous as she made him seem, but I always had difficulties keeping secrets. I found it best to just be honest because Nina said I had no poker face. I felt his fingers on my chin and when he moved me to face him, his face was void of any emotion.

“What did she say to you?”

I shook my head as much as I could with him gripping my chin. “I- N-Nothing.”

He didn't look like he believed me but he didn't get angry with me. His thumb gently caressed my cheek and soothed my nerves a little. Closing my eyes, I did my best not to tremble, letting out a slow breath. She had to be wrong. Niko wasn't dangerous. Maybe his intensity made her feel that way, but—

“Bring me the flight attendant.”

My Russian wasn't great, but he spoke clearly enough for me to understand him. My eyes flew open, and I watched as the two men behind us stood, marching towards the galley on either side. She'd have no way to escape them. I heard her cry out and a second later, she was dragged toward him, each of the men holding one of her arms. The entirety of the first-class cabin fell silent, all eyes on us.

“W-What are you doing?”

He ignored me, his narrow-eyed glare locked on her as he spoke to her in Russian. I wasn't familiar with all the words he was using, but his tone was threatening and she burst into tears, shaking her head.

“I didn't—”

“Do not lie to me,” he barked, making me flinch. My gaze darted between them and the longer she didn’t tell him whatever he wanted to know, the angrier he got. Terrified for the poor woman, I put my hands up placatingly.

“Stop, please! She was being kind, she wasn’t causing trouble. Please let her go.”

When he turned his furious gaze to me, I stiffened, trying not to let my fear show too much. I didn’t want to give away that I was worried about what she’d said. He studied me for a minute before flicking his gaze to the men and dipping his chin once. They released the poor flight attendant, and she crumpled to the floor, sobbing as they stepped around her and went back to their seats. Niko stood, moving to squat in front of the terrified woman, his voice low.

“You should be thankful. She just saved your life. Find someone to replace you. If you interfere again, I will not be so generous. Do you understand?”

She nodded quickly, forcing herself to her feet and darting off, disappearing past the curtain that separated first class from the rest of the plane. The rest of the travelers in first class had been watching avidly but when Niko stood, all their gazes jerked away and they went back to minding their own business. Everyone here was aware of his reputation. Everyone but me.

Niko appeared in front of me, kneeling down so I could look him in the eye, his hands taking mine gently. He seemed to consider what he wanted to say before he sighed.

“There are many rumors about me, not all of which are untrue. It would be my hope that you would make your assessment by getting to know me, without being swayed by the words of others. I’ve enjoyed talking to you. You are sweet and perhaps the first person in a long while not to look at me with fear or contempt. I assure you, you’re in no danger from me.”

He got up before I could reply, returning to his seat and focusing on his meal. He sounded so sincere and the confusion I felt earlier came back. He was furious and sharp with

everyone else, but with me, he was kind and generous. What was I missing?

I took a minute to myself, trying to understand the mix of emotions. I didn't want to stop talking to him, but the flight attendant's warnings and his threatening tone when he spoke to her rang in my head, making me hesitant. What did it say about me if I ignored that kind of thing?

Lost in thought, I took a bite of my food, sighing when the flavors burst into my mouth.

"Is it good?"

When I turned to face him, I could see the tension in his face. He was waiting for me to avoid him like the flight attendant suggested. I couldn't do that though, not when he looked so hurt already.

"It is. What is it?"

"Golubtsy. It's stuffed with mushrooms."

My mouth fell open, and I jerked my gaze back to my plate. It was when he started laughing that I realized he was teasing me again. I was momentarily distracted by his husky laugh before I scowled at him.

"Niko!"

The tension disappeared from his face, and he chuckled to himself. "I'm only teasing, malyshka. It has no mushrooms." When I looked warily between him and my plate again, he licked his lips, fighting back a laugh. "I promise. It is meat, onion, carrot, and rice wrapped in cabbage. It is my favorite."

I decided to trust him. If there was mushroom in it, I couldn't taste it. It certainly wasn't what I was expecting from him. He looked so fancy in his suit and the fact that he could drop money on a first-class ticket for a stranger proved he wasn't struggling for money. I figured he'd eat something more high end.

After seeing him grimace at the meal they brought him, I decided to share mine. It was too big a portion for me anyway. We split everything so there was plenty for both of us, except

his main course with the mushrooms, which we both ignored. That, paired with another glass of champagne, turned out to be a pretty decent meal.

“What are you drinking?”

He lifted his glass. It looked like water but I could smell the alcohol from my seat, so I knew that wasn't it.

“Vodka.”

I pursed my lips against a smile, and he chuckled. “Yes, I am very Russian. Then again, so are you, *malyshka*. Would you like to try it?”

I scrunched my nose. “I'm not sure. Will I like it?”

He lifted a shoulder. “Maybe. Only a small sip. This is not cheap vodka that you Americans like to take as shots.”

Giggling, I took the glass he offered me. I'd never had a shot before, much less a shot of vodka, so I wouldn't really know the difference. Nina was the one who went all out when we turned twenty-one. I had a test the next day, so I stayed home to study instead.

Lifting the glass to my lips, I took a small sip. It didn't really have a distinct flavor, but the alcohol hit me hard and I started coughing, handing it back to him. He chuckled, handing me a napkin.

“It takes some getting used to if you've never tried it before. Here, now that you are prepared for it, try again.”

That didn't sound like a good idea but he offered it to me and he wasn't being cruel about it, smiling encouragingly. I took another small sip. It was still really strong, but it was pretty smooth and went down easier this time. When I didn't immediately start choking on it, he looked proud of me. The warmth from the alcohol sank into my belly and spread outward, making me breathless. Without thinking about it, I took another drink. It only made the heat under my skin worse and the flush in my cheeks worked its way down my neck. He took the glass from me, his eyes dancing.

“Not too much, *malyshka*. You seem like you don’t drink often. You don’t want to make yourself ill.”

I shook my head, feeling myself relax. “I don’t drink at all. Never have. My sister is the fun one. I’m the boring one.”

It sounded depressing, but it was just the truth. I never met another set of twins so polar opposite before. If we didn’t look so similar, I’d question if we were actually related. She was the one who went to parties and had boyfriends and made tons of friends. She went on road trips and snuck out of the house, even got arrested and brought home in a squad car once at sixteen when she was caught doing donuts in her boyfriend’s car. On the other hand, my teenage rebellion involved staying up past midnight reading or keeping a library book too long. Randal and Carol had their hands full with Nina. I didn’t want to add more to their plate, so I just stayed quiet.

“I find that hard to imagine.”

Niko’s voice brought me out of my reflection, drawing my focus back to him. I forced a small smile. “Nope. She’s brilliant and beautiful and brave and I had to be bullied just to get on a plane. I haven’t had any adventures like her. I haven’t done much of anything. You really landed yourself next to the wrong sister.”

His brow furrowed, and he looked like he was going to argue with me but suddenly the plane shuddered and the fasten seatbelt light went on.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Captain has turned on the fasten seat belt sign. We will be experiencing a bout of turbulence. Please return your seats and keep your seat belts fastened. Thank you.”

Terror swept through me and my hands shook as I tightened my seatbelt almost to the point that it was cutting off circulation. The plane shuddered again, and I whimpered, clutching tightly to my armrests.

“Anya. You have nothing to worry about. Turbulence isn’t dangerous.” Niko was trying to sound reassuring, but the flight attendants, who had been clearing dishes from people’s tables,

suddenly moved to their jump seats and strapped themselves in. That couldn't be a good sign.

Niko's hand took mine, and he laced our fingers together, bringing my hand to his lips for a quick kiss. I looked at him, trying to take some comfort in the fact that he didn't look bothered, but the plane suddenly dropped and a scream ripped from me.

IT WAS over in a few seconds, but it was the most terrifying experience in my life. One minute we were moving through the air relatively smoothly, with only a few light shudders of the plane, the next it felt like the plane dropped a few hundred feet before leveling out again. I burst into tears, shaking so hard it felt like my body was trying to tear itself apart.

Niko released my hand, moving to cup my cheeks, shushing me softly as his thumbs brushed the tears away. He was whispering to me in Russian but I was too distraught to try and figure out what he was saying. His tone was soothing though, as were the gentle kisses he brushed over my eyes, my forehead, my cheeks, before settling on my lips.

As the boring twin, I didn't date. It wasn't that I didn't want to, I was just too shy and awkward to meet anybody, so to say I was surprised was an understatement. His lips were soft, plucking at mine until the tears stopped and I leaned into him. He took my breath away and kept my focus on him, my lips parting on a gasp when his tongue brushed up against the seam.

I'd fantasized about my first kiss, but those fantasies didn't even come close to the real thing. He took possession of my mouth like it belonged to him, his fingers holding my jaw to move me how he wanted. My whole body lit on fire and I could only clutch at his arms and let him have his way with me. He only pulled away long enough to murmur something in Russian, his lips brushing against mine as he spoke. Before I could ask him what it meant, he sank back into it, one hand

sliding into my hair, the other settling on my ribcage, close enough to my breast that I could think of nothing else other than his hand moving to cover me.

I tried to move closer, needed him to touch me more, but my seatbelt was still tight around my waist and I couldn't figure out how to undo it with his lips distracting me so much. I whimpered, and it seemed to draw his focus. He gently pulled away, pressing his lips to mine one last time before leaning back to look me in the eye.

If I looked anything like I felt, I was probably six shades of red right now. The heat had dropped low into my belly and seemed to focus there, building into an ache between my legs. I was panting, my gaze constantly dropping back to his lips until he grinned at me.

“Malyshka...”

He probably thought it was funny, just how pathetic I looked after one kiss. I didn't want to admit it was my first. It was embarrassing that I was twenty-two with zero experience outside a few timid bouts of self exploration that barely brought out a tingle, much less that all-encompassing explosive feeling everyone seemed to go on and on about.

“Ladies and Gentleman, the Captain has given the all clear. You are now free to move about the cabin.”

I'd forgotten all about the turbulence and the terrifying mid air drop. It was probably his goal, to stop the crazy woman's freak out so he wouldn't have to hear it, but I was almost desperate for more. His hands were still on me, holding me in place, his eyes searching mine. It almost looked like he was about to kiss me again when a voice spoke behind us.

“Miss Richardson, would you like me to... Oh, I apologize.”

The new flight attendant, the one that replaced the one that made Niko angry, blushed and spun on her heel, hustling to help another patron. Niko sighed heavily, releasing me and brushing his hand over my hair to smooth it out.

“Are you alright, malyshka?”

Was I alright? I just had the most earth shattering, mind blowing kiss of the century right on the heels of mind numbing terror. This was the kind of thing that happened to Nina, not to me. And yet I was desperate for him to kiss me again. What was happening to me? I could only nod dumbly, a tremble working its way through my system as I settled back into my seat. The seatbelt was starting to hurt so I carefully un-did it to loosen it, jumping when the flight attendant approached me again.

“Miss Richardson? Did you want turn down service?”

I shook my head, confused. “I’m sorry, what?”

She smiled softly. “We can make the seat into a bed if you’d like. It would only take a moment.”

“Oh...” Now that I noticed it, a lot of the other first-class passengers were either set up with their beds or were waiting while a flight attendant set them up. Only a few refused, like the two who were sitting behind us. My gaze flicked nervously over to Niko. He probably wanted to go to sleep, I shouldn’t keep bugging him. “Um, I guess that’s alright.”

She nodded and gestured for me to step out of the little suite so she could set up my bed. I was worried I was in the way so I took a few steps back until I was near the curtain separating the classes, twisting my fingers nervously as I looked at Niko. He was talking to the man who sat behind him, he probably didn’t even notice I was gone. As much as I wanted to believe he felt that kiss as profoundly as I did, it probably wasn’t like that for him. He was very handsome, he probably had hoards of women throwing themselves at him.

The thought was depressing, and I dropped my gaze to my feet. I’d been so wrapped up in his attention, I’d forgotten that after this flight was over, I’d go back to my boring life and he’d never think twice about me.

I was wrapped up in my own head, completely oblivious to the world around me until a hand grabbed my elbow roughly, yanking me toward the curtain. Khloe bared her teeth furiously, hissing at me under her breath.

“I can’t believe you didn’t switch with me. You’re so selfish. Since your sister is the one getting married, you had to get special treatment too, right? Just wait until she hears about this. You know I’ve always wanted to fly first class.”

Wincing, I let her drag me past the curtain, trapping me in the middle galley right by the door. I tried to edge away from it but she blocked me from moving, still ranting at me.

“K-Khloe, please move. I just—”

“Oh shut up, Anya. I bet you’re making all of this up just to be dramatic and get people to give you things. You’ve always hated when the attention wasn’t on you.”

Tears swam in my eyes, and I shook my head. I never liked the attention on me. I just wanted to get away from the door. She kept backing me up until I could see out the little window to the clouds below. My head spun and my breathing picked up and black dots popped up in the edges of my vision.

I couldn’t draw in a deep breath and when she backed me up far enough that I brushed up against the door, fear seized me and I let the darkness take me. Hopefully, if the door flies open and I get sucked out, I won’t wake up during the fall.



I DIDN’T KNOW how much time had passed but when I woke up, I wasn’t plummeting to my death. I was laying in a bed, quiet murmurs surrounding me, including Niko’s low growl.

“Why the hell didn’t anyone stop her?”

“I apologize, Mr. Romanov. I was setting up her bed. I didn’t notice her being pulled away.”

“Where is she?”

Another rough voice spoke, this one with a heavy Russian accent like Niko’s. “Back in her seat. She started screeching when I got close and caused a scene.”

“I want her dealt with,” Niko snarled.

“Mr. Romanov, I’m afraid we have no course of action as of right now. She said Miss Richardson fainted and there were no witnesses to a physical altercation. We can keep her in her seat, but we can’t do much else.” This flight attendant was less fearful than the last one, her voice unwavering as she defended Khloe. She wasn’t wrong. Other than grabbing my arm, Khloe didn’t actually hurt me. She just stalked me until I was up against that door...

Another wave of panic washed over me and I curled in on myself. It drew Niko’s attention, and I felt him move closer to me, his hand running through my hair.

“You are alright, malyshka. I am here.”

I kept my eyes shut, willing my body to stop shaking, but laying down seemed to make it all worse. It’s like I could feel every tiny dip and movement of the plane, the noises even louder than I remembered. I had no idea how much longer there was on this flight, but I needed it to end. I couldn’t take much more.

Niko’s warmth surrounded me as he crawled into bed with me, pulling me into his arms. I didn’t know how he knew I wasn’t asleep, but he shushed me lightly, petting my hair as I broke down for the second time on this flight.

“Mr. Romanov, you can’t—”

“You will find there is very little I can’t do, Miss Russet. Leave us. She doesn’t need your complaining to add to her stress.”

The flight attendant protested, but the little door to my suite slid closed, blocking her out, leaving me alone with Niko. I buried my face against him, trying to draw in his warmth because I still couldn’t stop shaking.

“Tell me what happened.”

I shook my head slowly. I couldn’t think about it again. Just remembering that moment made me feel lightheaded. If I had to say it out loud, I’d probably faint again.

“Anya...” He muttered something under his breath, pulling me closer and kissing the top of my head. I was surrounded by

him, his strength and his scent. I could still smell the vodka, but he also smelled like expensive cologne and tobacco. The more I settled, the more aware I became of just how strong he was. He must've removed his suit jacket because there wasn't a lot that was blocking the heat that came off him in waves. Cuddled against him, I could feel every muscle in his chest, my head rested on one of his shoulders. How did someone manage to have so much muscle?

Rough fingers slid under my chin, gently tipping my face up to look at him. Opening my eyes, I was locked in his intense brown ones. His eyes searched mine, concern laced in his features. When his hand slid to cup my cheek, I reached up and pressed his hand there, leaning into it and closing my eyes again.

“I will never allow you to come to harm again.”

I wished I could believe that. I wished our time together wouldn't be ending after the plane landed. He made me feel safe and cared for, and I wasn't sure I'd ever really felt that way. Not the way Niko made me feel.

IT SEEMED like every time I let her out of my sight, she managed to get herself into trouble. Ivan was updating me about the tracker. The idiots who took the product were moving north, and that might affect the signal. I needed to get off this plane to handle it, but I couldn't make them fly any faster. I noticed the flight attendant speaking to Anya, and I saw her start putting the bed together. I figured she stepped away for a moment to allow the woman to do her job and I didn't think anything of it, but in the next moment, I heard shouts and found Anya collapsed on the ground with the bitch who boarded with her standing over her prone form.

I wanted to go after the woman myself, but I went to Anya instead, pulling her off the floor and into my arms. She was pale and her skin was cold. I brought her straight to the bed the flight attendant set up for her. The flight attendant was quick to bring a first aid kit. It wasn't necessary, but she was smarter than the last one. At least until she tried to stop me from joining Anya in bed.

Having her in my arms, a heady possessiveness washed over me. She needed someone to watch over her and protect her. That person would be me. It wouldn't be an easy thing for her. My life was dangerous, but she would learn eventually that it was for the best.

She did fall asleep after a little while, her face buried against my chest. I didn't normally sleep on planes, but then again, I didn't sleep much in general. There was too much to get done. I wasn't willing to wake Anya, though, so I settled in

for a little while and eventually drifted off. I woke up with gentle fingers stroking my face and I felt myself smile.

“Malyshka?”

When my eyes opened, she bit her lip, smiling shyly. “The flight attendant said she would need to put the bed away soon.”

I ran my fingers through her hair, drawing her closer. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes drifted to my lips. I kissed her softly, but I knew better than to start kissing her like I had earlier. In the position we were in now, I wouldn't be able to stop myself and if they were putting the beds away, we would be landing soon. It wasn't until I saw the disappointment in her eyes that I rolled back toward her and captured her lips fiercely. She whimpered, clutching my shirt tightly until my hand slid to her rear. She broke away with a gasp, a deep flush on her face.

“Niko, I... I haven't...”

The confirmation of what I already knew surged through me, settling in my cock. Anya was untouched and the thought only added to the possessiveness. When I kissed her again, it was a lot more ferocious than I intended. She gasped, and I took advantage, stroking my tongue against hers, nearly losing my head when she moaned quietly. I had to force myself away from her, breathing heavily.

“The things I would do to you if we were alone...” It was muttered in Russian but given the flush in her cheeks, she understood me. Her lips were swollen from the kiss and her eyes hooded. I almost gave in to her allure, only the voice of the flight attendant outside our little room distracting me.

“Miss? Are you ready?”

If we were on my private jet, we would remain uninterrupted throughout the entire flight, safely ensconced in my private room in the back. Our next flight together would be better, I would make sure of it.

Forcing myself away from my sweet temptation, I stood, opening the door with a scowl. Russet was smart enough to

avert her eyes, standing off to the side as I stepped past her, offering my hand to Anya. She stumbled getting out of bed, but I caught her against me, pulling her to my side. She clutched my shirt, her gaze on her feet and her face dark red. She was embarrassed at the curious looks from the rest of first class, but I ignored it.

Ivan shot me a look, and I dipped my chin. Something happened while we were sleeping. I didn't want to introduce Anya to that part of my life just yet, so I turned my attention to Grigori. He stood, moving to shadow Anya. I kissed her temple, stepping away from her.

"I must speak with Ivan for a moment. Grigori will watch over you. Stay away from the curtain. I do not want that woman coming near you again."

Her brow furrowed, and she looked a little uncomfortable, but I had business. She'd get her own security eventually.

"Anya. Do you understand?"

She tipped her head, nodding. "Okay, but I'll be seeing her eventually. We're riding together to the hotel."

I made an irritated noise. "Not anymore. I will bring you to meet your sister. Wait here."



AFTER IVAN'S UPDATE, I took a moment to use the restroom and get myself ready for landing. I wouldn't be able to stay with Anya right away. She needed to be with her sister and I had a thief to find, but I would be meeting her afterwards. She just didn't know that yet.

She was sitting in her seat, attempting to use her Russian to speak to Grigori. He looked amused, leaning against the side of the little suite.

"What are you doing?"

"Letting her practice," was his gruff reply. Anya understood him, though, and she jerked to face me. I nodded.

“Grigori speaks English, malyshka.”

Her face turned such a deep shade of red that I was beginning to worry for her health. She stuttered and ducked her head, her hands clenched tightly in her lap.

“I-I’m so sorry, I d-didn’t mean to imply—”

Grigori chuckled. “I took no offense, printsessa. Most would appreciate the fact that you made an attempt. They would not be angry.”

She was still blushing fiercely, so I waved him away, glaring at him when he smirked. The nickname wasn’t far off, given my station. She would be treated like a princess, especially amongst my men, but he didn’t know of my intent to keep her yet, so I didn’t enjoy him speaking to her that way. If he tried to take her from me, I’d make sure the end of his life was as pain filled as possible.

“Ladies and Gentleman, we are beginning our descent into Moscow. Please ensure all tray tables are stowed and seats are in their upright positions. Flight attendants, please prepare for landing.”

I saw the tension gather in Anya’s shoulders as she quickly wrestled with the seatbelt, tightening it to the point that it looked uncomfortable. Stroking her hair, I waited for her to turn her attention back to me, her eyes wide and terrified not because of who I am, but merely because the plane was going to touch down soon. It was a novelty. Even after the flight attendant warned her away from me, she still chose to trust me.

“What days will you be free from your duties to your sister?”

She seemed surprised that I’d ask, probably thinking we’d say goodbye after the plane landed. “Oh, um... I’m not sure. I—” She flinched when the plane shuddered a little. “I’m not really sure what she needs me to do. She just asked me to come early to help her.”

I hummed my acknowledgement, brushing my knuckles against her cheek to keep her calm and distracted. She flinched

and whimpered when the landing gear released, clutching my hand tightly.

“I will be busy at first. There’s something I need to attend to, but when I return I will show you Moscow. You should see where you come from.”

Her face flushed, and she looked up at me hopefully. “Really?”

My free hand cupped her cheek, pulling her closer to me. “Really, *malyshka*. I am nowhere near done with you yet.”

Claiming her mouth, I kept her focus on me, sweeping my tongue past her lips. The tremble that ran through her seemed less a reaction to the fear and more a reaction to me. She leaned into me, making her own timid attempts to kiss me back. It filled me with lust and my hand slipped into her hair to hold her there. I growled in irritation at the wall separating us. I held her in my arms once. I didn’t like being separated from her now.

The plane touched down with a thud and I felt Anya’s grip on my hand tighten significantly, but she didn’t pull away, using my kiss to distract herself. I was happy to provide for her, tangling my tongue with hers until the noise quieted and the plane parked at the gate.

Regretfully, I pulled away from her. Her eyes stayed closed for a moment and when she swayed in her seat, I was filled with smug satisfaction. I thoroughly enjoyed how affected she was by me. I would enjoy it even more once I got her into my bed. Another day, unfortunately. I needed to deal with the thief first. But once I got her there, we wouldn’t be leaving for at least a week.

Given that we were in first class, we were allowed to disembark first, which meant I could keep Anya away from her horrid travel companion, keeping her tucked against my side as we headed out of the terminal. She met no resistance with customs, one look at who was standing behind her hurrying the process considerably. It wasn’t until we were leaving baggage claim that she frowned at me.

“Don’t you have any luggage?”

I shook my head. “No. I left that with my jet.”

Her brow furrowed. “Jet? Why were you on my flight if you had a jet?”

I paused, pursing my lips as I considered it. “Fate, malyshka. How else would I have met you?”

She bit her lip, blushing and ducking her head. So sweet and so easy to please. There must have been divine intervention to put this woman in my path because she couldn’t be more perfect if she tried.

BY THE TIME we pulled up in front of the hotel Nina had told me to meet her at, I was on fire. Niko had closed the partition between us and his driver and attacked me the moment we were out of sight. Without a wall to separate us, he was that much more intense, making me tremble and moan at his assault. His hands were everywhere and when he started to drag up the long skirt I was wearing, I almost begged him to touch me. He stopped just short of his goal, the town car pulling to a stop in front of a massive hotel.

Panting, I clutched tightly to the lapels of his jacket, wishing we didn't have to separate. Being with him, letting him touch me, it was the wildest thing I'd ever done in my life and I didn't want him to stop. He said we'd see each other again after he handled some business, but between helping Nina with the wedding and his work, I wasn't sure when that would be. I only had two weeks here before I headed home and only three days after the wedding that I might be able to have free time without any obligations. It wasn't long enough, not when he looked at me like that, but I promised Nina I'd help her. I couldn't ditch her just because a handsome man swept me off my feet on my flight here.

Someone knocked on Niko's door. He waited for me to straighten my clothes and smooth my hair before opening the door and sliding out, offering his hand to help me out. The air was chilly, a wedding during the winter in Russia seeming like a horrible idea in my opinion, but Niko pulled my jacket closed for me, brushing his fingers along my jaw.

“You will call me if you are in trouble, yes?”

I frowned. “I don’t have your phone number.”

One of the men I recognized from the plane coughed, poorly covering his laugh. Niko shot him a dirty look before pulling a pen and a card out of his pocket, scribbling down his number. When he handed it to me, I bit my lip, hugging it against my chest so the wind wouldn’t snatch it from me. Niko tucked my hair behind my ear, regarding me with a frown. He almost looked... worried?

“What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “I do not like leaving you unprotected. Promise me you will call.”

I wasn’t entirely sure what he was so worried about. Nina never said anything about Moscow being unsafe, but I nodded to appease him, stepping closer to put my hand against his chest.

“I promise.”

His smile always took my breath away and when he pulled me closer, my eyes slipped shut on their own, my whole world focused on his lips plucking at mine.

“Anya?!”

Jumping, I spun around, facing down my twin sister. She looked incredulous and Khloe was standing next to her, glowering at me. I didn’t know how she beat me here. We got off the plane first. But it didn’t really matter. I wanted to shrink away from their glares, but Niko’s hands on my shoulders bolstered me a little.

“Are you sure you will be alright?” he murmured, an edge to his voice making me look over my shoulder at him. He was glaring at my sister and Khloe, and it worried me a little. I already knew he didn’t like Khloe, I didn’t want him disliking Nina.

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m sure she’ll settle once we get to work.” Turning around to face him, I offered him a small smile. “I hope your work goes well. I... I’d like to see you again soon.”

His face softened, and he ran his knuckles down my cheek, making me blush. “You will, *malyshka*. Go, you are starting to shiver. Stay warm until I can come warm you myself.”

The thought made my face go from light pink to deep red and he chuckled when I ducked my head. One of his men grabbed my luggage, bringing it inside for me while I followed Nina and Khloe, turning one last time by the door to wave at Niko. I hoped he’d keep his promise, and I’d see him again soon. It would be all I could think about between now and whenever he showed up again.

The second we stepped inside, Nina spun, seething at me. “What the hell was that?”

I swallowed hard. “What do you mean?”

She scowled, waving her hand toward the door. “That! Since when are you whoring yourself out to the first Russian who looks your way?”

My mouth fell open. “Nina!”

This wasn’t my sister. She didn’t speak to me like that. The sister I knew would be excited for me that I was actually doing something outside my comfort zone. Whoever she was now, she cared very little about my feelings on the matter, screaming at me right in the middle of the lounge about how I humiliated Khloe and how I was trying to steal her thunder by meeting Niko. Whenever I tried to speak, she cut me off, her tirade growing until her fiancé showed up and pulled her away. Khloe sneered at me before her face morphed into one of concern, petting Nina’s hair as she sobbed on her fiancé’s shoulder.

“There, there, *lyubimaya*. I’m sure it wasn’t her intention to upset you. Come, you will feel better after a drink.” Anton hugged her shoulders before guiding her away. He glanced over his shoulder, shooting me a sympathetic look and tipping his head for me to follow. I was worried I’d upset Nina more by following, but I wanted to be close by in case she needed something. Besides, she and Anton were paying for my room. I had nowhere else to go but with them. Fighting back tears, I followed them from the lounge, keeping my gaze on my feet

so I didn't have to see the faces of the people who watched my sister scream at me. I wished Niko was here.



ONCE ANTON GOT NINA SETTLED, she stopped screaming at me and switched her focus back onto the wedding. The rehearsal dinner was in three days and she was losing her mind about it. She put me to work immediately, putting together centerpieces and ironing napkins while Khloe's job was to keep her calm and bring her food and drinks. We decided to work out of my room so that we could store everything without worrying about it. I didn't mind. I didn't need a ton of space.

Luckily, Anton stepped in when Nina tried demanding I call vendors for her. I hadn't had a chance to talk to him much the last time we met. He came to Nina's and my graduation and they were wrapped around each other the whole time. He said he had to leave early and only stayed a couple days so our interactions were limited up until now.

He was kind, and he seemed to dote on my sister. I liked how he could redirect her when she started getting snippy, distracting her with a kiss and a cuddle. It made me think of Niko every time, and I found myself fiddling with the little note with his number on it, trying to resist the urge to ask to use a phone to call him right away. Nina was still sensitive about it, and I didn't want to upset her again by calling him so soon. I decided to wait at least until after the rehearsal dinner.

"No! But we already— Please, I just—" Nina looked close to tears, her brow furrowed as she spoke to someone over the phone.

Tipping my head, I put the centerpiece I was working on aside, coming to stand by her side. Her chin trembled and when I took her hand, she squeezed it tightly. The stress was hurting my sister, I could tell. She needed a break.

Putting my hand out, I took the phone from her, putting it to my ear. The person on the other end was still speaking, so I

politely interrupted them, getting them to explain the problem to me. They were catering the wedding itself and said they could do the rehearsal dinner as well, but Nina called too late and they were unavailable at the time she requested. I asked if it was possible for them to have the food ready and for us to pick it up ourselves and they were eventually able to accommodate that. Luckily, it was a simple fix and once I hung up, Nina shot me a watery smile.

“Thank you. I wouldn’t have thought of that. I swear I can’t think straight anymore.”

Shaking my head, I put my arm around her shoulder. “It’s okay. You’re under a lot of pressure. Why don’t you go lay down for a bit? I can finish these up and I’ll have your phone on me in case one of the vendors calls. Is Anton around? My Russian isn’t great, and I’d like to be able to go to him for help, so I don’t accidentally change your cake into a pudding or something.”

A real smile split across her face, and she laughed, wiping tears from her cheeks. “You would do that, wouldn’t you? Remember that time you tie-dyed my dress?”

Making a face, I stuck my tongue out at her. “I told you it wasn’t a good idea. You didn’t listen.”

Shaking her head, she stepped closer, hugging my shoulders. “I’m sorry about earlier. I’m glad you’re here. I don’t think I could do this without you.”

Rubbing her back, I felt myself relax. When I showed up and she started screaming at me, I was really worried about how this might go, but I could see bits of my sister hiding in there. She was just having a rough time, and I’d need to be understanding about it. I was sure if I ever got married, she’d be by my side too.

“Go get some rest. I’ll come get you when it’s time to eat, okay?”

She nodded, sucking in a shaky breath before stepping back and reaching into her pocket. “Here, this is a copy of my room key. I’m just down the hall. Anton is working out of our

sitting room for now. I'll let him know to check on you in case you need him."

Smiling softly, I nodded and sent her on her way. Maybe she'd be clearer after a nap. In the meantime, she left a list of things that needed to get done and I was going to tackle as much of it as I could on my own to ease her stress a little. I may not be brave on planes or adventurous, but I excelled at organization and time management. I could help her out a little and maybe after the rehearsal she'd be more open to hearing about Niko. I really wanted to tell my sister about the handsome stranger who saved me on the plane. He was so sweet and gentle, and I knew she'd love him once she got to know him.

ANYA

MOST OF THE tasks were simple. They just happened to be tedious, which I figured would be stressful on Nina, considering she had a lot to do. Making the welcome bags for the wedding party, for example. It wasn't hard to put together, it just took a minute to make them look nice. I didn't mind tasks like that, so I got through them pretty quickly and set them aside, moving on to the centerpieces. There were two, one for the rehearsal and a much more complicated one for the wedding itself. The rehearsal ones were easy enough, but I'd probably have to ask Nina for clarification on the second one, just to make sure they were perfect.

Even though Nina was given an unlimited budget for the wedding, it didn't surprise me that she didn't have a planner or people setting this up for her. We were both pretty frugal and tended to do things ourselves when we could. Even when the Richardsons said we could choose any college we preferred, we decided on a state school because it wasn't as expensive, just to make things easier.

I was finishing up the centerpieces for the rehearsal when someone knocked on my door. I sucked in a breath, setting aside the one I was working on to answer it, really hoping it wasn't Khloe. While she wasn't focused on Nina, I was worried her attention would swing back to me and she would start yelling again about not switching seats with her on the plane. I couldn't regret refusing when I got to spend my time with Niko. Had I given in to her, I never would've had the most earth shattering kiss ever.

Cracking open the door, I let out a relieved sigh when it wasn't Khloe who was waiting for me to answer. It was Anton instead. He smiled brightly at me, a stack of papers in his hands.

“Privet, Anya. Nina wanted me to check on you and she also asked that you look through these to get a final count on who will be in attendance.” Offering me a sheepish grin, he shrugged his shoulders, handing me the messy stack of invitation responses.

Accepting them, I stepped back to let him come in. “Okay, that’s fine. I did ask where I could find you in case there were any phone calls. Nina overestimates my Russian and I’m worried I’ll mess something up if I answer any vendor phone calls.”

He chuckled, moving to look at the gift bags I’d been working on. “I do not mind speaking to them for you. Anything to make Nina’s day easier.”

Beaming at him, I set the invitations on the little table. It was difficult to find space with all the centerpieces, but I’d move them once they were done so I could start on something else.

“It’s your day too,” I pointed out, turning to face him. I came up short, taking a step back and bumping into the table. He was right behind me, way too close for comfort. His eyes were on the centerpieces, so I chalked it up to lack of spatial awareness and edged to the side, putting more space between us. His gaze lifted slowly and locked on mine, a slow smile spreading across his face.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. I’ll admit, I am more interested in what comes afterward.”

I wanted to think he was referring to their marriage, but it almost sounded like he was being suggestive and unease settled over me. Forcing a smile, I nodded.

“You must be looking forward to being married. Nina said she wanted to travel more, I imagine you’ll get to go together.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw, but he smiled at me, lifting a shoulder. “I have responsibilities here. She is aware of this. We are hoping to start a family soon. That will keep her plenty busy.”

My brow furrowed slightly. Nina never mentioned starting a family. She’d always talked about traveling and seeing the world. I wasn’t sure she even liked kids. It almost sounded like she was giving up on everything she wanted for a man and that seemed... off.

My gaze had drifted down to the centerpieces while I contemplated talking to Nina about her plans after marriage. I didn’t want to stress her out, but I didn’t want her to feel pressured by Anton, either.

“Nina has told me you are the troublemaker.”

Confused, I looked up at him, the unease compounding when I realized he’d moved closer to me again. I took another step back, shaking my head.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He pursed his lips, looking thoughtful. “Did you not cause a commotion on the plane?”

“Oh... No, not intentionally. I got too close to the door, and I fainted.”

“Ah.” He nodded, considering it. “That was not your fault, then. The one, Khloe, made it seem as though you acted maliciously.”

I fought back a scowl. “That’s... not correct. I’m afraid of planes. Being near the door was frightening.”

He reached out, touching my arm. “But you are alright now, yes?”

He looked legitimately concerned, but I was still uncomfortable. When the door pushed open and Khloe waltzed in, I was actually happy to see her. Anton’s hand dropped on her arrival, but she stopped, looking between us suspiciously.

“What’s going on?”

His pleasant smile reappeared, and he stepped away from me. “Nothing. I was bringing the invitations for Anya to look through and Nina told me about her collapse. I merely wanted to make sure she was well.”

Khloe’s eyes narrowed on me, her lip lifting in a scowl. “Yes, well, obviously, she’s fine. Anton, would you mind helping me? The front desk is being difficult about moving my room. I want to be closer to Nina.”

Nodding, he shoved his hands into his pocket and strode away without looking back. Khloe stared at me for a moment longer, still looking suspicious, before turning on her heel and stalking off, pulling the door closed roughly behind her.

Letting out a long breath, I rubbed my arms. It might be cultural differences, but Anton made me feel uneasy and when he got close to me for a second time, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I didn’t want to accuse him of anything. He didn’t do anything wrong, and I was on edge after the day I had. Between everything that happened on the plane, the fact that I was working from the moment I arrived, and the jet lag, I was exhausted. Maybe if I got some sleep, I’d feel better.



Niko

The tracker led us on a wild goose chase, going as far north as Saint Petersburg before heading in a new direction. It didn't take long to figure out they were aware of it and were purposely moving it to keep us guessing, but we caught up with the driver just outside Yaroslavl. We were bringing him back to deal with him when my cell rang and a number I wasn't familiar with popped up on the screen. I considered it to be my enemy's since I just got ahold of their man, so I was a little more gruff than necessary when answering.

“Kakogo khrena ty khochesh’?”

“Niko?”

I cursed under my breath. She sounded worried, and I didn't want to frighten her. “Anya, my apologies. I thought you were someone else.”

“What did you say?”

Twisting my mouth, I tried not to smile. “Nothing appropriate. How are you?”

She sighed. “I'm okay. Busy. I had a minute, and I didn't want you to think I forgot to call... If you're busy, I can—”

“No. It's fine. I wanted to hear from you. How is helping your sister going? I never did ask when the wedding was.”

Anya may be shy, but once I got her talking, she was comfortable enough with me to tell me everything. I found I missed the sound of her voice and I didn't mind listening to the mundane things she had accomplished for her sister. She sounded pleased, and that was what was important. She did sound tired, though, and I frowned.

“Anya, are you sleeping?”

“What?”

“You sound tired. They are letting you rest, no?”

She hesitated for a moment, and I could almost hear the lie. “Y-yes, they’re letting me rest. It’s jetlag. There’s a big time difference, and it makes it harder for me to get to sleep at night.”

It would be plausible if she didn’t sound so nervous about it. Anya wasn’t a good liar. I knew very little about planning a wedding, but it sounded like they were overworking her to get ready for it, and that did not sit well with me.

“What are you doing tomorrow? I’d like to come and see you.”

“Oh, tomorrow is the rehearsal dinner. My sister and her fiancé are going wine tasting on Saturday, though. I should be free that day...” She didn’t sound overly convinced of that, but it was only an extra day. I could wait to make things easier on her.

“Fine, Saturday then. I’ll pick you up at the hotel.”

Her voice softened, and I could imagine the sweet smile on her face. “Okay. I might not be able to call tomorrow. We’ll be at Anton’s family home for the rehearsal dinner, but if I get back early enough, I’ll try.”

Before I had a chance to ask where that was, someone started shouting at her in the background. “Anya! What are you doing? I asked you to fix this and you haven’t even touched it!”

“I’m sorry, Nina, I forgot. I’ll do it now.”

I was grinding my teeth, trying to hold back from demanding she hand whoever that was the phone. She was being treated very poorly and I wouldn’t stand by it. After the rehearsal, I would be checking in with her more often. I would also be getting her a phone so she could call me if she needed me.

“I’m sorry, Niko, I need to go. I’ll see you Saturday?”

“Da, malyshka. Saturday. Do not—”

The voice in the background grew closer. “You’re supposed to be helping me, not chatting on the phone! Hurry

up!”

“I-I just wanted—”

“Hang up, we need to go! I swear to god, I don’t know why you even bothered to come if you were this unwilling to help me!”

“Sorry Niko, I’ll call back later.”

She gave me no chance to reply before she hung up. Fury ripped through me and I almost threw my phone in my frustration. I held back only because it was the way Anya would get into contact with me and I didn’t have time to get a new one.

Saturday was too long. I would be checking in on her just as soon as I handled the little shit currently tied up in my trunk. He chose the wrong day to screw with me. I would take great pleasure releasing pent up frustration on his flesh.

ANYA

I HAD to assume most people had a limit to the abuse they would take in any given situation. Being as averse to confrontation as I was, my limit was significantly higher than most apparently. Nina's rest helped for a little while, but then the florist tried to deliver the flowers for the wedding and not the rehearsal, and she lost her mind again. Since then, it had been one thing after another. I barely got any sleep in the last two days and I was starting to weave on my feet.

The only thing I was looking forward to at this point was a good night's sleep and seeing Niko on Saturday. If I managed to get time away, that was. I was plugging away at the list Nina had for me, but she kept adding new things and it was starting to feel like I wasn't making any progress at all.

Gathering a few of the centerpieces in my arms, I moved them to the little cart outside my door. Khloe was supposed to help me bring them to Anton's family home, but supposedly she went with Nina early to help her mother-in-law-to-be with the cooking. I knew for a fact that Khloe couldn't cook, so she was just trying to avoid helping me. She hadn't spoken to me since the day we arrived. I would consider it a small miracle if I wasn't in serious need of some help.

If this was how I felt, I couldn't imagine how Nina was coping. It was her wedding.

"Anya?"

My spine stiffened. Anton had been... helpful. A little too helpful. He showed up at my door in the early hours of the

morning asking if I needed a hand and refused to accept a polite decline the first time. I was trying to avoid him because everyone else seemed to like him so much. It had to just be me that felt uncomfortable around him. Quickly gathering the last two centerpieces and my bag, I nudged the door open and almost ran straight into him.

His hands caught my elbows, trying to steady me. I nearly lost my grip on the centerpieces in my attempt to get away from him.

“Hey, careful. Are you alright?”

Nodding quickly, I took a few steps back, holding the centerpieces against my chest protectively. “Yes, I’m fine. I’m just late. I need to get these to Nina.”

His smile was pleasant, but I still moved to the other side of the cart to avoid him. “That is why I am here. I will be giving you a ride.”

I wanted to grimace. Being stuck in a car with him sounded awful. I’d planned on calling a taxi, but it might seem weird if I refused him. Forcing a smile, I nodded. “Okay, thank you.”

He took over pushing the cart, and I followed him with a frown. I couldn’t really pinpoint what about him I didn’t like. He was sweet to Nina and helpful without being asked. He tipped waiters really well, and he was the only one so far who ever asked how I was doing. There was just something about the way he spoke to me that put me on edge.

“I believe you’ll like my family home. Nina says you like historic buildings.”

I nodded slowly. “Yeah... I like history and buildings tell stories of different times we will never experience.”

Glancing over his shoulder, he smiled softly. “That is a pretty way to look at things. My home has been in our family for generations. It is very old. There are many places to explore. As a boy, it was fun to find the many places I could hide.”

He sounded so sincere that I forced myself to relax a little. I was being ridiculous. There was nothing wrong with him and I was just tired. Hopefully, I'd be able to excuse myself a little early so I could get some sleep before I saw Niko. I didn't want to worry him.



ANTON'S FAMILY home was almost an hour outside of Moscow, but the time passed quickly. Once I stopped being so awkward around him, he was very kind. He asked me a lot about my life and what I planned to do with it. I didn't really have much of a plan right now, but he didn't seem to mind, offering suggestions that had a lot of opportunities to travel. I didn't want to remind him that I was afraid to fly and that none of those options would work for me.

When we pulled up, the house was busy, people in uniforms streaming in and out, setting up for dinner in a few hours. Anton called for some people to bring in the centerpieces and led me inside.

Looking around, I did my best to mask my frown. Anton said the house was old, but it was obviously upgraded. There was very little of the older charm to the building. Everything had sleek lines and expensive decor.

“Did you need to change before the party?”

He drew my attention back to him, and I did my best to smile. “Yes, that would be nice. Nina said it was a formal affair.”

Gesturing with a smile, he led me up some marble stairs to a long hallway with so many doors I was surprised people didn't get lost. He brought me to one near the end, opening it for me.

“This one should be fine to use. It's an old guest room and—”

“Anton! Thank goodness, please come here. I can't understand what they want from me.”

We both turned, seeing Nina and Khloe at the other end of the hall with a few waiters standing in front of them. Anton offered me a soft smile before heading back to help his bride. Khloe glared at me, but I ignored her, pushing into the room and looking around.

This room was more classic than the rest of the house, and I found myself smiling. It looked like the room hadn't been remodeled yet and I felt like I had stepped into the past. The giant four-poster bed took up most of the space. A large armoire near the window held vintage dresses that I trailed my fingers over, barely resisting the urge to pull them out to see them better. Thick curtains were tied back next to the window, giving a wonderful view of the back garden. It was mostly snow right now, but I'd bet it would look perfect in the summer.

Hurrying through changing, my eyes traveled from one thing to the next. The intricate wallpaper, the antique lamp on the nightstand, the thick rug under my feet. It was beautiful, and I hoped they'd keep the room as it was instead of upgrading it like the rest of the house.

I had to tear myself away from the pretty room before Nina came looking for me and started yelling again. I was gathering my things to bring to Nina's room so I could grab them before I left when the door opened and Anton slipped inside, shutting the door quietly behind him.

"Anton?"

"Hush, we don't want to be overheard."

He spun, striding towards me with a determined look. I took a few steps back, stumbling a little on the edge of the rug.

"What are you talking about? What are you doing in here?"

He sneered. "Don't play coy. We both know what is happening. You have been flirting with me since you arrived."

Reaching for me, he grabbed my things, tossing them to the floor. I backed up quickly, shaking my head.

"There's been a misunderstanding, I didn't—"

He wasn't listening to me, this time grabbing my arm tightly and hauling me against him. "There has been no misunderstanding, kotonok. I paid for your flight, your hotel, the food you eat. It is time you paid me back. Khloe was more than willing. You Americans all believe in reciprocity."

Pushing at his chest, I shook my head wildly. "No! Please let me go!"

When he shoved me, I tripped and landed against the foot of the bed. He took advantage, pushing me backwards onto the bed and dropping his weight on top of me. I pushed and slapped at him, tears streaming down my face, but he didn't even flinch, capturing my wrists and yanking them above my head while leaning to lick the tears from my cheek.

"You are the sweet one. You won't tell anyone, will you? You wouldn't want to hurt your sister."

Whimpering, I used all my strength to push against him, but he grabbed my knee, yanking my legs apart so he could situate himself between them, grinding himself against me. Nothing I was doing was making any difference, and I felt the panic threaten to overwhelm me. He brought me to the room at the end of the hall, far from everyone else. No one would hear me even if I cried out.

"P-Please... let me go..."

He chuckled darkly. "Oh, kitten. You will enjoy this, I promise."

I sobbed and squeezed my eyes shut when he reached up my skirt, grabbing at the band of my panties, but before he could pull them down, the door flew open, slamming against the wall. Nina looked between us, betrayal and fury overtaking her features. She bared her teeth, her fists clenched at her sides.

"What the hell are you doing with my fiancé?"

I'd been relieved to see her, but she didn't see it right. She paid no attention to the fact that Anton was holding me hostage, or that I was crying. She only saw us in bed together

and decided I was the one at fault. Anton pushed off the bed quickly, putting his hands up.

“Nina, I’m sorry. She seduced me.”

“N-No! That’s not—”

I’d barely managed to push myself to my feet, my whole body weak from fighting hard against Anton. I almost felt like I was going to collapse again like I did on the plane, but I was too scared that if I did, Anton would take advantage. I took an unsteady step toward Nina, desperate to tell her the truth, but she stormed up to me and slapped me so hard that I hit the bedpost and crumpled to the floor.

“Khloe told me she saw you flirting with him! I didn’t want to believe her, but she was right!”

Sobbing, I pressed my palm against my cheek, shaking my head helplessly.

“Get out! I never want to see you again! Get out!”

Too frightened to argue, I pushed to my feet and ran. Along the long hallway and down the stairs. Straight through the front door, even though I wasn’t wearing a jacket, and it was starting to snow. I kept running, too terrified to stop, until I managed to make my way into the town center near Anton’s family home.

My teeth were chattering, and I was shaking, my arms wrapped around myself. The dress I’d chosen for tonight was thin, hitting just below my knees, and the long sleeves did nothing against the wind and snow. Not to mention the heels I’d been wearing were lost somewhere along the way in a thick snow drift.

Freezing and exhausted, I walked the streets until I managed to find a hotel. I figured they were used to travelers and might be able to help me. I pushed through the door, tears long since frozen on my face. The person at the front desk looked horrified, speaking in Russian too fast for me to understand. I stepped up to her, saying the only word in Russian I could think of at the time.

“Pomogíte.”

Help.

NIKO

THE DRIVER PROVED to be useless. A kid with nothing to lose was offered money to drive around the tracker. They told him to make it difficult and no matter how much pain I put him through, he couldn't tell me who hired him. He didn't know. They approached him on the street, offered him money, and he accepted without question. It was a mistake he didn't live long to regret.

I had to put off visiting Anya, watching over my next delivery myself to make sure it got to the right hands. It meant I wouldn't see her until Saturday, but there wasn't much I could do about it.

When my phone rang Friday from a town outside Moscow, I figured she managed to find the time to call me. I considered not answering given how foul my mood was, but I didn't want her to think she couldn't reach me when she needed me. Picking it up, I willed my voice to stay calm, losing that battle a moment later when she spoke to me.

“N-Niko...”

I could barely hear her. It sounded like her teeth were chattering and she was sobbing.

“Anya? Where are you?”

She didn't answer, only a whimper coming through the line. My hackles went up, and I knew she was in trouble without her saying anything to me.

“Are you alone?”

“N-No.”

Snapping my fingers at my men, I pointed to the cars. Ivan tossed me some keys. I normally used a driver, but right now I was in a hurry and the town car wouldn't be fast enough.

“Put someone else on the phone.” She whimpered again, and I felt guilty for making her more upset, but I needed to know where the hell she was in order to get to her. “I need them to tell me where you are. Hand them the phone, Anya.”

There was static before another woman spoke on the line, worry laced in her tone.

“Where is she?”

She rattled off the address. It was a hotel, but not in an area I was familiar with. The town was north of Moscow. It would take me a minute to get there.

“Is she hurt?”

“Yes, she is freezing, and she has a cut on her head. I want to help her, but she is frightened and keeps looking over her shoulder.”

Looking over her shoulder. Then she was worried she was being followed. She was supposed to be at a rehearsal dinner right now. What the hell happened that she would be chased?

“Hide her. I will be there as soon as I can, but no one else is to come near her. If anyone asks about a young woman with her description, say nothing. I will call this number back to prove that it is me. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand. Is she in some kind of danger?”

That was what I was going to find out. As soon as I could get to her.

I had to hang up so I could plug in the address to where I was going. I took every shortcut and pressed the gas nearly to the floor, trying to get to Anya quickly. The terror in her voice kept repeating in my head, fueling my anger. I knew better. I told myself that she couldn't be left alone. I thought she would be safe with her family while I handled business, but she obviously needed more protection than I thought.

The little town was busy, and I was forced to slow down, growling to myself when cars moved too slowly ahead of me. When I finally made it to the hotel, I nearly threw myself out of the car, putting my phone to my ear just as I pushed inside. The young woman at the desk answered, frowning until she heard my voice.

“Where is she?”

She looked up and let out a breath, taking a step back and gesturing to her feet. “She’s here. Someone came looking for her and I was worried if I moved her they would see.”

Rushing around the desk, I came up short. Anya was sitting on the floor, her arms wrapped around her knees and her whole body shaking. She had no shoes and no jacket; her dress was not nearly warm enough for this weather.

“Anya.”

She lifted her head, tears spilling down her cheeks. Her lips were tinted blue, and she was so pale I worried for her health.

“Niko...”

I wanted to rush to her, to pull her against me, but she was obviously terrified. Pulling off my jacket, I approached her slowly, kneeling next to her to lay it across her shoulders. My fingers brushed her skin, and I nearly lost control. She was icy to the touch, her feet dark red and probably frostbitten. With as much care as I could muster, I pulled her into my arms. She whimpered, curling against me.

I hated bringing her back into the cold, but I needed to get her somewhere safe and seen by a doctor.

“I wanted to offer her this earlier, but she didn’t want me to leave her alone.” The woman who had been behind the desk offered me a blanket, helping me wrap Anya in it as best we could without me putting her down again. I nodded my thanks and stepped outside, relieved that my men were outside waiting for me. Grigori opened the back of the town car, tucking the blanket inside before closing the door.

“Where are we taking her?” Ivan asked.

“Home.”



THE TRIP HOME was longer than I liked and Anya fell asleep at one point. It worried me. I wasn't sure if sleeping was for the best, but her breathing remained steady and her shivers eventually subsided. I knew enough about hypothermia to know that she needed to be kept warm and my body radiated heat, so I kept her in my lap, carefully rubbing her skin to warm her up.

The doctor met us at the house, and we put her in my room. After I stripped her of her wet clothes, he gave her warm IV fluids and treated her hands and feet. She was very lucky that the damage was not more severe. Only the fact that it was a warmer night saved her skin. Any colder and she may have been looking at severe frostbite.

She didn't wake up while she was being treated, but the doctor said to let her rest for now. She wasn't in any danger and her body was exhausted, so it was better to just wait. It was excruciating. I needed to know what happened to her, but I was not so much of an ass that I'd wake her when she was in such need of rest.

Following the doctor out of the room, I shook his hand. He assured me he would stop in again tomorrow to check on her before heading out. Ivan took his place, a dark look on his face.

“What happened?”

I shook my head. “I do not know yet. She is sleeping. Send someone back to that hotel. I want to know what they know.”

He dipped his chin, rushing to do as I asked. I should be dealing with my thief issue while Anya was resting, but I returned to her side, holding her hand and carefully tucking a stray hair behind her ear. She had a cut on her temple that was superficial, but it was the bruises on her wrists that built a great fury in my chest. Whoever hurt her was going to die.

Her head jerked, and she whimpered, her body going tense. She was dreaming and whatever she was seeing was scaring her. Cupping her face, I brushed my lips against her forehead.

“Malyshka. Open your eyes.”

Sucking in a sharp breath, her eyes flew open and darted around wildly. When they landed on me, she froze. “N-Niko.”

Forcing a small smile, I nodded. “Yes, Malyshka. You are safe, it’s okay.”

Tears spilled over her cheeks, and she let out a sob, reaching for me. Careful not to hurt her, I drew her into my arms, stroking her hair softly. I gave her the time she needed to settle before I started asking the hard questions.

“I need to know what happened.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to bury her face against my chest, but I grasped her chin, forcing her to look at me.

“You only need to tell me once, then I will never make you speak of it again. What happened, Anya?”

Her chin trembled, and she started shaking again, this time not due to the cold but because of fear. I waited, letting her work up the courage to speak.

“H-He attacked me. Nina... she thought... she thought I wanted...” She choked on a sob, dropping her eyes. “She hit me, told me to leave... S-So I ran. I thought he would chase me. I was too scared to stop. Not until I got to the hotel.”

“Who? Who attacked you?”

Shame took over her face, and my patience wavered. I wanted to set the world on fire, but I needed to know the whole story first.

“Anton, my sister’s fiancé. He—” She swallowed hard and curled in on herself. “He said I owed him, that I was flirting with him. He was going to—” She whimpered and shook her head. She couldn’t go any farther, but I got the picture. Her sister’s fiancé tried to rape her and her sister believed it was an affair and sent her away without waiting for the whole story.

“Did he—”

She shook her head quickly. “No. She showed up before— before he could...”

Pulling her against my chest, I kissed the top of her head. “You did well, malyshka. The doctor says you need rest, so you will stay in bed for now. If you need to get up, someone will help you. I will be back in the morning.”

I pushed to my feet, but she clung to me, shaking her head, her tears ripping at my insides.

“P-Please... don’t go... I’m scared. I don’t want to be alone.”

This woman would be the death of me. Every instinct I had told me to go after the man before he had a chance to hide from me, but she looked up at me with those big blue eyes and I was powerless to leave her.

“Okay, malyshka. I will stay with you.”

ANYA

IT WAS difficult to sleep that night. Only Niko's steady embrace kept me from falling apart completely. He stripped down to his boxers and climbed into bed with me, wrapping himself around me until I could only feel warm and safe. Any time I woke up, I felt his arms tighten, and I settled again, looking at his relaxed face.

When I woke up the following morning, the sun was up and a few rays pooled across the bed. It was like a natural heated blanket and probably why I didn't notice that Niko was gone. Sitting up slowly, I flinched. My feet were uncomfortable from running in the snow and my body felt sore. I was starting to worry when the door opened and he stepped back inside. Someone in a white coat and a younger woman with a silver tray following him. When he noticed I was awake, he smiled at me.

“Good morning, malyshka. How are you feeling?”

My eyes flicked from him to the other people in the room nervously, but Niko didn't seem to notice, moving to sit beside me on the bed. He was dressed in another fancy suit, though this was the first time I noticed tattoos on his knuckles. I wasn't normally looking at his hands. His face was kind of distracting.

“Why do you have tattoos on your knuckles?”

He looked like he was holding back a smile, leaning to press a kiss to my forehead. “I will explain that later. The

doctor is here to check on you and I've had them bring you your lunch."

My eyebrows went up. "Lunch?"

He nodded. "You've been asleep for a while. You needed it, and I didn't have the heart to wake you."

The doctor watched us curiously, stepping up to the side of the bed. He seemed to be stuck on Niko, but eventually he turned to face me, a smile on his face. "I'm glad you are awake. We were worried about you last night. You very nearly went into hypothermia."

I didn't want to think about what happened yesterday. It still scared me, so I just nodded politely. Niko took my hand, kissing the back of it gently. Once again, the doctor looked at him like he was odd before moving to check my feet and hands, stopping by my face to look at my head.

"How did you cut your head?"

My gaze dropped to my lap, and I fidgeted with the blanket. "When my sister hit me, I smacked my head on a bedpost."

It was all I was willing to say. Niko promised me I wouldn't have to talk about what happened again and the doctor didn't ask.

"Well, it looks fine. Just be careful with it when you are washing so you do not reopen it. Your extremities look fine too. They may be a little tender and uncomfortable, but there will be no permanent damage. Some pain medication will help. I will leave some with Mr. Romanov." He turned to Niko, speaking in Russian. "No more running in the snow. Americans need to prepare better for Russian weather."

Niko shot him a dirty look, but I actually started laughing, too surprised by the doctor's comment to be upset about it. Trying to smother my giggles, I buried my face against my knees.

"What am I missing?"

Niko sounded amused. “She can speak basic Russian. I’m assuming she understood you and your poor attempt at humor.”

When I glanced up, the doctor’s face turned red, and he swallowed hard. “My apologies, I did not mean to—”

Niko rolled his eyes. “You can go, Doctor Kozlov. I will call if we have need of you again.”

He excused himself, hurrying from the room. The woman who’d brought in the tray of food had left it on the nightstand and Niko placed it in my lap once I stopped giggling. He leaned casually on the bed by my feet, his focus on his phone. I wasn’t sure if he’d eaten lunch yet, so while I ate, I shared a few bites with him.

“Do you have to work today?” I remember him saying that he would be busy, but today we were supposed to meet to go out, and I didn’t want yesterday’s disaster to ruin that.

“I do have some things to attend to today, *malyshka*, but I will not stray far. You will focus on resting and when you are feeling up to it, I will show you Moscow, like I promised.”

“What kinds of things?”

I never did ask him what he did for a living. The only thing I knew was that he must do his job well, considering he owned a private jet and his bedroom was easily twice the size of my apartment back home.

Looking up, he seemed to consider me for a second. “I will tell you more about my work, but not now. You need your rest.”

I frowned. “I slept all morning. I feel fine.” Sort of. Still in some pain, but I wasn’t exhausted anymore, and I didn’t want to waste any time with him. I wasn’t sure what would happen with Nina, but it was entirely possible she would change my ticket and send me home right away. Or Anton would demand I pay him back in order to use it to get home... I shuddered, drawing Niko’s attention away from his phone again.

“What’s wrong?”

I shook my head, but he could see right through me. Taking the tray from my lap, he set it aside, moving to stroke his fingers along my jaw.

“No one will hurt you, malyshka. I failed you once. I will not do it again.”

My brow furrowed, forgetting for a moment that he'd told me on the plane that he wouldn't let anyone hurt me. It wasn't like it was his fault. He was working and I was supposed to be with my family. If anything, it was my fault. If I'd mentioned to Nina that I was uncomfortable around her fiancé, maybe she would've believed me. Maybe...

Niko's lips on mine pulled me out of my head, distracting me. He kept it light, barely brushing against my lips, and when I tried to get him to do more, he pulled away with a shake of his head.

“You are a sweet temptation, malyshka, but the doctor said rest. If you keep testing me, resting will be the last thing we will be doing.”

After yesterday, I was nervous about things like that, but Niko made me feel safe and warm and I didn't like him pulling away from me. I tugged gently on his shirt, drawing him closer and pressing my lips against his. His hand slipped into my hair, his tongue tracing along the seam of my lips before stroking against mine. Tingles flooded my body, and I moved closer to him, sliding my arms slowly around his neck.

A knock at the door made me jump, and I broke away from him. He didn't move for a second, his lip twitching like he was fighting back a scowl, but it showed up full force when someone knocked again.

“We found him.”

That caught his attention, and he glanced over his shoulder. When he turned back to face me, his face had gone dark and determined. He kissed my forehead lightly and sat up.

“I need to handle this. I want you to stay here for now and rest. Katya will assist you if you need anything. No exploring without assistance. I do not want you to hurt yourself.”

I didn't want him to leave, but whatever he was going to do was obviously important, so I just nodded, ducking my gaze so he wouldn't see my expression. I didn't want to come off as needy, even though that's how I was feeling right now.

His big rough hands cupped my face, tipping my chin so I was looking at him. He kissed me lightly before rubbing his nose against mine, drawing a smile from me. "I promise I will not be gone long. There are books on the shelves if you wish to practice your Russian more."

He left without looking back, and I settled on finishing my food for now. I wanted to explore, Niko's room was more old-fashioned, like I preferred and I wanted to see if the whole house looked that way, but walking around was a little uncomfortable. I was too afraid to stop for my shoes when I was running and it really wouldn't have mattered anyway. High heels do absolutely nothing to protect you from giant snow drifts. I did manage to get myself to the attached bathroom on my own, my jaw nearly hitting the floor at the extravagance.

There was a huge bathtub sunken into a dais with white columns in each corner and marble steps to reach it. All the fixtures were gold and intricate, there was a mural of angels and clouds on the ceiling, and every surface was gold and white marble. It was a little much, to be honest. There was also a large glass shower off to one side and a toilet with a golden seat, because who doesn't need a golden toilet seat? I fought back a laugh, shaking my head. Okay, Niko was rich. He didn't have to scream it in his bathroom. Then again, he did scream it with those suits. I'd say something if I didn't drool at seeing him in them. They were tailored perfectly to him and very sexy.

Someone at some point changed my clothes yesterday. I was in one of Niko's button ups and even my panties were gone. I blushed hard when I realized it. Did Niko take off my clothes? I was both embarrassed and a little hot thinking about it. I was looking around his closet for a little more coverage when I heard a voice in the bedroom.

"Miss?"

Poking my head out of the closet, I frowned at the woman who was pushing a wheelchair. “Yes?”

She smiled brightly at me. “Mr. Romanov said you’d probably like to look around a little. He wants you to stay off your feet.”

Sighing, I stepped out of the closet. A wheelchair felt like a little much. Walking was uncomfortable, but I could handle it. It was sweet that he cared so much, though.

“Um, yes, I’d like to, but I don’t really have anything to wear...” I gestured nervously to my shirt. She looked contemplative for a moment before moving past me into the closet and pulling out a silky-looking robe.

“It might be a little big, but it should be better than nothing until your clothes are done in the laundry.”

I shuddered at the thought of wearing that outfit again, but I didn’t have much of an option. I had no clothes here, and I didn’t want to go back to the hotel and possibly run into Anton getting my things. Maybe if Niko came with me...

NIKO

WHEN I STEPPED OUTSIDE to join Ivan and Grigori, I expected them to inform me that they had the piece of shit in our custody. I wanted to make him suffer, and the longer he went free, the more irritated I got. When they only had his location, I considered getting new security and shooting these two.

“Why not?”

“He’s with the sister. We didn’t know how you wanted us to proceed.”

I scowled. Anya’s sister hurt her both physically and by suggesting the attempted rape was consensual. I had no qualms with handling her, but I got the feeling that would upset Anya, and she had dealt with enough.

“Fine. I want to see him, though. I want him to know what is coming for him.”

I was not the type of man to hide in the shadows. I liked to let my enemies know I was coming for them so they would suffer longer, constantly looking over their shoulders waiting for me to show up. The man who hurt Anya would be no different. He could only hide behind his fiancée for so long.

I promised Anya I wouldn’t be long, so I would get this done and return to her. I didn’t trust her on her own and I hadn’t decided who would be her permanent security yet. I’d trusted my men with my life for years, but trusting them around Anya was another matter entirely.

The couple was back at the hotel that I had brought Anya to after the flight. It was a popular place for weddings and quite crowded, but the crowds parted quickly upon our arrival. The locals knew to avoid us and the tourists followed their lead, eyeing us curiously as we strode inside.

Normally, in handling things like this, I wouldn't bring so much security with me. This time I wanted a show of force so that Anya's family was made aware of who guarded her now. They failed to protect her. They would not be seeing her alone again. If they wanted to visit her, they would need to clear it with me first.

When we stopped outside the door of the room they were in, I could hear shouting inside. The couple was obviously unhappy with each other. I took great pleasure in making things worse for them. Ivan kicked the door open and my men and I spilled inside the room.

A woman who looked very similar to Anya screamed, but it was the man's actions that made me see red. He recognized me and grabbed his fiancée, hiding behind her. She looked stunned and terrified, trying to get him to release her. He couldn't even be bothered to protect his own fiancée. Pathetic little shit.

“Anton Babin.”

He paled considerably, jerking his fiancée back in front of him when she tried to get away again.

“What's going on?” Anya's sister looked both frightened and annoyed, elbowing Anton roughly.

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Do you know who I am?”

She shook her head. It was unsurprising. She may be Russian, but like Anya, she was raised in America and wouldn't know of those to avoid in her home country.

“Your fiancé does.” I lifted my gaze to his, and he ducked to hide yet again. Coward. “Do you know why I'm here?”

“I-I have no conflict with you. You've got the wrong man.”

My fury compounded, but I masked it, giving him a bored look. “Really? So then you didn’t attempt to force yourself onto Anya?”

Anya’s sister’s eyes went wide. He must have cooked up some kind of lie to her to back her assumption. Anton shook his head wildly.

“No! No! She came on to me!”

A muscle ticked in my jaw as I attempted to hold myself back. I could take him now, force him to leave with us, but the sister may create a scene and that would cause trouble for me. Besides, I told Anya I would be back soon.

“That’s not what she told me. As she is under my protection, I take great issue with anyone who tries to hurt her.” Narrowing my eyes, I let the fury show in my voice. “You made a mistake, going after what’s mine. You can only hide behind your fiancée for so long. I will be seeing you again soon.”

“M-My father is Leonid Babin! You cannot touch me or he will—”

I chuckled, running my thumb along my bottom lip. “Recently, people have begun to question my abilities. I must do better at demonstrating it. Starting with you.”

Snapping my fingers, I pointed at him. He yelped and dragged Anya’s sister toward the bathroom with him, trying to outrun his fate, but Ilya grabbed him by the collar and yanked him backwards, punching his side to force him to release the woman. He tossed the little pissant on the floor and my men surrounded him. Moving to squat in front of him, I smirked when he lifted his head, grabbing the back of it and smashing his face against the floor.

“Stop! Stop! Don’t hurt him!”

Anya’s sister was trying to get past Grigori to protect her man. Foolish woman didn’t even care that he tried to rape her sister. It surprised me how little Americans cared for their own family members. If someone attempted to rape my sister, I’d

destroy every member of their family still alive and wipe out their line completely.

Switching to Russian, I spoke low to him. “I’m not through with you yet, Babin. However, I have things I must see to. This is your warning. I am coming for you. Every cut, scrape, or bruise I find on Anya’s body will be another hour in which I will hurt you. The same goes for her sister. If you hurt her, I will come for your entire family. Enjoy your last few days alive, Babin. We will be in touch.”

Without warning, I grabbed his fingers, snapping two effortlessly. He screamed, writhing in pain when I squeezed them. I only stopped when Anya’s sister managed to get past Grigori and threw herself on top of Anton, screaming for help. I chuckled.

“No one will come to help you, little dove. They know who is in charge here. You are so eager to protect the man who attacked your sister, and you have yet to ask me if she is okay.” I shook my head, a mock frown on my face. “It is lucky I found her when I did. She will be better protected from now on.”

Standing, I studied her. She looked so much like her sister, but held none of the qualities that made Anya so perfect. Anya was wrong. I was very lucky to have stumbled upon the right sister. I would endeavor to prove it to her once I handled business. She was mine. She deserved to be treated like a princess.



WHEN I STEPPED OUTSIDE, the cold wind settled my temper a little. I loved this weather; it made me feel clear-headed and relaxed. It did make me think of Anya, though. I would need to get her a proper jacket. The one she was wearing on the plane wasn’t enough, not for a Russian winter. It was still early in the season now. It probably would’ve been fine for her trip, but now that she would be staying, she’d need to be properly attired.

My mind on Anya, I only heard her sister calling for us after Ivan and Ilya stopped her, blocking her from coming closer to me. Turning to face her, I raised an eyebrow. These sisters needed to learn not to approach monsters of their own free will.

“Wait! I want to see my sister!”

I scoffed. “After what you’ve put her through, you think I would allow that?”

She glared at me, baring her teeth. “Anton said—”

“Anton is a coward and a liar. You and Anya are twins, yes?”

She nodded once, her expression confused and distrustful.

“You have been sisters all your life and yet you believe the word of a man you’ve barely known a year over her.” I shook my head in mock shame. “She spoke so highly of you on the plane. She must not realize how little you think of her.”

Pain slashed across her face, and she took a step back. “She didn’t say—”

Stalking up to her, I cut her off before she could continue and piss me off anymore, leaning closer to growl at her. “You never gave her that chance. You saw only what you wanted to see, and you chose violence instead of hearing her side of it. Then you sent her away in a country she is unfamiliar with, injured and frightened, while your fiancé got no repercussions for his actions. You are just as much to blame for Anya’s injuries as he is.”

She gasped, finally showing some concern for her sister. “She’s really hurt?”

I remembered the stories Anya told me of her and her sister. She valued their relationship and I would do well to remember that and not maim the woman, because she was starting to get on my nerves.

“She is being cared for, which is more than you did for her. You are lucky she loves you or your fate would be much the

same as your fiancé's. However, if you ever strike my Anya again, I will remove your hand. Do you understand me?"

Her eyes widened, and she looked fearful, nodding and edging away from me. Straightening, I gave her one last dark look before heading back to the car. I wanted to get home to Anya. After seeing what she'd had to put up with for the past few days, I intended to spoil her. Then I would inform her about the change in plans. She would be happy here. I would make sure of it myself.

ANYA

IT TOOK a lot of wheedling from Katya to get me into the wheelchair. I thought it was ridiculous and excessive and I only agreed to it once she mentioned she would get in trouble if we didn't use it. I wouldn't want her pay docked or something because I was being stubborn, so I sat in the stupid thing and let her push me through the house.

House wasn't grand enough a word though. Even mansion seemed lackluster. Palace would be more fitting. Every inch of it was elaborate and beautiful, like history preserved into art. It almost felt like I stepped into a different time and I felt incredibly underdressed wandering around the place in just a robe and Niko's shirt.

Katya showed me almost all of upstairs, except for a few rooms that she said were off limits. I'd ask Niko about those later. She was really kind and sweet and she loved to talk, though she did sometimes switch to Russian and I'd struggle to keep up with how fast she was talking. She was about to bring me back to Niko's room for a break and a snack when someone called her name. She grimaced.

"I'll be right back. If I don't answer, she gets very angry with me."

"Go ahead, I'm okay on my own." I shooed her away, moving the wheelchair on my own. It wasn't like it was hard. Niko's room was at the end of the hall and took up an entire wing. I had to pass the stairs to get to it and I paused at the top. I didn't get to look around down there and I didn't really want

to sit alone in Niko's room waiting for him. Since Katya wasn't here, I figured she wouldn't get into any trouble if I wasn't using the wheelchair. I parked it by the banister and took my time heading downstairs.

This place might require a map to find your way through. I wandered for a while, finding the kitchen and a few more bedrooms, but I got lost on the way back and ended up down another hallway I wasn't familiar with. There wasn't much down this hallway. One wall had giant windows facing the snow covered back garden and on the other side was a set of massive, intricate double doors. Biting my lip, I looked around before deciding a small peek wouldn't hurt. Katya never mentioned any rooms off limits down here, and Niko said I could look around.

Pushing the doors open, I stepped inside carefully. It was dark, the cloudy weather doing very little to light up the room, so I didn't really know what type of room this was. It wasn't until I found the light switch that I realized what I'd walked into. Niko had a ballroom! An actual, honest to god ballroom. One wall was all mirrors, the light from the elaborate chandeliers bouncing off them and making the room feel like it was glowing. All the other walls had gold trim running up them and little murals on the ceiling and anywhere there was room. There was a grand piano in the corner hidden under a sheet and everything was a little dusty, like this room wasn't used in a while, but it was gorgeous and I was speechless, spinning slowly as I tried to take in every detail.

“What are you doing in here?”

Startled, I jerked around to face the speaker. Her long blonde hair was pulled up into a ponytail and she was wearing the same uniform Katya was wearing, but I didn't recognize her. Katya pointed out a few staff members who were moving about the house working, but she probably couldn't point out all of them in one sweep of the upper floors.

“Oh... Niko said I could look around and—”

She scowled. “Niko? Who are you that you can be so casual about the way you speak that way of the Czar?”

My brow furrowed. “Czar? Is that what he does for a living?”

She scoffed, crossing her arms and scrutinizing me. “You Americans are all clueless. I don’t know who you think you are, but you need to leave.”

Uncomfortable with her glaring at me, I moved to do as she asked, apparently too slowly for her liking. She made an irritated noise and rolled her eyes. “Any day now!”

I jumped, fighting back tears. “I’m sorry, I—”

Putting her hand up, she glared at me. “I don’t want to hear excuses. Leave, now. Most of Mr. Romanov’s overnight guests know they aren’t supposed to stick around in the morning. I can’t understand why he’d want to slum with a stupid American. He can do so much better.”

Someone snorted, and we both looked up. There was another entrance to the ballroom, and the doors had been left open on that side. The woman who’d made the noise was leaning against the doorframe, her arms and ankles crossed casually, a smirk on her face.

“What? Like you? You’re kidding yourself, Ivanka. He wouldn’t waste his time with someone as pathetic as you.”

I wasn’t sure who the new woman was, though she did look familiar. She wasn’t wearing a staff uniform, so it couldn’t be someone Katya pointed out to me.

Ivanka screeched, stamping her foot. “I am better than the useless women he drags in here! He will realize it eventually!”

The woman’s face went dark, and it suddenly struck me why she seemed familiar. She looked a lot like Niko.

“Yell at me again, watch what I will do to you. My brother will look like a kitten in comparison.”

Ivanka gritted her teeth, her fists clenched at her sides. She spun on her heel and stormed off without another word, apparently believing the woman would actually hurt her. I faced her nervously, twisting my fingers.

“I’m s-sorry, I didn’t know I couldn’t come in here. Niko said—”

She snorted, and her face brightened. “Please tell me you call him that to his face.”

He never made it sound like I couldn’t, but people kept pointing it out and I was a little worried that I was being disrespectful. When I nodded, Niko’s sister started laughing, pushing off the doorframe to come and join me.

“That’s funny. You must be special for him to allow that. If I tried, he’d maim me.” She stuck out her hand, smiling at me. “I’m Eva, his sister.”

Shaking her hand cautiously, I tried to force a smile. “I’m Anya.”

Tipping her head, she considered me. “You’re not usually my brother’s type. Are you always this quiet?”

Pulling my hand away, I ducked my head, nodding. I already knew Niko was way too good for me, but his sister pointing it out only made me feel worse. I was considering some kind of excuse so I could go back to Niko’s room to hide when she put her hand on my shoulder. When I looked up, she gave me a reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry, that’s a good thing. He could use a little softness in his life. Most of the women I’ve seen him with are only with him for one thing.”

I frowned. “Sex?”

Isn’t that what parents warn you about when they say boys are only after one thing? Was that only a warning for young girls? I felt stupid the moment I said it, and I wasn’t brave enough to ask.

She made a face. “Ew. I meant money. That’s not why you’re with him, is it?”

Blushing hard, I shook my head. It was just the first thing that came to my mind.

She huffed out a laugh. “Alright, good. I don’t need to know about that. Also, this room isn’t off limits. Though it is

in serious need of a clean. Ivanka has been neglecting it and I'll be informing my brother about her treatment of you, too. I can't stand her."

I didn't want anyone to get into trouble because of me, but Eva didn't give me a chance to protest. She took my wrist, leading me out of the room and pointing out a few more on our way back. She paused near the stairs when I kept wincing.

"What's wrong?"

Grimacing, I shifted from foot to foot to ease the discomfort. "I... I hurt my feet last night... Niko said to rest, but I got bored and then I got lost and—"

She pursed her lips, fighting off a smile. "You're a magnet for trouble, aren't you? First you get lost, then you earn the wrath of the most annoying bitch on staff, then you get hurt after ignoring my brother's rules. He will have his hands full with you."

I couldn't blush harder if I tried. "I didn't mean to... he said I could look around—"

"Miss Anya! There you are!" Katya came flying down the stairs, looking harried. "I was worried when I saw the wheelchair empty and you weren't in the room. You shouldn't be walking around so much."

Eva lost her ability to hold back her laughter, snickering and leaning against the banister. "He put you in a wheelchair?"

Katya slowed nearer to the bottom, curtsying to Eva and greeting her in Russian. "Good afternoon, Ms. Romanov."

Still snickering to herself, Eva moved in front of me, squatting down. When I frowned at her, she beckoned me closer.

"You'll hurt yourself going up the stairs and I don't want you getting into trouble with Nikolai for sneaking around after he told you to rest. You're fun. I don't want him to get rid of you."

When she saw my panicked expression, she shook her head. "I'll tell him it was my fault. If he cares enough to put

you into a wheelchair, he obviously cares about you more than the rest of the women I've seen him with. He wouldn't even offer them his jacket. I heard him tell one woman she should've dressed warmer. He's an ass."

Waving me closer again, she helped me climb onto her back. I was too embarrassed and worried to argue with her. I just wanted to get back upstairs so Niko wouldn't be angry with me. If I lost him, I really would be all alone.

We'd only made it up about halfway when Niko's booming voice echoed through the house.

"Eva! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

NIKO

I'D GIVEN VERY clear instructions when I left. Anya was allowed to explore only in the wheelchair and only for an hour because she needed her rest. When I found her on my sister's back climbing the stairs, I lost my temper, storming toward them, fully intending on throttling my sister for putting Anya in danger.

“Hello, big brother. I found your girlfriend being berated by one of the staff.”

It distracted me, which was her purpose. “Who?”

“Ivanka. She was trying to make Anya leave.”

Growling, I plucked Anya off her back and into my arms, keeping her off her feet. “I'll deal with it. What the hell were you thinking carrying her like that? If you dropped her—”

She rolled her eyes like the insufferable brat she was. “I wasn't going to drop her. She's tiny and weighs almost nothing. Besides, she said her feet hurt, and I didn't want her to take the stairs when she couldn't stop wincing.”

That effectively took all my attention off my sister and onto Anya instead. She was looking between us, her eyebrows furrowed. I didn't realize we'd been speaking in Russian and probably too quickly for her to keep up. Drawing her closer, I brought her back upstairs and to my room, setting her on the bed. Her face was bright red when I moved to check her feet, shaking her head and trying to block me.

“I'm okay, I didn't mean to—”

“You were supposed to be resting, malyshka. The doctor said so. I could have shown you around later.”

She ducked her head, frowning at her hands in her lap. “I was only going to look a little. I got lost...”

My brow furrowed. “Where was Katya? She was supposed to be showing you around in the wheelchair.”

Her eyes widened, and she jerked her head up, with a worried expression. “She did! She showed me upstairs, but then she got called away for a second and I snuck off. It wasn’t her fault!”

Her reaction was surprising, like she knew I would hurt someone for not following my directions. She shouldn’t be aware of that. I’d made threats in front of her, but I preferred to keep her ignorant of my violent nature. I didn’t want to scare her.

Cupping her face, I brushed my thumb over her cheek to soothe her. She let out a shaky breath, leaning into my hand and closing her eyes. It made me smile, her being so trusting with me.

“Since you snuck off, she will not be punished. You will though.”

Her eyes flew open, and she looked uneasy. I smirked at her. “You cannot be trusted on your own. Your punishment is to stay by my side the rest of the day.”

Her face flushed, and she smiled, ducking her head. “Okay...”

“That was cute.”

I rolled my eyes. I’d forgotten my sister was still hanging around. She was sitting by the fireplace, her feet propped onto the coffee table. She knew I didn’t like that and yet she continued to do it because she liked to annoy me. She was one of very few people who wouldn’t end up dead for pissing me off.

“Why are you here, Eva?”

She shrugged. “I was bored.”

I drew in a deep breath, trying to summon my patience with her. Eva being bored was never a good thing. She liked to cause trouble to entertain herself. It was lucky that Anya was here to distract her from whatever mischief she'd planned when she arrived.

"It is not my job to entertain you. What happened to your work?"

She shrugged. "I got bored."

Frustrated, I considered throwing her out, but when I glanced back at Anya, a thought struck me. Studying my sister, I frowned. Anya needed security, but I wasn't pleased with the idea of one of my men being alone with her. If I added Eva to the mix, it would keep her out of trouble and make me feel better about letting Anya leave my side.

"Do you want a new job?"

Dropping her feet, she sat up, studying me suspiciously. I never offered her a job before. My life wasn't safe, and I wanted to keep my little sister out of it. This job shouldn't be that difficult, though. Ilya would be joining them and would act as their protection while Eva would help Anya escape if needed. She'd been trained in getting out of difficult situations by yours truly. I wanted her prepared in case my enemies tried to come after her instead.

"What kind of job?"

I hadn't talked to Anya about security, so I switched to speaking in Turkish to keep it between us until I could explain it properly.

"Anya needs security. One isn't enough and my men can't go with her into certain areas. You know how to get out if needed. You can bring her home."

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "That sounds like fun. Can I have a gun?"

I scowled. "No."

She chuckled. "Alright, fine. I get to choose the car, though."

Rolling my eyes, I nodded. “Deal. Now get out. And don’t cause trouble.”

Laughing, she pushed to her feet, giving us an exaggerated bow. “As you wish. Bye, Anya. Good luck with him.”

Anya had been watching us speak with a frown, but her eyebrows shot up at Eva’s warning and she whipped her head towards me again. Sighing, I considered for the millionth time if I needed a sister. I had a younger brother too, and he wasn’t so annoying.

Gentle fingers on my jaw drew my focus. Anya looked concerned, stroking my face cautiously. She effortlessly brought me peace, and I hadn’t even gotten to enjoy all of her yet. I wanted to remedy that, but she was in pain and decided to ignore my advice on resting. Just another thing to ruin my day. I didn’t get to murder Anton like I’d planned, I had to deal with my sister, my staff needed correction, and Anya was still off limits for the time being. I needed a drink. Or maybe several. Being so close to her and not being able to touch her was almost painful.

“Are you okay?”

Turning to kiss her palm, I nodded. “I would be better if you were resting like I asked. Do your feet hurt?”

Ducking her gaze again, she nodded. “A little. I should’ve taken a break when Katya suggested it. I’m sorry.”

I was tired of her hiding from me. Pulling off my tie and jacket, I kicked off my shoes and drew her into my arms again, setting her into the center of the bed before wrapping myself around her. She turned over immediately, leaning her forehead against my chest, and I felt myself relax.

“I got you a present.”

Leaning back so she could see my face, she frowned. “You didn’t have to do that.”

I nodded. “I am aware. I wanted to.”

She began to nibble on her bottom lip, drawing my focus to her mouth. Little minx was making it difficult for me to let

her rest and she wasn't even trying.

“What is it?”

Chuckling, I shook my head, rubbing my nose against hers. “If you're good, I'll give it to you tonight.”

She smiled softly, her fingers clutching my shirt to keep me near her. “Does being good mean I can't explore anymore?”

When I shot her a sour look, she giggled. “I'm kidding!”

Sliding my hand into her hair, I kept her from moving while I nipped at her bottom lip. “I can think of a few ways to keep you interested in staying in bed with me.”

Her face fell and her pupils dilated, making me smirk. She wouldn't be arguing about exploring if I kept her busy. I took possession of her mouth, keeping her distracted. I wouldn't risk her health to sate myself, but that didn't mean we couldn't do other things for the time being. I'd need her to get used to me anyway.

She grew more brave over time, her hands moving up away from my chest to explore. Even in her kissing she felt innocent and I had to fight the ferocious need to claim her. It was in an effort to control myself that I pulled away, dropping kisses down her neck instead.

She was shifting restlessly, my robe parting to show off her legs barely covered by my shirt. In my fury, I'd forgotten to retrieve her things from the hotel earlier and I was grateful for it now. Sucking lightly on her neck, I trailed my fingers along her thigh, waiting for any sign that she was uncomfortable. She'd been through a lot and I wasn't going to push her. She made no move to stop me though, mewling and clutching at my shoulders.

Slipping my hand between her thighs, I brushed my fingers along her heat. She sucked in a breath and when I moved to rest my palm on her belly, she released it again, sounding a little more frustrated. A grin tugged at my lips. Sliding my hand back down, I teased her with barely there touches. When

it came to her first time, I wanted her to want me so badly that she didn't feel an ounce of pain.

Lifting my head up, I watched her fighting to stay quiet. She bit her lip, her brow furrowed. I could tell she wanted me to touch her more, but she was too shy to say it. It was when I pushed down on her clit that she finally gave in, moaning so sweetly.

“Niko...”

My head dropped, nearly losing the battle to not attack her. I placated myself by opening the front of the robe and shirt, watching the flush work its way down her chest as she was brought closer to release. Her nipples were drawn into tight buds, just begging for attention, and when I drew one into my mouth, she cried out, pushing her chest towards me to give me more access.

I couldn't get enough of her and I hadn't even had her yet. I would need to find some sort of distraction because if I wasn't careful, I'd give in to her sweet temptation and accidentally hurt her. If this is what being a gentleman was like, I was glad I never subscribed to that kind of thing. In an effort to spare her, I would be hurting myself instead.

NOTHING I'VE EVER DONE ALONE in the bathtub ever came close to feeling like this. With every circle of his fingers, every pull of his lips, I felt my body coil tighter and tighter until I was almost desperate for release. My legs tightened and my back arched and right as it felt like I was tipping over the edge, he pushed his finger inside me. I shattered, crying out his name as he slowly pushed his finger in and out, setting off little explosions with every movement. He didn't stop until every aftershock faded and my body relaxed.

When I finally managed to open my eyes, he was watching me, a fire smoldering in his gaze that took my breath away. I thought maybe he'd do more, but he pulled his hand away and brought his fingers to his lips, putting them into his mouth. I felt my cheeks burn and when he removed them, he flashed me a wicked grin.

“You taste as sweet as you sound, *malyshka*.”

Mortified, I covered my face with my hands, making him bark out a laugh. I hadn't ever thought to stop him. He made me feel safe, and I was pleading with him in my head to touch me before he even got close. At some point, someone switched bodies with me because I'd never been so wanton in my life.

His face nuzzled my neck, nipping and kissing until I dropped my hands and tipped my head to give him more room. This was it, this was when he'd take me and I'd finally get to experience what Nina was always gushing about. I—

With one last nip that made me jump, he chuckled and pushed himself up off the bed. Confused, I watched him move toward a little bar tucked into the corner, pouring himself a drink. Pulling the robe closed, I sat up with a frown.

“What... What are you doing?”

He glanced at me, a smirk crossing his face before he tipped back the drink like a shot. While pouring himself another, his eyes trailed over me, the heated look making my skin burn, but he still didn't move to come back to bed. He swallowed down the next drink much like the first, tipping his head back to finish it all at once.

“I thought you weren't supposed to drink vodka like that.”

A grin spread across his face. “You're not. However, I find it necessary if I'm going to keep myself away from you.”

My brow furrowed. “Why would you need to do that?”

He exhaled sharply, pouring himself another drink. “Because you need rest, and you decided to sneak around instead. I will not cause you any more pain, even if it pains me to do so. So we will relax and spend time together until you are feeling better.”

I was torn between delighted that he cared so much and annoyed that he was purposely not going to touch me. He showed me just a hint of what I'd been missing, and I wanted more.

“I feel fine.”

This drink he took more slowly, watching me with a heated grin. “You will not tempt me, malyshka. You should get dressed. I'm going to take you to dinner.”

Throwing my hands into the air, I scowled at him, frustrated. “Into what? I don't have any clothes.”

His brow furrowed. “Have they not finished cleaning your dress?”

I hesitated, sinking in on myself a little. I'd been avoiding thinking about it, so I never asked. I didn't want to wear it. I

didn't want to constantly think about what happened the last time I put that dress on.

Setting his drink down, he strode across the room, coming to sit beside me. I was staring at my hands until he made me look at him with a knuckle under my chin.

“What’s wrong?”

Swallowing, I bit my lip. I was probably being stupid. It was just a dress, and I didn't really have any other options, so I'd need to get over myself eventually, but...

Like he could hear my thoughts, he didn't question me anymore. He leaned over, kissing me softly before resting his forehead against mine. “I will send the staff out to get you something else.”

Grimacing, I shook my head. “I couldn't ask them to do that, I just—”

“If it makes you unhappy, *malyshka*, then I will not force you to wear it. We will eat here for tonight so that you do not need to rush and tomorrow we will go see Moscow.”

Tears slipped over my cheeks and he brushed them away, stroking my cheeks and pulling me into his arms. Warmth and safety surrounded me and I felt myself relax. There was no place in the world where I felt like this. I never wanted to leave. I wished I didn't have to eventually.

Since we weren't going out tonight, Niko had them draw me a bath. He'd already seen pretty much everything earlier, but I was blushing so hard I think he decided to spare me by saying he'd wait in the room. Settling into the tub that was way too big for just one person and deep enough to cover all of me and then some, I listened for him. He turned on a radio from somewhere and spoke low on the phone in Russian. It was too quiet for me to really hear him, but I found his voice soothing. I nearly fell asleep, the warm water and the rumble of his voice making me drowsy. I had to force myself to clean up just to stay awake.

When I came back out, he was back by the bar, leaning against the wall and sipping his drink while still on the phone.

I was in another one of his shirts and his robe, loving the look he gave me when he saw me. Padding over to him, I put out my hand. He grinned, handing me his drink and pulling me against him. I knew this time to take small sips; the alcohol warming my insides.

“No, that is fine. I don’t want to alert them that we know just yet.”

I wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but it didn’t really matter to me. Handing him back his drink, I cuddled against him, breathing him in.

He chuckled at whatever they were saying. “That’s not going to save him.”

My brow furrowed, and I looked up at him, tipping my head. Save who?

Taking another sip of his drink, he made a tick sound behind his teeth. “So let him. It won’t change anything. If anything, it will only make it more fun for me.” He hummed his acknowledgement to their response. “No, not tomorrow. I’m taking Anya to see the city. The day after.”

Whatever he was doing, he was working it around his time with me, and it warmed me to my toes. Tugging on his shirt, I pulled him close enough to kiss him lightly to show my appreciation. His answering smile made my heart flutter in my chest.

“Yes, that will work. See that it is done.”

He hung up without saying goodbye, slipping the phone into his pocket before cupping my face in his hands and sipping my lips.

“Did you enjoy your bath, malyshka?”

Smiling, I leaned into his palms. “Yes, thank you. Next time, don’t leave me in there alone.”

I don’t know what possessed me to say that, but his answering grin was worth it. He scooped me into his arms and strode for the bed, spending the rest of the night showing me

how easily he could make my body sing without actually taking me.



IT'D BEEN a few days since Niko brought me to his home. He kept his promise, taking me out to see the city. The present he brought me was a new jacket that came all the way past my knees and amongst the massive amount of outfits he had some of his staff pick out for me, they also bought me boots that were fur lined and so soft it was like walking in slippers. I was plenty warm as we went exploring, but he kept making us stop and take breaks, still worried about my feet. They weren't as bad as he was making it seem and after putting on the cream the doctor left for me, I was feeling a lot better, but it made me feel special that he was doting on me, so I didn't complain. Not much anyway.

The next day he had to work, but Eva came to visit again and she took me out to a local bookstore so I could get some easier books to practice my Russian. The ones Niko had were complicated and even though he had an entire library almost as big as the ballroom, there weren't any in there at my reading level. After realizing I spoke a little Russian, Eva refused to speak English to me so that I could practice. She teased me about my accent, but it still felt nice to chat and practice without feeling like a burden. She even brought me to a restaurant for lunch and made me order so I could try with someone other than her. My face was on fire, but I managed to order us what we'd wanted, so it wasn't all bad.

Niko had to work again this morning, but he promised he'd have dinner with me and I had a plan to seduce him. He never went past touches, though he was slowly working on more fingers. When he tried three, I thought it was too much, but he still managed to make me come. Every night was the same thing, and he never did anything for himself. I wanted more, or at least to reciprocate. I'd only worked up the nerve to explore his chest, but maybe if I went farther south, it'd push him in the right direction.

Sitting at the vanity that took up an entire corner of the bathroom, I dusted my cheeks with a little powder. I wasn't an expert at makeup, but I hoped I'd pulled off a sultry look that I saw in a magazine at the bookstore. I left my hair down because he seemed to like to play with it, wrapping it around his fist and running his fingers through it. The skirt I chose was a maxi, and I was pairing it with a tight long-sleeved shirt, but hopefully the v-neck was enough to make it sexy and not give off the 'innocent vibe', as Eva liked to call it. Yesterday she said I looked like I belonged in a library.

Slipping on a pair of heels, I stood and smoothed out my outfit, looking in the mirror. Okay, so I looked a little like I belonged in the 1950s, but I wasn't really sure how to pull off sexy and I was already uncomfortable showing this much cleavage. It wasn't much, but it was more than I normally would show.

Since it was just Niko, I figured it should be fine. Grabbing a scarf in case he wanted to eat out, I headed out of the bathroom, pausing in the doorway when Niko stormed into the room with a scowl. He froze when he saw me, his eyes trailing over my outfit. I waited for him to tell me what he thought, but his response wasn't what I was expecting.

"Good. Someone told you we're having company for dinner."

I FROWNED. “COMPANY?”

He seemed more than a little irritated, heading straight for the bar and pouring himself a drink. I was a little hesitant to approach him when he was in such a foul mood, but he'd never done anything to make me think he'd hurt me. He always made me feel safe, and I wanted to help him feel better. Stepping up to him, I gently ran my fingers over his cheek, my eyebrows flying up when he leaned into my hand. Whoever was coming to dinner, he wasn't happy about it.

“Niko, who's coming to dinner?”

He sighed. “Several people. Predominantly my mother. She wanted it to be just us, but I didn't want her meddling, so I invited more to distract her.”

Niko always seemed indestructible to me, so the thought of someone upsetting him so much was shocking. What kind of woman was his mother that he decided to invite other people to dinner to avoid her?

“Did... did you want me to stay up here?”

His brow furrowed, and he slipped his hand around to the back of my neck, pulling me closer to him. “No, *malyshka*, I have no interest in hiding you. You are mine and she will come to accept it. But you must promise me you will stay with me at all times. She is not a kind woman and I will not allow her to be cruel to you, but I cannot protect you if you wander off.”

Apprehension settled in my belly at his warning. I nodded because it sounded important to him, but I was nervous about meeting his mother. He made her sound horrible, and I already struggled with confrontation. It was the look on his face that shored up my courage. He looked worried about me, like I was fragile and might break if his mother said something that upset me. I didn't like that. I was shy, I wasn't going to fall apart.

Lifting my chin, I straightened his collar and smiled at him. "Come on, it'll be okay. I'll be right there with you."

For the first time since we met, it was me comforting him and he softened a little, the dark look on his face melting as he dipped his head and pressed his lips against mine. He didn't linger, but when he pulled away, I lifted onto my toes, chasing him for one last kiss before taking his hand and urging him toward the door. Tipping back his glass, he set it aside and followed me, tucking my hand into his elbow.

Whatever happened, there was one thing that would stick with me tonight and I'd remind myself of it any time I started to doubt myself. He said I was his, and that made my heart flutter. I'd been working up the nerve to ask him what we were to each other and while he didn't spell it out, he was pretty clear about it. I was his, which made him mine, and I was going to protect him. Even from his own mother, if I had to. I just had to be brave about it.



NIKO LED me to a formal dining room across the hall from the ballroom. I'd poked my head in before, but like the ballroom, it didn't look like it'd been used in a while and I moved on pretty quickly. The walls were a deep red, bringing out the gold on all the picture and mirror frames and the gold of the chandelier above the long table. It looked like there was room enough for fifty, but only the end of the table was set up for now. A pretty teal tablecloth was covered in fancy plates and more silverware than necessary for one meal. I suddenly felt underdressed. There was a royalty feeling to the whole set up, and I was dressed for a casual date night.

There were several people milling about the room chatting with each other, one of whom I recognized. I waved at Eva, giving her a small smile. She looked just as annoyed to be here as Niko did when we were upstairs. I wanted to go ask her what was wrong, but I remembered Niko's warning about staying with him so I stuck to his side like glue, following him as we walked over to a severe-looking woman standing in the corner talking to a few men in suits.

There weren't a lot of similarities between her and Niko. While he had dark hair and brown eyes, she had light brown hair pulled into a tight bun and green eyes. She was tall like him and thin, her back rigid and her face lacking any smile lines. Her sharp eyes locked on me the moment we stepped into the room and tracked me as we approached.

She studied me for a few seconds before her gaze flicked away and she proceeded to ignore me, turning her focus onto Niko. She spoke only in Russian and I had to strain to keep up.

"Where did you find this one? She looks like a child."

His face went dark. "Rethink that statement."

If she was surprised by his reaction, she didn't show it. She didn't move a muscle in her face at all, staring Niko down like he wasn't a grown man but an errant child in need of dressing down. I opened my mouth to introduce myself, but Eva appeared beside me, pinching my arm and giving the smallest shake of her head. My brow furrowed, but she swung her attention to her mother, speaking in English to her.

"What's the occasion? You normally give us a little warning before events like this."

Scowling, she refused to answer in English. "I don't need a reason to see my children. What I don't understand is why so many others are in attendance."

Niko looked annoyed. "You're lying. You're here to meet Anya. Since you demanded to meet her, I felt it was better that everyone meet her at once so she wouldn't have to do this several times."

It was a little fascinating how his mother's face never moved, but you could feel the animosity pouring off of her. She wasn't happy that Niko called her out, and the room was silent. Everyone heard what he said.

Looking up at him, I saw the barely banked fury. It wasn't until he looked at me that he softened even a little. He covered my hand with his and led me away. "Let me introduce you to everyone."

In attendance for this dinner was mostly family. Ten in total, though he said it wasn't anywhere close to the amount of family he had living around here. They just happened to be the ones available at a moment's notice, apparently. Two of his uncles, his cousin and his wife, and two other cousins who were single. The only two who weren't family Niko introduced as business partners. One of them was named Yegor, a broad-shouldered giant who looked like he could crush a person's skull with his bare hands but was actually kind of quiet. The other's name was Max, a flirt who nearly got punched by Niko when he kissed the back of my hand. Niko made him sit as far from me as possible once everyone sat down.

The seating arrangement actually ended up being a bit of an argument, if the silent glares between Niko and his mother could be considered an argument. Apparently she always sat at his right-hand side, but he sat me there instead and the look on his face dared her to argue with him. She eventually sat across from me, but she wasn't pleased about it, glowering at me like I had demanded the spot myself. I tried offering to switch, but Niko cut me off before I could finish my sentence.

I couldn't really say much, at least not to those two. It was Eva who spared me. She sat down next to me and started talking about a concert she wanted to go to in New York and if I had any recommendations for places to stay.

Once everyone began talking about a neutral topic, Eva leaned closer to whisper to me. "Don't let her know you can understand her. She'll reveal more if she thinks she can get away with it."

I frowned. I wasn't sure I liked being deceitful to Niko's mother, especially when we just met, but I didn't really have the confidence to speak Russian to her anyway so I followed Eva's advice and kept quiet, speaking quietly in English to her and eventually, a few of Niko's cousins.

"I did not ask."

Niko's growl caught my attention. When I glanced at him, he wasn't touching his food, a drink in his hand and his focus on the room while his mother whispered harshly to him. I hadn't been listening to what she was saying, but he looked close to losing his temper at this point, a muscle ticking in his jaw. I reacted without thinking, putting my hand on top of his and offering him a small smile. One corner of his mouth went up for a second and he shifted to take my hand in his, the other firmly around his glass like it was a lifeline. A waiter kept appearing behind him, refilling his drink whenever it was empty. I wasn't entirely sure what his tolerance for alcohol was, but with the amount he was drinking, I'd be asleep under the table if I drank that much.

"Things are going to hit the fan in a minute. Brace yourself," Eva warned in my ear.

Swallowing hard, I glanced back at Niko just as his mother's whispers grew loud enough for me to hear her.

"You can't keep doing this. You have a responsibility to this family and giving your attention to whore after whore is not befitting a man of your station."

His furious gaze moved slowly to his mother, the grip on his glass so tight that it shattered, cutting his palm. The whole room went silent and when I tried to stand to get him something to stem the bleeding, Eva put her hand on my arm, forcing me to sit again.

"Refer to Anya as a whore again and you will see just how little I care for stations. She is mine and I will hear no more of it."

"Nikolai, don't—"

“Enough!” he roared, pushing to his feet. His hands were clenched tightly at his sides and fury seemed to radiate off him in waves. “You are not the head of this family, and it is not for you to say who I choose to be with. If you cannot accept her, then you can get out!”

The last two words were so loud, I jumped. It hurt to think his mother knew nothing about me and was immediately going to write me off, but it’d only been a few days. He made me wonder if he’d had a similar conversation with her before and last time may have gone in her favor. That scared me a little, that there might be someone who could sway him to leave me. A few days was enough for me to realize I was falling for him and I would be heartbroken if he left.

He looked so angry that he was almost shaking and I couldn’t sit by and watch it anymore. Freeing my arm from Eva’s grasp, I stood. Niko’s eyes flicked to me, a warning in his gaze, but I wasn’t leaving. I just wanted to help him. Stepping up beside him, I touched his arm, drawing his focus off his fury and onto me. He turned just enough to give me the room to reach up and stroke my fingers over his cheek.

“You’re okay. I’m right here with you.”

It was barely a whisper because the whole room was silent and I was a little embarrassed, but he needed it. One of his arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer, the other hand trapping mine against his cheek. He frowned, searching my face for a moment, but just as he started to relax, his mother spoke again.

“How embarrassing,” she muttered under her breath.

It made Niko stiffen, the barely banked fire in his eyes blaring out of control. His fierce gaze slid over the group, his lip curled up in a deep scowl. “All of you! Get out!”

NIKO

MY MOTHER PROTESTED, but my uncle grabbed her arm, dragging her away from the table. No one else said anything as they left the table. I saw Eva's concerned look out of the corner of my eye, but she didn't need to worry about Anya. She was the only person keeping me calm right now. She took my hand, drawing my attention back onto her, her brow furrowed with concern as she carefully tied a napkin to the cut on my palm. It was superficial, but I liked her attention. Her sweet whispers would have worked to settle me if my mother had kept her mouth shut. She'd grown cocky over the years, thinking because she was my mother that she could say or do whatever she pleased. She forgets who keeps a roof over her head. Before I started my business, we were just above living on the streets. The power had gone to her head.

Urging me back into my seat, Anya stood in front of me, running her fingers through my hair and down my neck. Settling my hands on her hips, I drew her closer, burying my face against her belly. She wrapped her arms around my head, hugging me against her.

She was sweet and under normal circumstances it may have settled me, but my blood still boiled at my mother's insistence in giving her up. Family was everything to me and my mother was included in that, but Anya would be my whole life, just as soon as I felt like she was ready to hear it. After the turmoil caused by her own family and now my mother's interference, I didn't think she'd accept her place just yet.

In serious need of a distraction, I tugged the hem of her shirt free, brushing my lips over the skin I exposed. She sucked in a breath, her hands moving to my shoulders to keep herself steady. With my position, I could easily reach under her skirt, sliding my palms up her legs to her ass, gripping it roughly as I ran my tongue over her belly. Her little gasps were addictive, but I wanted more from her now.

When my fingers moved into the waistband of her panties, slowly dragging them down her hips, she started to tremble, swaying on her feet. Lifting my gaze to hers just as they slid down to her ankles, I took her in, her bottom lip caught between her teeth, her pupils blown, her breathing sharp and fast.

Standing quickly, I crowded closer, dragging her hips to mine and grinding my erection against her. I dipped my head, claiming her lips fiercely, thrusting my tongue into her mouth when she gasped in surprise. I was being too rough. I was too riled up to properly take care of her, but she didn't protest, her fingers digging into my shirt as she let me have my way with her.

She only broke away when I swept my hand across the table behind her, sending the plates shattering to the floor. Wide eyed, she opened her mouth to say something, but I wasn't interested in explaining myself right now. Lifting her by her hips, I sat her on the edge of the table, leaning over her as I plundered her mouth. The new height lined me up perfectly and when I pushed my hips against hers, she let out a startled noise that quickly melted into a sweet moan.

That. That was what I needed. I needed her to make more noises like that. Determination swept through me, shutting down every thought process outside of getting her to make those noises again. Tracing my tongue down her neck, I reveled in her little sighs, but it wasn't enough. I needed more.

Pressing against her chest, I urged her to lie down on the table. The adorably confused look on her face didn't stop me. She'd understand in a minute. While I brushed kisses down her torso, my hands focused on pushing her skirt up to expose

her to me. It was when I sat back down that she realized what I was about to do.

“Niko, I—”

She was laid out on the table in front of me, and like a king at a feast, I intended to devour her. I spread her apart, cutting her off, and dragged my tongue along her sex. She let out a breathy gasp, her hips jumping. Tracing my tongue around her clit, I looked for the spots that brought out the loudest noises from her. She tried to smother it, a hand over her mouth, but I was relentless and eventually she was moaning wildly, the noises like music to my ears. I lapped at her center, sucked on her clit, and ripped her release from her, making her scream my name.

Her body was shaking as she lay pliant across the table. So obedient, not moving until I was ready for her to. I licked the juices that came from her release, loving the keening moan that it brought forth.

Tasting her had an unfortunate side effect, however. It settled the anger, but the lust compounded, and I couldn't stop myself from having her. I had the presence of mind to not take her on the dining room table, but bringing her to my room was as far as my patience stretched. Something in the back of my mind was telling me there was a reason I was waiting, but being so riled up, I couldn't think past the lust. I laid her on the bed, climbed on top of her, and attacked. I'd figure out what I forgot in the morning.



Anya

My mind still reeling from his tongue's assault, it didn't register to me what was happening until he'd stripped off my clothes and started on his. Excitement and nervousness exploded through me and I moved to help him wrestle the knot of the tie free while he shrugged off his jacket.

A part of me was aware that alcohol probably was the only reason he was giving in to this, but I didn't want to think too hard about it. He was giving me exactly what I wanted, and I wasn't going to talk him out of it by pointing out how much he had to drink. Maybe it made me a bad person, but he'd been touching me for days without going all the way and after what he did on the table, I didn't just want him. I needed him.

Once he'd torn off his shirt, literally, he attacked me again, ravaging my mouth and pressing me into the bed. I heard his zipper, heard the rustle of his clothes, but he didn't give me a chance to look at him. He kept his mouth fused to mine, his hands skimming across my skin as he settled himself between my thighs.

Everything was happening so quickly that I was thinking of asking him to slow down, but I never got a chance. The head of his cock pushed against my entrance and he thrust inside me in one go, tearing ruthlessly through me. My mouth fell open and my body protested, tightening around him. He groaned loudly and immediately started moving, mumbling in Russian, with his face buried against my neck. To distract myself from the pain, I tried to pick out what he was saying, but he was using words I didn't recognize. There were only a few things I managed to catch, and they made me blush.

“You are so wet.”

“I love the way you feel.”

“I want to stay inside you forever.”

His dirty little whispers sent heat spiraling into my belly and shifted my mind away from the pain. I focused more on

the feeling of him inside me, the way his hips moved, and how full I felt every time he bottomed out. Slowly, the fire started to build, taking over the pain. Like he could tell when my body surrendered to him, he growled, shifting and tipping his hips. He changed the angle, and I was surprised when pleasurable tingles rushed through my body, centering on my clit.

Moaning, I clutched at his shoulders, sweat breaking out on our skin as he moved us how he wanted. When he grabbed my legs, wrapping them around his waist, I cried out, pain and pleasure at war sending my body into overdrive. I felt like there was a volcano of heat in my lower belly, and only Niko knew how to deal with it. He reached between us, his fingers rubbing circles around my clit, and the volcano detonated without warning.

“Niko!”

He bared his teeth, bucking harder into me, drawing out my orgasm until he let out a shout and collapsed on top of me. I could feel him twitching inside me and he was breathing like a freight train. He was heavy, but not so heavy that I wanted him to move. I wrapped my arms around his neck, hugging him tightly.

I felt the last of my energy wane and I closed my eyes, running my fingers through his hair. It was different from what I imagined, rougher and more intense, but it was still amazing and I didn't regret it. I couldn't. He'd been protecting me since he showed up in my life and I got to help him for once.

I didn't know how quickly I fell asleep. All I knew was that when I woke up, we were in the same position as we were last night. Niko was using my chest as a pillow and his hips were still cradled against mine. Looking up at the ceiling, I thought about the rollercoaster that was last night. From the insanity that was meeting his family, his change in mood, my first time, it was all a little overwhelming. I had no idea what I was going to do about his mother hating me so much. Or if I even needed to bother since I'd be going home eventually and long distance commitments were notorious for ruining relationships.

It still made me sad to think about and I was so lost in thought that I almost didn't notice Niko waking up. He nuzzled my chest, grumbling something. He was always grouchy in the morning and needed at least one cup of coffee to get himself moving. Running my fingers through his hair absentmindedly, I was still looking at the ceiling when I felt him stiffen.

Slowly, he lifted his head, his eyes wide. He looked between us, making me blush, but it was the stunned look on his face that made me frown, tipping my head.

“What’s wrong?”

“Malyshka... did you let me take your purity when I was too drunk to remember it?”

NIKO

THE LOOK on her face said it all. I remembered bits and pieces of last night, but the more my mother spoke, the more I drank in an effort to stay calm. She had always been critical of the women I'd dated, but Anya was different and she wasn't even giving her a chance. Since I planned on sharing my life with her, my mother's immediate dismissal infuriated me and I took to drinking to deal with it. I should've known better, sent Anya to bed without me, but the little minx decided to use my intoxication to her advantage, finally getting her way and having me take her.

I'd had plans to seduce her slowly, take her on a date that night and tease her until we came back home. I would've taken my time, made her come several times over before finally taking her. I hated myself for giving in to her, for not making it special.

"O-Oh, I didn't realize... You weren't acting that drunk..." She turned her face away, her cheeks bright red.

That was entirely possible. She didn't drink much, and I was an excellent drinker. Not even my closest friends could tell when I'd had too much if I didn't want them to know. I had no reason to hide it from Anya, but she may not have recognized the signs unless I was slurring or stumbling, which I'd never done in my life.

She refused to look at me, even when I guided her face to mine. Her eyes stayed averted, shamefaced and tear filled. So sweet. To distract her from her upset, I sipped at her lips,

pulling away to rub my nose against hers. When she smiled, a few stray tears slipped over her cheeks. I brushed them away with my thumbs, leveling her with a look.

“I had plans, *malyshka*. You ruined them.”

Biting her lip, she blushed. “What kind of plans?”

Minx. She let me take her virginity in a drunken stupor. I knew I wasn't gentle about it. She had to be sore, but she still stared at my mouth. She didn't get enough last night, and I was more than happy to remedy that.

“Want me to show you?”

I spent the morning doing exactly what I'd planned to do the first time. I wouldn't enter her until she'd come at least three times, and she was pleading with me for more. She winced when I pushed inside her, but because I prepared her, she moved past the pain quickly. She did punish me for hurting her, both last night and this morning. I'd felt the stings upon waking, but I felt them more keenly when I thrust inside her. Her nails dug into my back in her pleasure, sending shivers up my spine. She didn't need to know I enjoyed her rough treatment just yet. She was shy and it would only embarrass her.

I had no intention of getting out of bed now that she'd seduced me into it. Her body was made for me, wrapping around my cock and squeezing until I was fighting against my release. I wanted to stay inside her for at least a week. And it didn't slip past me that she'd failed to force me to wear protection. Given that she was a virgin, it was possible she wasn't on any birth control either. The thought of her getting pregnant made me salivate, and when I first thought of it, I immediately dragged her back beneath me, wanting to fill her with my seed again to encourage it. If she got pregnant, she'd have no choice but to stay with me.

A knock on the door made me growl. I was back where I found myself when I woke this morning, my head pillowed against Anya's breast, her sweet body trapped beneath mine, and I wasn't willing to get up to answer it.

The knock sounded again, and I snarled. “What?”

“I-I brought breakfast, I c-can leave it, if you’d prefer—”

“Just bring it in!”

Anya squeaked in protest, but I shifted to cover her fully with my body, pulling the blankets over my hips. While Katya brought in a tray for breakfast and set it up on the small breakfast table in the corner, I studied Anya, who was hiding behind her hands.

“Does hiding behind your hands really help?”

She hesitated for a moment before shaking her head. “No. Yes... I’m not—” She seemed at a loss for words and when I dragged her hands down, she was blushing fiercely. A grin crossed my face, and she scowled at me. “You’re mean.”

Barking out a laugh, I shook my head. I couldn’t really argue that, though allowing staff in while we were indisposed was the tamest thing I’d done in years. “And you’re adorable when you’re angry. You need to eat, malyshka. You didn’t eat much last night.”

She frowned. “How could I? She was making you so angry. I don’t like seeing you so upset.”

Her sweet words warmed my middle, and I dipped my head to kiss her. She shrank away, shaking her head, her eyes darting to Katya, who was still setting up the table. Anya wouldn’t let me do anything with her until Katya left.

“Just go, it doesn’t have to be formal,” I snapped.

Katya jumped and hurried to put the food on the table before rushing from the room. When the door closed behind her, I attempted again to kiss Anya, but she frowned at me instead.

“That wasn’t nice. She was just doing her job.”

I sighed. I could point out that part of Katya’s job was to do as she’s told and not inconvenience me, but I didn’t want to argue. I had enough of that last night and I didn’t want to ruin the morning.

“I’ll be nicer tomorrow.”

Anya rolled her eyes, pursing her lips to hide her smile, but it came out a moment later when I grinned at her.

“You’re a monster.”

Chuckling, I nipped at her neck. “You have no idea.”



AFTER BREAKFAST, Ivan alerted me that Anton was no longer hiding behind his bride but had taken to hiding behind his father instead. His father had influence, but not enough to scare me. He was a minor crime lord with zero ties or influence to speak of. I’d met him before and I also knew him as the type of man to hand over his own son to save his skin.

“Send Grigori to start following him. Let him show his face every once in a while, just to let the little shit know it is us.”

He snorted. “Didn’t anyone ever teach you not to play with your food?”

“Perhaps they shouldn’t make it so entertaining.”

There was a reason they called me the white tiger. Like the Siberian tigers of Russia, I liked to stalk my prey and pop up when they least expect it. It was especially entertaining when they knew I was coming, but couldn’t see me until I was right in front of them. The amount of people who have pissed themselves when I showed up was highly amusing.

I’d planned on staying in bed with Anya all day, but she fell asleep after our last round and I decided to let her rest. There was always more work to do, so I checked in with my men and made a plan with Ivan on how long we would toy with Anton before I finally killed him. I was not the type of man to send others to do the work for me, especially when it came to those who harmed my family. I would be the one to kill him and I would enjoy doing it.

Anya was still sleeping when I came back but she'd woken a monster and I wasn't willing to wait around anymore. I climbed on top of her, settling my weight on her back while laying kisses along her bare shoulder. She sighed sweetly, stretching and smiling at me.

“What time is it?”

“Just before eleven. It's time to get up.”

Her eyes flew open. “Eleven?!”

I chuckled. No one would blame her for napping. We spent the entire morning enjoying each other. She was unused to such activity. I no doubt wore her out. It was another reminder that she was naked beneath me, only the sheet covering her, and I was getting impatient.

Pressing my erection more insistently against her backside, I nipped at her shoulder. Anya was a treat, her mood switching on a dime as she wiggled beneath me, her breathing picking up. She responded so well to me, her needs quickly coming in sync with mine. I should leave her be, she was sore, but she never asked me to stop. It was only after I pulled away the sheet when I noticed the traces of blood on her thighs that I paused. She wasn't wrong. I really was a monster if I kept pushing her.

Slapping her ass once, I rolled off her. “Come on, malyshka. Let's take a bath.”

When I glanced over my shoulder at her, she looked put out, a pout on her face. It made me grin, but it didn't change my mind. Stalking into the bathroom, I turned on the taps, letting it heat up. The warm water should help her pain with the added bonus that I still got to have her naked and wet against me.

She padded into the bathroom wrapped in the sheet, her hair in disarray from my constant need to grab it. I used it to control her movements and she let me without complaint. Stepping up to her, I ran my hand over it, trying to smooth it out. She was still frowning, her gaze shifting between me and

the tub. I knew she wanted to ask me why I changed my mind, but I doubted she'd be able to summon the nerve.

Wrapping my arms around her, I tugged her against my chest, slanting my mouth against hers. She took the bait, lifting onto her toes, releasing the sheet to throw her arms around my neck. Reaching for it, I tugged, letting it drop to the floor at our feet before scooping her into my arms. I kept her focus on me until I stepped into the bath and sat, taking her with me.

The water surprised her, and she jerked back. “Wha—Are—”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Are what?”

Her face flushed. “Are we going to do it in here?”

A wicked grin crossed over my face and she hid behind her hands again. So fucking sweet.

“If that’s what you want, *malyshka*, I doubt I’d ever tell you no.”

HE WAS DOING that thing again, where he wouldn't sleep with me because 'you need rest.' While I'll admit I was sore, it wasn't so bad that I couldn't ignore it. I'd gone my whole life without sex and I really enjoyed it. I didn't like him taking it away right after we started.

In the bath, he got me off with just his fingers and tongue, making me sit on the side of the tub while he had his way with me. It was good, but not what I wanted and when he pulled me back into the tub and wrapped his arms around me, he refused to do any more.

"You are sore, *malyshka*. I can see it in your face when I fuck you. Give your body time to rest."

I knew I should be embarrassed at how needy I was, but he was everything I wanted and we only had so much time before I had to go back home. I kept trying to work up the nerve to talk to him about it, but I didn't want to ruin the mood.

Since he wasn't willing to touch me, I decided to be brave and touch him instead, getting a soapy washcloth and running it over his skin. He allowed it, lounging against the edge of the tub like a spoiled king. I almost wanted to call him out on it, but I didn't want him to stop me before I got started.

He had a lot more tattoos than I ever noticed before and they weren't like a lot of the tattoos I've seen at home. They were more crude, almost like prison tattoos. It was hard to imagine, though, given his fancy suits and expensive home. Maybe it was just the way Russians liked their tattoos.

There was a dagger that looked like it was through his neck, dripping blood, which was a little unsettling. He also had a Siberian tiger on his chest and a star on the other side near his shoulder. A rose in the middle didn't seem to fit in with the rest, but then again, none of them made sense to me. And he never did explain the tattoos on his knuckles, either.

“Do they mean something?”

He'd been studying me, his hands caressing my hips as he watched me explore him. He looked thoughtful for a moment before lifting his gaze to mine. “They do.”

He didn't explain any further, using his grip on my hips to drag me closer. Close enough for me to rub up against his erection that was trapped between us. He diverted my attention, giving his focus to my breasts while letting me grind my clit against him. It was when he slipped under the water and yanked me down onto his face that I started to protest. He was going to drown himself, but he wouldn't let me pull away, lapping at my clit like he wasn't currently under water.

It was distracting. I was too worried about him to really focus, but he knew my body well enough by now and went after the spots he knew I liked. I came on his tongue and he finally released me, coming up for air with a wicked grin on his face. I was panting and little aftershocks coursed through my body and he didn't even look phased, grabbing me and pulling me back into his arms.

“W-Why did you do that?”

He lifted a shoulder carelessly. “Because it is fun.”

My brow furrowed, and I glanced down at the water. “Almost drowning is fun?”

He chuckled. “It's difficult to explain. It's something to experience.”

Biting my lip, I looked between him and the water. It didn't sound fun, but so far there hadn't been anything we'd done together that I didn't like. I couldn't help being a little curious, but before I could ask to try, he shook his head.

“You are not ready. You must learn to suck my cock outside of the water first.”

My face burned at his crude words, but he had a point. He'd done that to me a lot, but he hadn't made me try it yet. I wasn't sure I wanted to. He was big and there was no way it'd fit in my mouth. What if I disappointed him?

Since I was too embarrassed to bring it up again, we finished the bath without another word, though he did touch me as often as he could. And when I sat down in front of the vanity to brush my hair, he sat on the edge of the tub to watch me, his face soft and relaxed. It was a major improvement from last night, so I figured I was doing something right, though I didn't really know what.

They brought lunch to our room while we were in the bath, nothing too fancy, just some sandwiches that were way too big for me to finish on my own. Niko ended up finishing his and most of mine, which was interesting to watch. He didn't have an ounce of fat on him, but he had muscles for days, so I figured he needed to eat a lot to keep up with all that.

He'd gone to check something while I finished getting ready for the day when I heard his phone ringing in the bedroom. He normally always had it on him and I was worried he'd miss something important, so I hurried to answer it, putting it to my ear.

“Hello?”

The line was quiet for a moment before someone spoke with a very heavy Russian accent. “Hello? Where is Romanov?”

It almost sounded like he was struggling to form the words, English obviously not his first language, so I did my best to answer him in Russian. “He is busy. Can I take a message?” Honestly, I was a little worried I butchered it, but he seemed to understand me okay and he was nice enough to answer back slowly in Russian so I could follow along.

“No, I will call back... What is your name?”

I opened my mouth to answer him, but Niko appeared out of thin air, grabbing the phone from me and putting it to his ear.

“Who is this?”

I couldn't hear the person answering on the other end, but Niko looked annoyed, growling that he'd call the man back before hanging up and swinging his attention to me. He looked furious. I'd seen him give that look to others, but it'd never been directed at me and I had to resist the urge to shrink away from him.

“What possessed you to do that?”

Biting my lip, I shrugged. “I was worried you'd miss something important. I was just going to take a message. I—”

He growled, his anger making him seem to swell. “Do you have any idea who could've been on the line? Do you want people to come after you? My business is dangerous and you are lucky the person who called was a friend. I swear you look for ways to get yourself into trouble.”

It cut through me like a knife and my gaze hit the floor. I didn't think it would be a big deal, and it made me feel awful that such a simple gesture made him so angry. Tears welled in my eyes and when he tried to grab my chin, I jerked away.

“Anya, I—” He sighed heavily, running his fingers through his hair. When I glanced up at him, he looked annoyed. It made my stomach churn uncomfortably, and I wrapped my arms around my middle in an effort to stop it.

“I need to go. I have work to do. Stay here and rest. I'll be back later.”

He stalked away, shutting the door roughly behind him. The second he was gone, I crumpled to the floor, choking back sobs. I'd only meant to help him, but he'd looked at me with fury and irritation, a lot like the way he looked at his mother the other night. How long would he put up with me before he was screaming at me to get out like he did to her? I was relying on him to survive here. I didn't have anything of my

own, not even my passport. Everything I owned was still at the hotel.

I'd been stupid and naïve, wrapped up in the fairytale of meeting a handsome man on a plane to a foreign country and falling in love. This obviously wasn't that. I was never that lucky, and I needed to do better. I needed to be prepared for the inevitable. He'd grow tired of me eventually and I didn't want to end up on the streets when he did.



I WAS TRYING to pull myself together, sitting on the floor with my arms around my knees. I couldn't go out there looking for a ride back to the hotel if I looked like a crazy person, but every time I thought about leaving, I burst into tears again. I was too attached, and I hated myself for it.

The door opened slowly, and I held my breath, worried it was Niko. I didn't have it in me to face him right now, and I wouldn't know what to say if he showed up. I wanted to be angry at him for yelling at me for doing something nice, but I couldn't stand confrontation, so I knew I wouldn't be able to do anything about it. I needed to grow a backbone before I saw him again.

Eva poked her head in, looking around slowly. When her eyes landed on me, she frowned, pushing the door open and leaning her shoulder against it.

“Trouble in paradise?”

Scrubbing my cheeks to hide my tears, I averted my eyes. I didn't answer her. What was the point? He probably already told everyone how stupid and nosy I was.

Eva sighed, shoving her hands into the pockets of her jeans and striding over until she was toe to toe with me. When I finally looked up at her, she tipped her head towards the door.

“Let's go out. The weather is nice. We can see the sights.”

Shaking my head, I hugged my knees. Niko said to stay here, and I didn't need to give him another reason to yell at

me.

“My brother is an idiot.”

Surprised, I jerked my head up to look at her. She pressed her lips into a thin line, offering me her hand. “If he’s stupid enough to make you cry, he’s not the person you should be taking orders from. We’ll take the Ferrari so Ilya can’t follow us.”

My brow furrowed. “Someone has been following us?”

She grimaced. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you that. Nikolai is... overprotective. Ilya has been following us as security.”

That didn’t sit well with me. He mentioned while he was yelling at me that his job was dangerous, and he was having me followed. What else wasn’t he telling me?

Eva helped me to my feet. “Let’s go. It’s better to vent about him when you aren’t surrounded by staff.”

Nodding, I grabbed the jacket Niko bought me and followed her outside. Eva was up front with me and always kind. She would answer my questions. Niko never did. He always distracted me to divert my attention. I was tired of being treated like a child and since he couldn’t be bothered to be honest with me, I felt like I shouldn’t be bothered to follow his orders to stay here. I wasn’t going to get hurt just by leaving the house. Besides, I was with Eva. What’s the worst that could happen?

“SHE LEFT a few minutes ago with your sister.”

Grinding my teeth, I nearly crushed the phone in my hand in my fury. I'd been prepared to apologize, realizing soon after I left that I overreacted. She was trying to help, and I reacted without thinking. She didn't know that I didn't hide my phone number, daring my enemies to call me themselves to show that I wasn't afraid of them. I knew of a few who would target Anya the minute they learned I had a woman. I may not hide from them, but I wanted to hide Anya for as long as I could, to protect her, both from the danger and from the truth.

Her innocent questions in the bath about my tattoos reminded me that there was more than just my mother that could come between me and Anya. She didn't know much about who I was, and there was the possibility that she would protest or try to leave once she found out. She was sweet and innocent, not built for this life. I wasn't letting her go, but life would be easier if I could keep her in the little bubble of ignorance she was in currently.

I'd intended to go home after handling business to make it up to her when Ilya called and said my little sister kidnapped Anya and left in the damn Ferrari. She knew how to outrun her security in that stupid car, and she took great pleasure in seeing how long she could hide from me before I came after her. Normally, I'd let the game play out since I knew she could handle herself, but she had Anya, and that pissed me off.

“Find her. Now.”

He hung up, rushing to do as I asked. You'd think it'd be hard to hide that kind of vehicle, even in the city, but Eva was an expert at hiding when she wanted to. I'd been too soft with her. That would change once I caught up to them.

Swinging my attention to the little shit tied to the chair, I decided to take my frustrations out on him. I found him watching me, talking covertly on his phone. I played ignorant for a little while until I could lose him and come at him from behind. He never saw it coming, and he cried when I took him, but he had been a valuable source of information since we brought him here. Blood dripped steadily onto the floor beneath him and his head lolled forward, his entire body sagging against the ropes wrapped around him.

Shoving my phone into my pocket, I grabbed a knife, coming to kneel before him. His breathing was ragged, but when I came into his line of view, he started to panic, jerking away from me and whimpering.

“This was the wrong day to screw with me. I'm going to ship you back to your family in pieces, one at a time. Where should I start first?”

He sobbed, shaking his head helplessly.

“Tell me what I want to know. Who is touching my product?” I cut into his hand, emphasizing myself. Either he could answer me or he could bleed until I got what I wanted. The choice was his.

“I don't know!” he screamed.

He was lying before and he was lying now. Tired of his games, I jerked my head at Ivan. “String him up and take off his pants. Since he wants to cry and whine like a woman, we will send them his dick first.”

Ivan approached with a few more of my men, moving to cut the man out of his bindings to hang him from the ceiling instead. He screamed, fighting against them, but it was useless and he was dangling naked from the ceiling a moment later. It was when I stepped closer that he finally gave up.

“Wait! Wait! I'll tell you! Please!”

Pausing, I took a step back, crossing my arms over my chest. “Speak.”

His teeth chattered from the terror but he finally spat out the name I’d been looking for. “Bortnik. Boris Bortnik.”

I made an irritated sound. “You lie. He is nothing but a bug. Annoying, but not capable of pulling this off.”

Reaching for him, I growled when he writhed like a worm on a hook to avoid me. “No! No! I’m not lying! He’s working with someone! He wants revenge for his sister!”

Grigori stepped up beside me, a confused look on his face. “His sister? What about her?”

The man swallowed hard, avoiding eye contact. “Bortnik said you raped her and left her for dead. He wants you to suffer and is paying good money to see it through.”

My eyebrow went up. I don’t rape women. Why force them when they throw themselves at you wherever you go? Either Bortnik was making up lies or someone was feeding him false information. Either way, it was another person I would have to deal with. I was growing tired of this game. I had more important things to be dealing with, like my overconfident little sister and her newest trainee. Why the women in my life felt the need to test me, I’ll never know.

The man looked wary when I stepped closer to him. I kept my face blank, nodding slightly. “You did well. I’ve been looking for this information and you provided it for me. Thank you.”

He looked relieved, letting out a breath. Fool.

Grabbing his cock, I sliced it off cleanly and tossed it away, listening to him scream while Grigori burned him to stop the bleeding. We wouldn’t want him to bleed out too quickly. It would ruin the fun.

“No one ever said I’d set you free. No, I’m going to send Bortnik a message. You were the one foolish enough to follow me. A predator always knows when he’s being stalked. Do not worry, I will make sure your family receives your body for the casket. Well... most of it anyway.”

While I tore the little shit apart, I made plans to deal with Bortnik. He would come to learn what happens to people who screw with me. I would begin with his family, watch him panic as one by one they disappeared. Including the sister. If she wanted to play games with a monster, she would have to face the consequences.



Anya

“So you did a kind thing, and he was an ass about it?”

I scowled, basically inhaling my cocktail. I was so mad. After talking it out with Eva, I realized that I never did anything wrong and Niko had no reason to treat me like that. He was treating me like a child and I was sick of it. And thanks to a little (okay, maybe a lot) of liquid courage, I wasn't afraid to say it to him.

“Yes! He's an ass! A big one! I was just trying to help!”

She regarded me for a minute before chuckling to herself. “You're a noisy drunk.”

Rolling my eyes, I tried to get the last few drops of my drink, slurping loudly. “Like you're any better. You've flirted with every guy who walked past you since we started drinking!”

She snickered, sipping her drink more languidly. “That has nothing to do with alcohol and everything to do with the fact that I'm bored.”

Glaring at her, I sat back, nearly toppling off the stool before I righted myself. “Sorry I'm so boring. Everyone thinks that.”

The room was starting to spin, and I considered that maybe, possibly, I'd had too much. It didn't stop me from asking for another one, though.

Eva scoffed. “I didn't mean with you. I meant in general. You aren't the only one that my brother tries to keep under lock and key. You've only had to deal with him for a week. I've had to deal with him my whole life. Can you imagine trying to date when your older brother threatens every guy you bring home?”

Pursing my lips, I frowned. Okay, that sounded awful. At least I didn't have to worry about Niko messing with my sex

life. Other than denying me because I ‘needed to rest’. It’s my body, I’ll say when I need a rest.

The waitress brought over another cocktail, and Eva slapped a few bills onto the table. She’d been paying for my drinks because I still didn’t have access to my stuff. I’d meant to ask her to take me to the hotel, but then we started drinking and I forgot.

“You aren’t allowed to leave him. You showing up is the first time he’s treated me like an adult. He’s so focused on you, he doesn’t have time to follow me around. I’ve had more sex in the last week than I have in years.”

I snorted. “Me too!”

She made a face before we both burst out laughing. Eva was fun, and she made me feel better. She felt like my first real friend, in no way connected to Nina at all. When I finally stopped laughing, I put my hand on hers, trying to give her a serious look.

“I’ll keep him away from you if you promise to be my friend.”

She bobbed her head once, sticking out her hand. “Deal.”

We shook hands like we’d just made a business deal before bursting into giggles again. This was fun. I needed this. No stress, no worrying about saying the wrong thing and upsetting anyone. Eva let me say whatever I wanted, and she never told me what to do. She only got on my case when I wouldn’t stop complaining and move on to something more fun to talk about.

“You were seriously a virgin? And you decided to give it up to my brother? You poor thing! No wonder you were walking funny!”

My mouth fell open. “I was not! Was I?”

Slipping off her chair, she caught herself against the table before straightening with a grin. “This is what you looked like.” She walked a few steps, over-exaggerating a waddle that was nowhere near what I looked like. I threw my napkin at her, laughing.

“Shut up! I was not!”

Narrowing her eyes, she pointed to the ground. “Prove it. Walk around a little.”

I wasn't sure that was a good idea. Not because I thought she was right, but mostly because I wasn't sure I could feel my legs anymore. I wasn't going to back down from a challenge though, so I edged off the stool and onto my feet, my knees buckling almost instantly. I squeaked as I fell, but I never hit the ground. Instead, I fell against a massive chest and big arms wrapped around me, keeping me upright.

“Uh oh,” Eva mumbled.

SLOWLY, I glanced over my shoulder, my head lolling a little. Everything felt heavy. It took a minute to lift my gaze to look at him. Niko looked just as irritated as before, if not more. Turning in his arms, I glared up at him.

“I’ve got a bone to pick with you.”

His brow furrowed as he studied me. “How much have you had to drink?”

Pursing my lips, I tried to count in my head how many drinks I had, but I couldn’t do math for the life of me, so I ignored him, poking his chest. I frowned, poking him again.

“How do you have more muscles than you did this morning?”

Eva snorted, and I had to twist my mouth to the side to hide my own laugh. I didn’t know what was funny, but she set me off and I dropped my chin, my shoulders shaking as I did my best not to show it.

Niko made an irritated noise. “There is no talking to you when you are like this. You won’t remember it in the morning.”

I scowled at him. “Says who? I’ve got an excellent memory. I won the regional spelling bee in middle school.”

“That’s just sad,” Eva pointed out. I stuck my tongue out at her and she replied in kind, weaving on her feet before catching herself against the table again.

Pulling out the phone that I wasn't allowed to touch, Niko put it to his ear, keeping me pinned against him with an arm around my waist. I thought about pushing him away, but he smelled good and I would probably fall down if he let go. I clung to his suit jacket, burying my nose against him to breathe him in.

"You two aren't allowed to spend time together anymore," Niko growled, his attention on Eva. That made me mad, so I pushed against his chest until he released me.

"You don't get to tell us what to do! She's my friend!"

"Yeah!" Eva agreed, shaking her fist at him.

He muttered under his breath in Russian, rubbing his forehead like he was exasperated at us. I had no idea why. We're awesome.

He sighed heavily. "Anya..."

"Poshel k chertu."

His head whipped up, stunned, while Eva cracked up again, wrapping her arms around her middle and leaning so heavily against the table she almost tipped it. It was Grigori who appeared behind her, grabbing her arm to force her upright again.

"Where did you learn that?" Niko growled.

"Perhot'-podzalupnaya."

Grigori looked like he was fighting back a laugh, while Eva looked like she might not be able to breathe right. She was sagging against him, her face red and her shoulders shaking.

A muscle twitched in Niko's jaw, but he didn't say anything else. He dropped himself low enough to toss me over his shoulder, ignoring my half-assed protesting. I didn't really want to drink anymore, not when the room was spinning this much, but I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of telling him that. I spat out every curse word Eva taught me, my words slurring a little.

"Put me down, asshole!"

That one came out in English and he responded by slapping my ass so hard my teeth chattered.

“Ow! You—”

He did it again, and I screeched, stuck between trying to keep myself as upright as possible so I didn't throw up down his back or covering my behind for protection. We stepped outside and the cold air hit me hard enough that it took my breath away. I wasn't wearing my jacket. I left it inside.

“Everything okay?”

“They are drunk. Take Eva home,” Niko growled.

When he finally set me on my feet, I had to cling to him to stay upright. There were a lot of guys hanging around, all of them looking to Niko for instructions. He waved them off, yanking the door to the town car open and pushing me inside. I collapsed onto the back seat, laying across it with a sigh. I really needed a nap. Niko moved my legs inside and shut the door, coming around the other side. He lifted me up enough for him to slide in beside me before settling me back down with my head in his lap.

“Don't think you're getting lucky, mister. I'm still mad at you,” I mumbled, hugging his massive thigh like a pillow.

“I am pretty sure if I tried anything right now, you would throw up on me,” he replied, stroking his fingers through my hair. My eyes slipped shut automatically, though I really wanted to see if the mild amusement I heard in his voice was my imagination or not. I didn't get a chance. His fingers were like magic, knocking me out almost instantly. The last thing I heard before I drifted off was him mumbling to himself.

“No one that beautiful should cause this much trouble.”

Ha, I think he likes me.



I WOKE up with my head throbbing and my stomach churning so badly my mouth filled with drool. I had to launch myself

off the bed to make it to the toilet on time. No more drinking with Eva. I wouldn't survive this twice. As it was, I wanted to die, hugging the toilet and dry heaving every few minutes.

“I should have warned you against drinking with Eva. She does not know when to stop.”

I groaned, leaning my head against my arm. That was about as much effort as I could put into answering him. I went from never drinking to getting wasted in less than a week. Russians are a bad influence.

“There is medicine for you once you stop vomiting. Then you need to eat something.”

The thought of food made me dry heave again, and I waved him away helplessly. He didn't leave, but he did chuckle, like this was amusing for him. I was going to hurt him. Just as soon as I could open my eyes without the sunlight shoving daggers into my pupils.

“It will make you feel better, *malyshka*. I promise.”

I wanted to flip him off, but all the liquid courage was gone and I was a little worried his patience with me would run out eventually. I was already humiliated with how I acted last night. I thought drinking a lot made you forget.

When my stomach stopped trying to empty itself, Niko pulled me off the floor and into his arms, setting me onto the counter. He handed me a bottle of water and some pain pills, smirking as he handed me a bottle of mouthwash. Then he brought me back to bed and let me close my eyes for a little while before making me sit up to eat. He kept it simple, with some toast at first. I nibbled on it until I could trust my body to keep it down. When I finished, he kissed my temple and tucked me back in.

“If I tell you to rest, are you going to sneak off again?”

I pressed my lips together, fighting back a scowl. “You were mean.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“You didn't have to yell at me.”

He took a deep breath, nodding again. “I know. I was going to apologize, but then you snuck off.”

Well, that would’ve probably ended better than this. Still, I didn’t want to give in that easily, so I kept my expression sour, scowling up at him.

“Get some sleep, dorogaya. You’ll feel better after some rest.”

I didn’t argue with him, mostly because I was still a little nauseous and my head still hurt. I’d talk to him more about the whole making me rest all the time thing once I woke back up. I was not fragile, and I didn’t need him to baby me.

When I opened my eyes again, I felt better. My headache was gone and my stomach was settled. I sat up slowly, stretching my arms above my head. Niko didn’t have a clock in here, he used his phone as his alarm, so I didn’t know what time it was, but the sun was high in the sky so I had to assume it was the afternoon. I slept too much here. At home, I never slept in. I had too much to do. Niko was spoiling me by letting me sleep in every day. It’d be a huge pain to switch my schedule back over.

Getting ready for the day, I pulled on another maxi skirt and a snuggly sweater. I wasn’t sure what was planned for the day, though I doubted Niko would let me go out with Eva again any time soon. He’d have to get over it eventually. She was my friend, but the day after getting drunk with her, it was probably a smart idea to not repeat the interaction.

Niko hadn’t come back when I was finished getting ready, so I went looking for him. I looked around upstairs and was about to head downstairs when I heard his voice coming from one of the rooms that Katya said was off limits. Sneaking closer, I listened to the door but I couldn’t hear what he was saying because the doors were too thick. Since Katya warned me about this room, I knocked quietly and waited, bouncing on my toes.

The door opened, but it wasn’t Niko who answered. It was Grigori. A smirk pulled at his lips when he saw me, his eyebrow going up.

“Feeling better?”

Scrunching my nose, I nodded. “Yes, thank you. Is Niko busy?”

He glanced over his shoulder before stepping aside. “Ask him yourself.”

Stepping into the room, I looked around curiously. It was an office, though it was a lot darker than the rest of the house. The whole house had a royal feeling to it. Even Niko’s bedroom had giant velvet drapes behind the bed to make it feel more regal. This room was royal with a darker twist, the walls and shelves black and the colors all in darker tones. It was a little intimidating, and I felt out of place. There were a few of Niko’s men here, sitting on couches, speaking low to one another. Niko was standing behind the massive wooden desk, his phone pressed to his ear and his free hand in his pocket. He glanced over his shoulder, his eyes trailing over me before flicking to the men in the room. All at once, they stood and walked out. Worry spread through me. Was I about to get in trouble again? I knocked. They didn’t have to invite me in.

“I’ll call back,” he muttered. Hanging up, he dropped his phone onto his desk, stalking around it to meet me.

Swallowing hard, I lifted my chin at his approach. Eva said if I wanted him to stop babying me, I needed to stand up for myself more. It would be hard, I wasn’t that kind of person, but I felt safe with him.

“How are you feeling?”

It wasn’t what I was expecting him to say, and it took me off guard. “I, uh... I feel fine.”

He nodded once. “Good. There are things we need to discuss.”

That made me uneasy, and I twisted my fingers nervously, biting my lip. “Like what?”

A ghost of a smile drifted over his face before he narrowed his eyes on me. “Like the filthy things you said to me last night.”

My mouth fell open.

“Do you remember?”

My face flushed, and I ducked my head, nodding. “I’m sorry, I—”

He lifted my face with a knuckle under my chin, raising an eyebrow at me. “Do you really think sorry is enough?”

I held my breath, terrified that he was going to say he didn’t want to see me anymore because I said such awful things to him. I was drunk. I wasn’t thinking it through. Tears pricked my eyes, but I did my best to hold them back.

“I believe there are better ways to use your filthy mouth. Don’t you?”

Again, he surprised me, and my brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

A slow grin crossed his face, a familiar fire in his eyes that made my heart skip a beat. “It means if you want to apologize, dorogaya, then get on your knees and apologize properly.”

NIKO

I THOROUGHLY ENJOYED the look on her face. She was nervous when she came in here, but I wasn't angry with her. I tried to be, but amongst her drunken ramblings as I put her to bed, she told me I couldn't be mad at her because she loved me and it made her sad when I was angry. She effectively ruined any chance I had at punishing her properly. I wanted to remind her of it, but I didn't mention it. I didn't want a drunken confession. I wanted her to tell me how she felt without any influence.

Trailing my knuckle down her neck, I trapped her in my gaze. She trembled, licking her lips, and I fought to keep myself under control. The idea came to me after a particularly dirty dream last night. I couldn't hurt her. She was too sweet and innocent for that kind of treatment, so I would punish her in other, more pleasurable ways instead. Starting with putting her filthy mouth to good use.

“Will you apologize or not?”

Sucking in a shaky breath, she nodded. Satisfaction surged through me and I took her hand, leading her behind my desk. When I sat, she dropped slowly to her knees between my legs, her eyes darting around nervously.

“Dorogaya.” Drawing her attention back to me, I tucked her hair behind her ear. “Do you need direction?”

She nodded quickly, biting her lip.

“Very well. Take out my cock.”

Her hands shook as she moved to do as she was told. I didn't expect to be so aroused already, but the combination of her sweetness and how quickly she followed directions left me hard as steel. She drew out my erection, her tiny hand circled around me only serving to inflame me more. Wrapping my hand around hers, I dragged it upwards, showing her how to touch me. Her eyes darted between my face and my cock, her brow furrowed.

“Won't I hurt you?”

Shutting my eyes for a second, I tried to focus on her questions. “No, you won't hurt me. I—” She readjusted her hand, her grip tightening, and I sucked in a breath through my teeth, thrusting my hips in response. She hadn't meant to do it, but the tight grip was pleasurable and when she mimicked the movement, I groaned.

“Put it in your mouth, *malyshka*.”

I forced my eyes open, watching as she worked up the courage to do as I asked. Shifting forward on her knees, she brought my cock to her lips, licking tentatively. It was like torture, and my patience was waning. Slipping my hand into her hair, I urged her closer, watching as she pulled me into her mouth. I used the grip on her hair to guide her movements, starting slowly so she could get used to it. She was tentative, her tongue exploring as she bobbed her head. When I groaned, she whimpered, and I saw her shifting, pressing her thighs tighter together. I would bet good money that she was wet, enjoying the feel of my cock in her mouth.

I only allowed the slow pace for so long before my grip tightened and my hips thrust more insistently. She choked and gagged, pulling away, but I dragged her back, growling at her.

“Breathe through your nose and suck.”

Her gaze flicked up to me, wide and tear filled. I was going to stop, give her a moment to breathe, but a look of determination flashed across her face when I pulled her back and she batted my hand away, pulling me back into her mouth without instruction. Her hand wrapped around me, following the motion of her mouth, and pleasure shot up my spine.

“Dirty girl, you like that, don’t you?”

She let out a breathy moan, and I growled at the vibrations. She was tempting me too much and I couldn’t take it anymore, grabbing the back of her head to keep her still so I could fuck her mouth like I wanted to. She sucked in a breath, surprised, but I couldn’t focus on anything other than the feel of her sweet mouth.

I was getting too rough with her. She was too sweet to handle me, but whenever I tried to stop, she took over, sucking and licking like she enjoyed it as much as I did. I felt my balls draw up, my teeth bared as I fought off my release, not ready for this to end, but she tightened the grip on her hand like earlier, following the motion of her mouth, and the combination set me off. With a growl, I yanked her closer, coming down her throat in deep spurts that seemed to drag on and on.

Releasing her, I was careful not to let her fall backwards. She was breathing hard, her face flushed and her lips swollen. She had tear tracks down her cheeks and I was a little concerned I went too far, but when she looked up at me, her chin went up and she looked proud of herself.

Reaching for her, I pulled her into my lap, cupping her face and kissing her softly. She melted in my arms, letting out a sweet sigh. I wasn’t done with her yet, not by a long shot, but I was rough with her and she took it as a challenge, never backing down. It was possible I underestimated her. She might be able to handle more than I thought.

“Do you accept my apology?”

Deciding to test it a little, a grin pulled at my lips. “Not quite.”

When she leaned back with a frown, I jerked my chin towards my desk. “Lay down.”

Her brow furrowed deeper as she slowly moved to do as I asked. Before she could lie on her back, I spun her around and pushed between her shoulder blades until she was bent over my desk. I yanked her skirt out of my way roughly, making

her gasp. She still didn't protest, even when I palmed her ass. Only the cotton of her panties would protect her. I'd go without them, but I didn't want to go past her limits.

Without warning, I slapped my palm across her ass, making her cry out. She rocked with the force of it, whimpering when I rubbed away the sting. She was prepared when I did it again, but her reaction was the same. And still, she never stopped me. I slapped her hard, over and over, waiting for her to cry for mercy. Instead, she clutched at my desk, tears staining the paperwork beneath her, and a damp spot showed up on her panties. She liked it.

A shudder rolled through me, and I had to fight not to attack her. How could someone so sweet be hiding such a dirty minx?

I knew I shouldn't reward her. It was supposed to be a punishment, but I couldn't resist spinning her around and sitting her on my desk, spreading her legs. She had a preference for long skirts and I found I preferred them as well, enjoying the slow reveal as I dragged the material up her legs. Her panties were soaked and when I dragged my finger over the damp material, she moaned and rocked her hips automatically.

“You liked that, didn't you?”

When I lifted my gaze to hers, I smirked when she bit her lip and nodded. Dragging my finger a little rougher over her sex, I watched her writhe and whimper, her eyes pleading with me. I wanted her to ask, to beg me to fuck her, so I leaned forward, kissing her clit through the material of her panties.

“Niko...”

Fighting back a growl, I pushed my finger harder, dipping inside her a little. The material blocked me from going too far, nowhere near where she needed me, but just enough to drive her crazy. She panted, rocking her hips, but I knew she wasn't getting what she needed right now.

“Niko, please...”

It was like music to my ears and I rewarded her by tugging her panties aside and kissing her clit. Her hips jumped, and she made a needy sound, but I didn't move until she said it again.

“Please!”

“Good girl.”

I kept going, licking her every time she begged, until it spilled from her lips like a cadence and her hips rolled against my face. I added two fingers, and she started to babble more than beg, her eyes unfocused on the ceiling as she lay sprawled across my desk. There were important documents beneath her, little pieces of my empire, but I couldn't give two shits. The image of her lying across my desk begging me to touch her was something that I'd never forget.

When she keened, her body pulsing around my fingers, I stood, keeping up the motion of my fingers while I pumped my cock. Between one aftershock and another, I pulled my fingers away and pushed inside her, growling as I slid all the way to the hilt in one motion. She was so wet. Unable to hold back any longer, I grabbed her hips, fucking her roughly. She didn't protest, instead wrapping her legs around my hips and picking back up her pleading. It set me off and I pistoned my hips, chasing my release with abandon.

“You're so fucking perfect. You were made for me. I love how you feel around my cock.”

Shoving her shirt and bra up to her neck, I watched her tits bounce with each thrust, her nipples drawn tight. I leaned, sucking one roughly, and her body tightened. She was going to come, and I wanted her to scream so loud they heard her through the soundproof doors.

“Scream for me, dorogaya. Tell the world who fucks you.”

Reaching between us, I pressed down on her clit. Her eyes widened and her head flew back and when I rubbed it roughly, she came screaming my name, her legs tightening around me. I followed with a growl, the pulses of her body milking me of my release. A shiver rolled up my spine, and I dropped to my elbows over her, fighting to regain my breath.

“You are mine, Anya. And I am going to thoroughly enjoy reminding you of that every time you misbehave.”

ANYA

I WOKE up the following morning to light kisses on the back of my neck. Sighing, I turned in his arms, keeping my eyes closed as he plucked at my lips. I would never get tired of waking up with him. He was so sweet and made sure we started the day together before he went off to work.

“What time is it?”

“Early,” he grumbled. “Something came up with work and I need to leave before the sun rises. Go back to sleep.”

Frowning, I forced my eyes open. It was still dark and the sky outside the windows was barely gray. He never had to go to work so early before.

“What time will you be back?”

He sighed, shaking his head. “I’m not sure. Not before lunch. Ilya will watch over you until I return. He will keep you updated.”

I still hadn’t gotten around to asking why I needed security, but it didn’t really seem like the right time. He rolled out of bed, disappearing into the bathroom, and was dressed and ready less than ten minutes later. Rubbing my eyes, I sat up with a frown.

“Can I have him call Eva?”

He grimaced, pausing as he fixed his tie. “Must you?”

Pursing my lips against a smile, I nodded. “I must. She’s my friend, Niko. I promise we won’t go drinking. I was

thinking of meeting for coffee. She lets me practice my Russian with her.”

He looked contemplative, but eventually he nodded. “Fine, if you promise no alcohol. Don’t let her spike your coffee to make it Irish, either. She likes to do that.”

Snickering, I shook my head. I could definitely imagine her doing that. He came back to bed, cupping the back of my head as he kissed me goodbye. When he shifted to move away, I caught him by the lapels of his jacket, rubbing my nose against his like he always does to me. He smiled, kissing me one more time before pulling away.

“Be good, dorogaya, or I will have to punish you again.”

Biting my lip, I scrunched up my nose. “Is that a warning or incentive?”

He laughed as he slipped out the door. It felt lonely to sleep without him, but it was too early to wake up, so I hugged his pillow and eventually fell back asleep.

I woke up at a decent hour for once, probably because Niko left so early. I took a bath and braided my hair, letting it hang over my shoulder. It was snowing, so I dressed warmly, thick leggings under my skirt and a snuggly sweater. I wrapped a scarf around my hair like I’d seen so many women do since I got here, tugging on my jacket. Ilya was in the kitchen and he lifted his chin in greeting before scanning my outfit and nodding.

“You dress for the weather. That’s good. It is cold today.”

I made a face. “It’s cold every day.”

Chuckling, he grabbed his own jacket. “Eva said she will meet you in a little while. She bitched at me for waking her up so early. We can wait here if you want?”

“No, I don’t want to sit around waiting. We can get coffee and wait for her, if that’s okay.”

His brow furrowed. “You are asking my opinion?”

Lifting an eyebrow, I shot him a confused look. “Shouldn’t I? I’m not from here. You know the area better than I do.”

He looked pleased, pulling on his hat. “It is no wonder he likes you so much. You actually listen. Most women would make demands and throw a fit if they didn’t get what they wanted.”

Hearing him say that Niko liked me warmed me to my toes. I followed him outside, barely feeling the bitter wind. I felt the same way, but I always second guessed whether he was just having fun, playing out the fantasy of ruining the quiet virgin, or whether this was something real. He was the first guy I ever dated, so I had no frame of reference outside of watching Nina date and she was marrying an asshole, so I didn’t think she was a good role model.

The cafe that Ilya brought me to was close to the city center, but it wasn’t crowded with tourists. It was a little hole in the wall shop run by a tiny old woman who smiled at my sad attempt at Russian and pinched my cheek. I loved her instantly and when she brought me some tea cakes, I beamed at her. I made Ilya sit with me and share, since he was the one who brought me here. He seemed a little uncomfortable at first, but he settled after making a quick phone call.

“Has Niko called yet?”

He nodded. “Yes, he is very busy, but he should probably be home before dinner. He said to let you explore the city more after Eva showed up and he mentioned a museum, since you like history.”

Today was turning out perfect and even though I would’ve preferred to have Niko here with me, he made sure I would enjoy myself without him and he even remembered how much I liked museums. I wanted to figure out some way to thank him and was discussing gift options with Ilya when a familiar voice called my name.

“Anya?”

My spine stiffened, and I fought back a grimace. I hadn’t seen Nina since the day Anton attacked me. It was the longest I’d ever gone without speaking with my sister, but after the way she treated me, I didn’t want to see her. I didn’t want to

run into Anton for one thing, but I also didn't know what to say to her.

When I turned in my seat and glanced over my shoulder, I was relieved that she was alone. If Anton was there, I would've asked Ilya to take me home and met Eva another time. Nina looked tired, probably staying up late getting the wedding planning done, but she didn't look angry anymore. She approached slowly, twisting a pair of gloves in her hands. Her gaze flicked to Ilya, and she pressed her lips together. She didn't look like she wanted to speak with him around, but I didn't want him to go. I was worried she'd hit me again.

“Hi...”

She forced a smile that looked more like a grimace. “Hi. Can we talk?”

It made me uneasy, but when I glanced at Ilya, he dipped his chin and pushed to his feet, speaking to me in Russian. “I'll be close by. If you're scared, look my way and I'll come back.”

Nodding, I watched him walk away, going to the counter near the back to order himself another coffee. When I glanced back at Nina, she was watching me, her gaze flicking between me and Ilya. I could see the question in her eyes, but I wasn't going to talk to her about Niko or Ilya. She didn't want to hear it before. I wasn't going to talk to her about it now.

“Can I sit?” She gestured to the chair across from me.

Nodding, I straightened in my seat, playing with the handle of my mug. “How have you been? The wedding is coming up—”

“Anya, there isn't going to be a wedding.”

Frowning, I glanced at her. “Why not?”

She scowled at me. “Because he attacked my sister. I'm sorry, I never should've—”

Shaking my head, I crossed my arms over my chest. “I don't want to talk about that.”

She nodded, a pained expression on her face. “I, uh... I have your stuff. I left the hotel because Anton wouldn’t leave me alone, but I didn’t want anyone messing with your stuff, so I brought it with me. It’s in my flat.”

“Okay. Thank you. I’ll talk to Niko about picking it up later.”

The atmosphere was awkward, and I hated it. Nina and I had always been really close. Our fights never lasted longer than a few days, and we leaned on each other when things were rough. Under normal circumstances, I would’ve been by her side after she ended her relationship and we would’ve cursed his name together. I was there for every break up and I hated the sad look in her eyes. I still didn’t trust her, though. After everything we’d been through together, the fact that she thought I’d sleep with her fiancé cut me deeply and then she hit me and kicked me out, even though I was the victim. I wasn’t ready to forgive her yet.

“Is... is that all? I’m meeting Niko’s sister and—”

“Wait. I wanted to talk to you about him.”

My spine stiffened, and I regarded her carefully. “What about him?”

Looking around, she leaned closer to whisper to me. “Anya, that man is dangerous. I don’t know where you met him, but you need to stay away from him. He’s a murderer.”

My mouth fell open. “Who told you that?”

“Anton told me. He—”

I wasn’t willing to hear any more after she said that. Shoving away from the table, I stood. “Wait. You’re judging my boyfriend based on the word of the guy who tried to rape me without even asking me about him first?”

She looked startled. “He... He said—”

Shaking my head, I clenched my fists at my side. “Of course, you never saw it that way. You saw what he wanted you to see, just like now. Niko is sweet and kind and he takes care of me. He’s not dangerous!”

She looked around uneasily before shushing me. “Listen, I’m sure he treats you okay but—”

“But nothing! You don’t even know him!”

Irritation swept across her face. This was the first time I’d ever stood up to her, and she didn’t like it, but I didn’t like her talking about Niko like that.

“If he’s not dangerous, then who’s that?” She pointed to Ilya. “He was at the hotel when your boyfriend stormed in and attacked us. He grabbed Anton and broke his fingers and—”

“Why are you still defending him?” I screamed. Tears welled in my eyes and I fought back a sob, shaking my head. “He assaulted me and all you care about is what he says or what happens to him! I was nearly hypothermic when they found me! Niko saved my life after you threw me out because your fiancé tried to rape me!”

A presence at my side startled me. Eva appeared out of nowhere and she looked pissed off, glaring at Nina. She grabbed my hand, tugging me behind her, and I held it in a death grip. I couldn’t do this anymore. I didn’t want to hear any more of Nina’s lies. It was obviously all cooked up by Anton, and she was never going to listen to me anyway. Glancing over my shoulder, I locked eyes with Ilya. He was already behind me, a dark look on his face.

“I want to see Niko,” I demanded, choking back tears. He pulled out his phone, flicking it open without question.

“He was busy... in a meeting, but I can see if he’s through. Let’s go wait in the car.”

Nodding, I followed Eva as she moved toward the door; her gaze locked on Nina. I was surrounded and there was no way Nina could hurt me, but I didn’t think I’d feel safe until I was in Niko’s arms again. My heart was in pieces and I needed him.

“Anya! I’m just trying to help!” Nina cried behind us.

Tears spilled over my cheeks and I clung tighter to Eva. I didn’t want her help. She wasn’t going to change her mind, and I wasn’t going to change mine. I just wanted to go.

NIKO

WE WERE in the middle of handling a few of Bortnik's family members when my phone rang. Wiping off my hands, I stepped away to answer it, frowning when Ilya's name appeared on the screen.

"What's wrong?"

"The sister showed up at the cafe. She's crying, wants to see you."

Growling, I tossed the tray of instruments I'd been using. I knew that woman would be trouble. I should've handled her like I initially thought.

"Bring her to the restaurant. I'll meet her there soon. Is Eva with you?"

"Yes, she showed up just now."

"Fine, have her sit with Anya. It's time to make a statement. Bring me Anton. Anya's sister will get the picture when I rip her fiancé to pieces."

He grunted his acknowledgement, and I hung up, my blood boiling. Turning my focus to Bortnik's uncle, I grabbed a screwdriver and stalked over to him, slamming it into his knee. He screamed and thrashed in his seat, blubbering like a baby.

"Where is he?" I shouted.

I didn't lose my temper, not at this stage. I already had them where I wanted them, so I never felt the urge. But people were messing with Anya, and that pissed me off so much that I

felt like setting the world on fire. Since I couldn't take my temper out on the person responsible, I was going to take it out on Bortnik's uncle instead.

He was too busy sobbing to say anything until I pressed the head of the screwdriver against his neck.

"I know where your wife is, Kiril. Either you tell me where he is or she's next."

He didn't look like he believed me until I glanced over my shoulder at Ivan. He rattled off an address and Kiril's eyes went wide as he trembled in his seat. "M-Moscow. He- He's been staying in a hotel downtown. Near the station."

Ice flooded my veins, and I jerked to look over my shoulder at Grigori. "What cafe was Ilya taking her to?"

"Mama Ivanov's."

Near the goddamn station. They just left. Bortnik probably didn't know about her and it was fine, but something in my gut said he wouldn't pass up this opportunity. If he knew about Anya, she was in danger.

"Move out! Now!"

Ilya didn't answer when I called him back. Six times the phone rang until it went to voicemail and the uneasiness grew. Ilya didn't miss phone calls. He was meticulous. It was why I chose him to watch over Anya. Even if he was driving, he'd answer his phone. Something wasn't right.

We raced into town, but by the time we got to the cafe, it was too late. The parking lot was empty aside from police cars and news reporters. We stayed near the edge of the property, scanning the crowds for signs of Anya or the others, but the only thing I could see was a puddle of blood on the ground near the town car. Fury and fear overtook me, worried that it was Anya's blood and outraged that they managed to take her, but while I was dialing Ilya again, someone shoved me from behind.

My men grabbed her, hauling her away from me, but I put my hand up to stop them, trying to understand her screams through her blubbing.

“I told her! I told her you were dangerous, and she didn’t believe me! And now she was fucking kidnapped off the streets in broad daylight! Tell me this doesn’t have something to do with you! Tell me, you piece of shit!”

She was being too loud, and the police were nearby. Grabbing her arm, I stalked away, bringing her to an alley. She fought against me, seething and trying to wrench herself free. Anya wasn’t lying, they really were opposites. Anya’s sister was brave to the point of being stupid, attacking me like that.

When we were out of sight of the police, I tossed her away from me, uncaring when she stumbled and caught herself against the wall of the alley.

“What happened?”

Swinging around, she glowered at me. “I’m not telling you shit! This is your fault, and the police said they’re going to find her. Once they do, I’m taking her home. I’m not going to let her stay with—”

Snarling, I stepped up to her. “You do not get a say in the matter. Not after what you did to her. Stop stalling. If we want to find her alive, you will tell me everything you know. The police are useless and I will not have you standing in the way of me finding her. Speak or I will make you.”

She glared at me, defiance in her face, but she must have seen the truth in my eyes because eventually she spoke. “They were all leaving when a big white van showed up. They shot the guy and took my sister and the woman who was with her and drove off in that direction.” She pointed down the street. I whipped my head over my shoulder. Grigori was already moving, running to his car to chase after them. They were probably long gone by now, but it was better than sitting on our asses.

“What else? What did they look like? How many of them were there? Was she hurt?”

She rolled her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest. “She was kidnapped! Of course she was hurt! I tried to go out there myself, but then they started shooting people and...” Her brow

furrowed and she looked away. “And I got scared... I should’ve gone after her, I was right there but—”

“But you are not trained or prepared. You would have only given them one more victim to take. I will find her. You have my word. Now, what else can you tell me?”

She looked at me suspiciously. Neither one of us wanted to work with the other, but if we wanted to find Anya and Eva alive, we would need to put our differences aside. I would not allow my pride to be Anya’s downfall. Anya’s sister was right. This was my fault, and I was going to make it right. Just as soon as I could find her.



Anya

I was really starting to rethink staying in Russia. I seemed to be a magnet for trouble ever since I arrived. I never had anything remotely dangerous happen to me when I was home. It was probably my fault for wishing on all those stars as a kid to have a grand adventure like the people in my novels.

We were just leaving the cafe to go meet Niko when the van came out of nowhere, flying over the curb and screeching to a stop right in front of us. I didn't have a chance to open my mouth to scream before a group of unfamiliar men spilled out and attacked us. Everything happened so quickly that I never stood a chance. One of them shot Ilya, and I watched him collapse to the ground as two others grabbed my arms and dragged me towards the back of the van. Eva fought harder than I did, tossing a few of them to the ground. She almost got to one of their weapons too, but then one of them hit her in the head with the back of his gun and she was out instantly.

They didn't hurt me; they didn't really need to. I'm not a fighter, and I stopped struggling when they tossed Eva into the back with me. Even if I could find a way to escape, I wasn't going to leave her all alone. I scrambled over to her, pulling her head into my lap, tears streaming down my face. They left me alone after that, more focused on yelling at each other about the directions we were going. I tried shaking Eva's shoulder, but she was out cold and there was blood dripping from her temple.

Pulling off my scarf, I pressed it against the wound, sobbing the entire way to wherever they were taking us. I had to assume we left the city given how long we were driving, but there were no windows back here and I was too afraid to look around anyway. I kept my head down, my focus on Eva, until we pulled to a stop and the side door ripped open again.

I started screaming when they separated me from Eva. She was unconscious, and I was terrified they'd hurt her while she wasn't able to defend herself, but one of them punched me in

the stomach so hard I couldn't breathe and I collapsed to my knees. He tossed me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and stalked inside the house. I couldn't get a good look at it, not with the position I was in, but the inside was dilapidated and musty and there were a lot of angry men with weapons watching us as the one hauling me around stomped up the stairs.

He dropped me on my butt on the floor of a tiny room in the corner. There was a bed not two feet away, but apparently it was too much work for him to soften my fall. He didn't give me a backward glance, stalking back out and slamming the door behind him. I scrambled to my feet and rushed to the door, but I heard it lock and when I tried to wrench the handle, I heard him chuckle as he walked away.

Terrified and in pain, I looked around the room for something to protect myself. There was nothing but the bed that was bolted to the floor and empty bookshelves that were rotting and too soft to really do any damage. There was a tiny attached bathroom, but anything that could've been useful was removed and there were no windows. No way to escape. Sobbing, I wrapped my arms around myself, looking around helplessly. I was trapped and had no idea what to do. What should I do?

ANYA

AFTER A FEW MINUTES, I heard voices in the hall again. I plastered myself against the wall farthest from the door, worried they were coming after me again, but they never opened the door. Their voices were muffled, so I tiptoed closer, pressing my ear against the door to listen. I couldn't grasp all of it. They were speaking too low and gruff for me to fully follow along, but I got the gist of it.

“... broke my nose. I'm going to enjoy hurting her.”

“She's not... but the other one is. We will each have a turn... when he calls.”

The first one snorted. “Romanov is an idiot. He had no weaknesses until now. She...”

My stomach filled with lead. Nina wasn't lying. This was because of Niko.

“Leave her. Once she's awake, we will have fun. Let's go get a drink.”

She... Are they talking about Eva? Quickly dropping to the floor, I peeked under the door just as they closed the door opposite mine. I didn't see much, but I caught a glimpse of her lying unconscious on the ground before the door fully shut and they locked it, laughing as they walked away. They put Eva in the room across from mine. That was a good thing, right? Once she woke up, we'd figure out how to escape together. I saw her out there; she fought hard. She had to know what to do.

I stayed there, glued to the door, listening for any sign of Eva being awake. I heard men talking, but they were too far away for me to hear what they were saying. All I knew was that they were enemies of Niko's, and everything I knew about him was a lie.

People warned me. The flight attendant, Nina. Even Niko warned me. When he was yelling at me for answering his phone, he said his business was dangerous. I was so upset about him speaking to me that way that I never clued in on it. I had to be kidnapped off the streets to finally believe it.

Even if I hadn't been warned, there were signs. Red flags. I was so busy falling in love with him that I ignored every threat he made, every dark look. Since they weren't directed at me, I figured he was just really protective and growly. I was an idiot. A stupid, hopeless idiot because even though I knew this was his fault, the only person I wanted to see walking through that door was him. I felt safe with him and right now, terrified out of my mind, the only way I'd feel better was if he held me.

Stomping footsteps came my way, and I scrambled to my feet, darting across the room right as the door flew open. A tall, angry looking man strode into the room, a scowl on his face. He had a thick mustache and his head was shaved. I didn't know why that made him more intimidating, but it did. He had similar tattoos on his knuckles as Niko did, which probably should've clued me in on the criminal activity. The new guy's button up was parted in the middle, only buttoned about halfway and his slacks had what looked like splatters of blood on them.

There were two men behind him, both intimidatingly large and dangerous looking. They stood by the door as the one with the mustache studied me, his eyes narrowed.

“What's your name?”

He spoke in Russian and I was going to attempt to answer him, but I remembered Eva's warning when Niko's mother came to dinner and kept my mouth shut. Better to let them think I was a stupid American who couldn't understand them. They might mention something useful, like how to escape.

Shaking my head, I frowned at him, feigning confusion. He repeated himself, glaring at me, but eventually he switched to English, the guttural tone making me flinch.

“What is your name?”

When I didn't answer him, he marched up to me, grabbing my hair roughly and forcing my head at an odd angle. I cried out, my hands clutching my hair to try to ease the pain a little. His free hand came up, gripping my jaw roughly to the point that I tasted blood.

“When I ask a question, you answer. Understand?”

I couldn't nod much with my head at that angle, but I was afraid to say anything out loud without a direct question from him. I didn't want him to get angry at me for speaking out of turn.

“Name. Now.”

“A-Anyia.”

His brow furrowed. “You are Russian?”

My whole body was trembling, and I shook my head the best I could. “I was adopted. I grew up in New York. I don't speak Russian.”

He studied me for a moment, like he was trying to figure out if I was lying, but he accepted my answer eventually.

“Romanov. You are his girlfriend?”

I didn't want to admit to that. It wouldn't make this any easier on me. I wasn't a good liar, but I decided to try. Maybe if they thought I wasn't important to him, they'd let me go. But then Eva would be here all alone...

“N-No, not really. We just spent some time together. I'm leaving soon. It was never going to go anywhere. I'm not really looking to date, I'm too busy and—”

He growled, shaking me roughly, and I cried out again. My scalp was on fire from his rough treatment and I was a little worried he was going to rip out all my hair.

“Stop rambling and tell me the truth.” He said that in Russian. I was in too much pain to fake confusion, but I was also in too much pain to respond to him, and it worked in my favor. One of the guys behind him spoke up, apparently understanding my English better than the man with the mustache.

“She said they’re just fucking. She’s leaving soon. I think she means they aren’t serious.”

The man holding my hair made an irritated sound. “That’s not what the maid said.”

Maid? What maid?

He gave me no warning before releasing my hair, sending me sprawling to the floor. I clutched my head, whimpering and curling into a ball away from him.

“At least we have the sister. We will send this one back to him broken for messing with my family and ruining my son’s marriage, and keep the sister as leverage to bring him under control.”

One of the men grinned. “Can I break her?”

I couldn’t show it on my face that I understood them, but panic made it hard to breathe. They were casually discussing raping me like it was a daily occurrence for them. The man with the mustache looked annoyed, growling at the men.

“I don’t give a shit who does what. Make it hurt. Casual or serious, she was important enough for him to bring home so our message will have the same effect. Take her downstairs and let the others have a turn. Just keep her quiet. I’ve got business to handle.”

He strode away without another word to me, disappearing out the door. The other two slowly turned their gazes onto me, and I scrambled away from them as they stalked into the room. When one of them reached for me, I screamed, my nails scratching the floorboards as I tried to stop him from dragging me backwards. They were both laughing, enjoying my pathetic struggling.

“No! No! Please!”

The one who asked to break me threw himself on top of me, wrestling with my arms and forcing them over my head. He shushed me gently, like that would somehow make me feel better. Transferring my wrists to one hand, he let his fingers trail down my cheek and neck, speaking quietly.

“This will hurt, but it will hurt more if you keep screaming and annoy the boss. He is not patient. You do not want his attention. Quiet now, malyshka. Don’t ruin the fun.”

Sobbing, I turned my face away from him. That nickname was sweet coming from Niko, but this man’s terrifying whispers ruined it. I would never be able to hear it again without thinking about this day and what they were going to do to me. He wanted me to be quiet, to keep the wrath of the man with the mustache off of me, but what was the point? It was going to hurt either way. Maybe if the boss did it, he’d kill me and it could be over.

I was quiet long enough for the man to stand again, grabbing my arm to haul me away, but the minute he tried, I started screaming again, ripping my arm away and kicking my legs to keep him away from me. It pissed him off and once he got close enough, he backhanded me hard. Blood filled my mouth, and I saw double for a second. He grabbed me by the hair, hauling me against him.

“You are going to regret that.”

Whether it was terror or maybe acceptance that I was going to die, I decided to keep fighting. I spit the blood into his face, scrambling toward the bathroom when he dropped me and reeled back.

“You bitch!”

There was no lock on the door, so I only managed to trap myself in a smaller space. I braced my shoulder against it to try and buy some time, but it didn’t make much of a difference. He barreled in the room, his teeth bared, and went after me, wrapping his meaty hands around my throat and shoving me against the wall.

I scratched and slapped him, but it was like he didn't feel it. I couldn't breathe and little black dots appeared at the edges of my vision. Maybe I made him angry enough to kill me quickly. I kept fighting as long as I could, trying to make him finish the job so I wouldn't wake up from this and face them hurting me. My vision swam and my heart pounded so loudly in my ears that I couldn't hear anything else.

My eyes had just slipped closed when he released me and I hit the ground hard. I wanted to protest, to force him to finish me off, but I could barely breathe. I gasped and coughed, too weak to lift my head. Too weak to pull myself off the floor. I shut my eyes, embracing the blackness that overtook my vision. If I was lucky, I wouldn't wake up until it was over.

ANYA

COLD WATER HIT MY FACE, and I gasped, my eyes flying open. It took me a second to remember where I was and what happened and when I did, I curled in on myself, sobbing. Of course, they wouldn't let me stay unconscious. Why would they ever be that kind?

“Anya! Get up! We need to go!”

My head jerked up, and I looked around. Eva was standing over me, a fierce look on her face. She had blood on her hands and face and she was holding a weapon. She glanced down at me and snapped again.

“Get up! You can't fall apart right now!”

My body still felt weak, but I did my best to push to my feet, leaning against her when she grabbed my arm to help me up. Keeping my hand grasped tightly in hers, she pulled me toward the door, peeking out before dragging me into the hall. I followed her, using all my energy just to keep up with her. I couldn't think beyond what we were doing. I didn't have the strength for it. I think it made it easier. I didn't have the energy to be terrified, even when a few men came running towards the stairs and Eva shot them just as they looked up.

She didn't stop to look around the place. She went straight out the front door, shooting another man standing by a fancy car out front. Ripping the driver's door open, she pushed me inside, forcing me to climb over the seats to get me in the passenger side. She'd barely shut the door behind her before the shooting started again, which was probably why she didn't

waste time putting me in the passenger seat first. We were lucky that the car was already running. Whoever had been using it obviously didn't plan on being here that long. She threw the car into drive and slammed her foot down on the gas, the tail of the car fishtailing as the tires spun out. A few men ran towards us and one of them managed to grab my door and open it, but the car finally got purchase and jolted forward and he lost his grip, falling to the ground as we tore away. I shut the door and locked it, doing my best not to hyperventilate as I tugged on my seatbelt.

Eva let out a string of curses, jerking the wheel to avoid a few cars coming into the end of the driveway. She bypassed them, flipping them off as she tore out of the gate and away from the property.

“What’s happening?” I croaked, my throat still sore.

“I don’t know, I didn’t stop to ask! Look around and see if you can find a phone or something!”

She was obviously stressed, the gun still clutched in her hand even though she was holding the wheel tightly. I did as she asked, searching the car as best as I could without unbuckling. The roads were icy, and she was going dangerously fast. I found a small cellphone tucked into the glove box and dialed the number she rattled off, putting it on speaking and holding it up between us.

“Who—”

“Not now! We need backup! Where the hell are you?”

I wanted to cry when I heard Niko’s voice, but I didn’t want to distract them. I focused on reaching around Eva to pull on her seatbelt, whimpering when the car fishtailed again.

“Following Bortnik’s trail. Where are you?”

“Seriously? You’re still doing that? Did you not even realize we were missing? You asshole!”

Something pinged against the car and we both ducked. Someone was tailing us and shooting at us. Another bullet hit, tearing through the mirror on my side. I yelped and ducked, covering my head with my hands.

“What the fuck are you talking about? Where are you?”

“I don’t know! It’s not like there’s a fucking sign saying ‘you are here’ on it!”

Niko growled, annoyed with her. “Stop fucking around, Eva! Bortnik’s family is on the east side, that’s where we’ve been looking. Head west, you’ll—”

“It’s not Bortnik! I don’t know who that asshole was, but he wasn’t Bortnik! Any other suggestions, dumbass?”

They were still arguing, but when I peeked out the window, I saw a sign off to the side.

“There! It said Moscow is forty kilometers away!”

Eva made an irritated sound. “Too far! I—”

Another shot shattered through the back window, catching Eva’s arm. She shouted, nearly losing control of the car. I pressed my hand against it, trying to stem the bleeding, but another shot whizzed over my head and through the windshield, the glass fracturing and making it difficult to see out my side. They were getting closer and if they got Eva’s side, we wouldn’t be able to see anything.

“Eva! What’s happening?”

Gritting her teeth, she pressed harder on the gas, glaring out the window. “They’re fucking following us. I need a way out, Nikolai. We aren’t going to make it without help.”

My heart sank when she said that. She was so quiet about it, so serious. She didn’t think we were going to make it at all.

Looking around desperately, I tried to find some kind of sign, something to point out where we were. There was nothing, and it wasn’t like I could recognize the area. I wasn’t from here. I wouldn’t even know what to look for. Niko was shouting, sending his men to look for us, but depending on where he was, it wouldn’t matter in the end. A quick glance over my shoulder showed that the car was gaining on us and the one leaning out the window with the gun was pointing it directly at me.

“Hold on!”

She jerked the wheel suddenly, yanking on the emergency break. We spun out, and I screamed, dropping the phone as I clutched tightly to the seatbelt. It choked me, trying to keep me in my seat, and when she straightened out and blasted forward, I was crying too hard to do anything about it.

Niko's voice was muffled, but I didn't know where the phone fell and I was too afraid to look for it. Eva didn't ask me to either. She just started shouting.

"Nikolai! We're near Papa's old cabin. I recognize the area. We're heading south now, but they aren't far behind us."

"Keep going! I'm on my way!" was his muffled reply.

The next few minutes were tense. We managed to get closer to Moscow before they managed to catch back up to us, but they weren't playing around anymore. The closer we got to the city, the harder they were trying to stop us. The blasts started going off in quick succession and one hit the back tire. Eva's face was tense as she struggled to maintain the car at the speed we were going with a flat tire.

"Anya, grab the gun!"

"B-But I don't know how to use it!"

"Just do it! I can't shoot and drive at the same time and we need to fire back!"

My hands were shaking when I carefully took the gun from her. I'd never even seen a gun outside of a policeman's holster, much less touched one. I was terrified it was going to go off, and I was going to accidentally shoot Eva.

"Use both hands. Don't bother aiming at them, it doesn't matter. Just shoot out the back window. It should slow them down."

I couldn't get a good enough view to actually see them with my seatbelt on, but I wasn't willing to unbuckle. Twisting in my seat as much as I could, I pointed it at the back window, pulling the trigger. It was loud and the force of it shoved my hands backwards, knocking it into my cheek. I flinched, but Eva was yelling at me to keep going, so I did my best to ignore it and fired again and again until nothing else was coming out.

“Now what?”

Another shot hit the other back tire and Eva swerved a little. For the first time, she looked helpless, shooting me a panicked look. Sitting back in my seat, I tightened my seatbelt. This wasn't going to end well.

The car behind us was catching up and when it smacked against the back of ours, we both screamed. They were trying to knock us off the road and if we survived, they weren't going to be kind about punishing us. Putting my hand on Eva's arm, I shut my eyes, not willing to watch when they rammed us again. The car spun out and Eva shouted as she tried to fix it, but it was harder with the tires out. The force of the spin made me nauseous, and we were thrown off the road with no ability to stop on our own. A loud thud sounded as we hit something and I was thrown forward, choking on the seatbelt. We came to a sudden stop, and the world went quiet for a second outside the ringing in my ears.

When I eventually forced my eyes open, I was stunned to find the front half of the car buried in snow. By some kind of miracle, we hit a deep snowbank, the snow fresh and soft enough to take the impact without crushing the car. Turning my head carefully, I looked at Eva. She was groaning, pressing the palm of her hand against her forehead, but she was breathing. I was really glad I took the time to buckle her in because she would've been thrown from the car at those speeds and I doubt the snowbank would've saved her.

Shouting brought us both around and she whipped her head up, shooting me a wide-eyed look. We unbuckled and searched the car, but there were no weapons, nothing to protect us.

“When we get out, I want you to run. Run and don't look back,” she demanded, crawling over the center console to the back. The front windows were covered completely with snow, and the cracked windshield sagged under the weight of it. We'd have to go through the back, which was sticking out. It put us more at risk, but we didn't really have much of a choice.

“No! We go together! They’ll kill you!”

With a grunt, she kicked the back passenger window until it cracked and broke. The cold wind whipped through the car instantly, stealing my breath away.

“It’s my job to protect you, Anya. You run and get back to my brother. He’ll keep you safe.”

I shook my head, confused. It was Ilya’s job to protect us and he was shot. Eva was my friend, not my bodyguard. Unless she’d been faking being my friend so I wouldn’t question being watched over. It hurt to think about, but I didn’t really have time to contemplate it. Eva crawled through the window and I followed her out, my skirt catching on the broken glass and tripping me, sending me sprawling in the snow. Eva helped me to my feet and was just pushing me away from the road when the bad guys caught up with us again. They pointed their weapons, shouting at us. So much for running away. We were back where we started, only this time, we seriously pissed them off.

I want to go home.

NIKO

I COULD HEAR their terrified screams and my heart beat wildly in my chest, but I couldn't go any faster. I was already maxed out, the car shuddering in its attempt to stay in control. My knuckles were white on the steering wheel as I held it steady. I would not crash. I was already chasing my tail, going in the wrong direction looking for them. I'd been so sure that it was Bortnik that I wasted precious time when I could've been calling my allies and sending people out in search of them. I failed them in my arrogance. I would not fail them again.

The sound of the tires squealing was cut off suddenly and my breath stuttered. The line went dead and real fear swept through me. I hadn't felt this way in years, but there were only two possibilities. Either they crashed and were killed or they would be taken by the enemy. An unknown enemy who was ballsy enough to kidnap my family in broad daylight. Either way, I wouldn't be able to save them.

Gritting my teeth, I tightened my grip on the wheel, praying that I could get to them before they were dragged off again. I was flying down the road and almost missed the car sticking out of the snow. Another was stopped nearby, and a group of men were piling out. Slamming on the brakes, I wrenched the wheel, using the momentum to swing the car around. They noticed me too late barreling toward them, one of them lifting his weapon to shoot at me. I hit the brakes again, taking out two with the car. The other two dove out of the way and I was out of the car and had my weapon out

before they could react. Two shots took them down and a quick scan showed no others.

“Niko!”

Jerking my head over my shoulder, I saw them both standing a few feet away. Anya looked disheveled and bruised, but she was holding up Eva, who was sagging heavily against her. Darting forward, I picked my sister up and moved her to the passenger seat of my car, looking her over.

“Sh-She hit her head when we crashed, she m-might have a concussion.” Anya’s voice shook, and her body trembled as she hugged her arms around her waist. Eva was still breathing, but unconscious. I couldn’t sit around and hold Anya like I wished. Grabbing her hand, I tugged her around the car, throwing my seat forward so she could climb into the back. She was unsteady and needed help, but when I moved to buckle her in, she turned her face away from me.

“I-I can do it m-myself.”

Of all the reactions I expected from her, anger wasn’t one of them. She buckled herself and tightened it considerably, avoiding my eyeline. I wanted to ask her why she was acting this way, but I needed to focus on Eva now. I pushed my seat back, careful not to hit Anya’s knees, and pulled back onto the road, dialing my men to update them.

The entire way to the hospital, Anya was silent, her hands clutching her seatbelt in a death grip. I kept glancing at her through the mirror, but she never looked in my direction, her eyes glued to the window. When we pulled into the emergency bay of the hospital, she didn’t watch as they pulled Eva out and she wouldn’t let anyone help her as she climbed from the back. Doctors rushed her, trying to get her in a wheelchair, but she pushed them away, her eyes on her feet as she followed them inside.

An ache grew in my chest. This never should have happened. I was arrogant and careless, and I nearly got both of them killed. Anya had every right to be angry with me. I said I would protect her and yet she kept falling into harm. It was clear I was not cut out to be the one watching over her. Based

on the look in her eyes when I approached her hospital bed, she was thinking the same thing. She looked exhausted and wary, but there was also a deep hurt that cut through me.

The doctors were busy rushing around, checking her injuries. She was battered and bruised, but she would come out of it unscathed for the most part. I doubted she'd ever truly be the same again. Some of the innocence was gone, ripped away from her when she was taken. Her sweet face held more tension, less trust, and none of the easy acceptance she once graced me with.

Once the room cleared out and we were finally alone, I approached her bed. Her gaze was locked on her lap and when I reached for her hand, she pulled away from me. I dropped my hand, clenching it at my side.

“I will find who did this. I won't let them get away with it.”

“Is Eva okay?”

She ignored my vow and still refused to look at me.

“Yes. You were right, she has a concussion and a few wounds that needed tending. She'll be alright.”

She nodded, going silent again.

“Anya, I—”

“I'd like for you to leave.”

My heart seized in my chest. “Anya...”

Her chin trembled, and she turned her face away. A stray tear slipped down her cheek, but her voice was strong when she repeated herself. “Please, just leave me alone.”

I wanted to reach for her, to pull her into my arms and tell her it would be okay. She was sweet, and this was too much for her. She needed to be comforted until she felt safe again. Instead, I nodded, taking a step back.

“I will let you rest. There will be security in the hallway so you can feel at ease. I'll check in on you in the morning and—”

“No, thank you. I want to go home.”

My brow furrowed. “The doctor said it was best to stay here for the night, for observation. I can bring you home after but—”

She shook her head, finally swinging her gaze to mine. “Not your home. Mine. I want to go home. Nina has my things. I’ll call her and change my ticket. I can’t—” Her voice caught in her throat. “I can’t stay here. I’m sorry, Niko.”

My first instinct was to deny her, to demand she stay and let me make it up to her. I had no intention of letting her go when she first arrived. I would’ve dealt with her protests until she was so in love with me that she didn’t want to leave. However, after today, I couldn’t argue with her. I saw the bruises around her neck, just a hint of the trauma she went through. That was my fault and until I could figure out who was responsible, she was still in danger.

Pain gripped me as I dipped my chin. “Fine, if that’s what you want. I will have my jet prepared, and you and your sister will be escorted to the airport.” She opened her mouth to argue, and I cut her off with a growl. “This I will not negotiate, Anya. It’s not safe for you to be on your own. You will be escorted safely to the airport and out of this country. It is the least I can do under the circumstances.”

Her jaw tightened, and she glared at me. I may be willing to let her go, but I wasn’t going to screw around with her safety in the meantime. Until I could find out who was responsible, she would remain under watch. One of my men would be going with them and would watch out for them until the threat was dealt with. I wouldn’t be telling her that part though, she would only argue with me.

“Fine,” she gritted out, dashing another stray tear off her face. Turning her face away again, she dismissed me and I left her alone. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that there would be nothing I could say to change her mind. Anya was too soft for my world, and I dragged her into it anyway. The kindest thing I could do was give her what she wanted and set her free. It would destroy me to do it, but that felt like an appropriate punishment for ruining such a pure and beautiful woman. She was leaving and she would take all the light in my

life with her. She deserved better, and I would do well to remember that.



I WENT to check in on Eva, wanting to make sure she was okay before I left. I needed to figure out who did this so I could handle it, but I wanted to make sure the doctors weren't lying to me about her condition, either. Considering my mood, I wouldn't be surprised if they said anything false just to keep me from killing anyone.

She wasn't where she was supposed to be when I arrived in her room. A few nurses were arguing with her as she dug through the bag with her things in it on the table nearby.

"I wasn't bleeding. Did you have to cut them all off?" she snapped.

"What the hell are you doing?"

She swung around, scowling at me. It wasn't an unusual reaction for her, but it cut deeper than I'd admit after my conversation with Anya.

"What's it look like I'm doing? I'm getting out of here. That asshole is still out here and Anya—"

"Anya's leaving."

She froze, confusion washing over her face. "What? Are they releasing her already? That's even more reason for me to ___"

Stepping up to her, I put my hands on her shoulders, trying to settle her. It was the shock that was making her this way. She needed to calm down, or she'd hurt herself.

"She's *leaving*, Eva."

I put emphasis on the word so she understood my meaning. My normally resilient sister looked hurt, shaking her head.

"I don't understand."

Sighing, I took her hands, leading her back to her bed. She sat on the edge, searching my face. I didn't want to tell her. I didn't want to admit it out loud, even to myself, but she was so concerned and I knew she wouldn't let it go until I explained.

“Anya is going back to America. She doesn't feel safe here and she will return to her family. She won't be alone. I'll send security with her until the threat is gone, but—”

“But she'll come back, right? When the job is done?”

I hadn't realized how close she and Anya had grown until now. Eva looked devastated and when she saw the answer on my face, she ripped out her IV and launched off the bed, taking off for Anya's room. I ran to catch up with her, but she'd always been quick and she made it there before I had a chance to catch up to her.

ANYA

IT TOOK work to get my point across, but the doctor finally agreed to release me. I wasn't hurt, not permanently at least, and I didn't want to sit around here anymore. My chest ached with how hard I was fighting back tears. I couldn't let myself cry, though. I knew once I started, it would be really hard to stop, and I needed to get out of here. I needed to get as far away from Niko as possible.

I called Nina, letting her know I was coming to get my things, and the hospital was nice enough to let me take off my clothes on my own earlier so they weren't damaged. I got dressed, avoiding looking at the bruises on my body. They'd fade eventually, but the memory of how I got them would haunt me.

I was just pulling on my jacket when Eva skidded into the room. She was only in a hospital gown, blood dripping down her hand. She looked wild-eyed, and she was breathing heavily.

“You can't go.”

It's what I thought Niko would say. I had an argument all prepared, waiting for him to fight me, but he conceded without hesitation. I knew our relationship meant more to me than to him and nothing he said would've changed my mind, but it hurt all the same that he didn't even try to stop me.

Fixing my jacket, I sighed. “I have to.”

She shook her head. “No, you don't. I don't want you to go. You're my friend and—”

I whipped around to face her. “Don’t. You don’t have to lie about that anymore.”

Her brow furrowed. “Lie? How am I lying?”

Either she hit her head a lot harder than I thought or she didn’t think I was paying any attention earlier. “You aren’t my friend. Friends don’t lie to one another.” She opened her mouth to argue, but I cut her off. “Were you spending time with me because Niko asked you to guard me?”

She hesitated, which was answer enough. I nodded. “Yeah, I figured that out. I apparently need to learn not to expect everyone to feel the same way I do. I was naïve. I’ll do better from now on.”

Scooping up the discharge papers, I moved to step around her, but she grabbed my arm, shaking her head.

“Anya, I never meant—”

“You told me if I got out to run and not look back. Remember?”

Her eyes searched mine, and she dipped her chin once. I probably didn’t owe her an explanation, but for a little while she was my friend and it hurt to see her so upset.

“This is me following your advice. Thank you for saving me. You shouldn’t let him bully you. You’re tougher than he thinks. Be safe, okay?”

Pulling away from her, I left the room, avoiding eye contact with Niko, who was waiting just outside the door. The nurse was waiting for me and when I handed her the paperwork, she led me to where the taxi was waiting. No security, no one following me, just me going to meet my sister like I’d originally planned. It should’ve felt like a relief, but I felt like I was leaving pieces of me behind and when I finally arrived at Nina’s apartment and she threw her arms around my neck, I finally gave in and let the tears fall.

This was supposed to be a vacation to help my sister get her happy ending. So how did I end up with a broken heart?



“ANYA... Are you sure you don’t want to come with me?”

Staring out the window at the falling snow, I didn’t answer her. She already knew the answer. I hadn’t really wanted to go anywhere since we got back. For a little while, I got away with saying I was struggling to get over the kidnapping. It was true that I had a lot of nightmares and I flinched if a white van drove past me, but that wasn’t why I was avoiding the world.

I’d get over the kidnapping after some time, I was sure. I didn’t think I’d ever get over Niko. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t stop thinking about him. Everything from the way he smelled to the low growl of his voice. It was all seared into my brain and played on repeat, reminding me of what I left behind. A tear slipped down my cheek, but I ignored it. Crying was becoming as normal as breathing to me. The doctors gave me medicine for the nightmares, but there was no cure for a broken heart.

Nina sat on the edge of the bed, taking my hand. She had her own apartment across town, but she came to stay with me when she realized I had stopped leaving the house. I found a new job where I could work from home, so unless I was getting groceries, which was rare because I was never hungry anymore, I stayed here and wallowed.

“Anya... it’s been weeks since Russia.”

Shifting my gaze to her, I studied her carefully. She got over Anton pretty quickly. I eventually summoned the nerve to tell her exactly what happened the day he attacked me and how uncomfortable he made me feel beforehand. She felt awful for not listening to me and for reacting so violently. Khloe had been feeding her lies since she got off the plane and she’d been so stressed about rushing the wedding like Anton asked that she didn’t stop to question it. She vowed to be a better sister, which included staying here to keep me company, even though I told her it wasn’t necessary.

“I’m fine, Nina.”

Shooting me a sour look, she ignored me, running her hands through her hair. She looked contemplative, and she drew in a deep breath before moving, so she sat directly in front of me, cross-legged on the bed. Taking my hands between her own, she squeezed them tightly.

“Have you ever considered that you can’t get over him because you aren’t meant to?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I think you were in love with him. Hell, I think you still are. Maybe you were meant to be together and you aren’t going to get over him. You should call him.”

Shaking my head, I looked out the window again. If I squinted, I could pretend we were back in Russia. It was late and snowing, I could almost imagine it.

“He’s a criminal, Nina. His enemy kidnapped me and was going to rape and torture me to get back at him. Normal people don’t make enemies like that.”

She grimaced. She told me she blamed herself for not going after me at the cafe. She wouldn’t have been able to save me, but no matter how much I reminded her of that, she still felt the same way.

“Okay, yeah, so his life is a little rough. But didn’t you tell me he treated you really well? You had no idea what he did for a living before that day and it never affected your life. You were just happy. Why can’t you go back to that?”

I’d thought about it. Wondering if maybe I could get past it, stick to willful ignorance so I could be with him. I knew I’d never be able to not ask though. I already looked up the meaning of some of his tattoos out of morbid curiosity. It only made things worse. I’d never be able to pretend I didn’t know and even if I still wanted to be with him despite all that, it didn’t really matter. He let me go. He never came to the airport, never called. He didn’t feel the same way, and I wasn’t going to force him to be with me.

“Aren’t you going out with your friends tonight?”

She rolled her eyes. “Nice try. I’m not letting it go that easily.” She paused before speaking again. “Look... his sister called me.”

Frowning, I jerked my attention to her. “What? When?”

She lifted a shoulder. “She’s called a few times. I don’t know how she got my number. It was a little disconcerting at first to get a phone call from Russia. I thought maybe it had something to do with the wedding or whatever, but she wanted to check in and she said she was worried you wouldn’t want to hear from her.” She forced a small smile. “She misses you. And she wants you to call her. Maybe she can shed a little more light on the situation than I can.”

Pulling out her phone, she offered it to me. I wasn’t sure I wanted to talk to Eva. It still stung that she lied about our friendship, but I missed her so much and the opportunity to hear her voice was too much temptation. I pressed the call button before I could chicken out. It rang a few times before she finally answered. The background was noisy, and she was yelling at someone before she spoke to us.

“Oye. There has to be a cure for annoying siblings. Arsenic maybe?”

Nina snorted, and a smile pulled at my lips. “Hi, Eva.”

She paused. “Hey, Anya...”

“How are you?”

She scoffed. “That’s a dumb question. My best friend is half a world away and apparently doesn’t own her own phone because I’ve been trying to find a way to contact you since you left and it’s like you disappeared off the face of the earth. Do you not even have Facebook?”

The ever present ache in my chest since I left Russia eased a little listening to her carp at me.

“No. I never saw the point. I don’t have any friends.”

“You have a friend, Anya. I know Nikolai asked me to watch over you, but that was after we already met. I told you I liked you before he ever asked me. I just... He never let me do

anything and he was finally giving me a job and treating me like an adult. It meant a lot and I couldn't pass it up. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Nina handed me a tissue. I hadn't realized I'd started crying until she did and I wiped at my face roughly. I could understand her side of it. I'd seen the way he treated her, and she told me stories.

"I just wish you would've told me." I was trying to stand up for myself more. Usually the only person I could do that with was Nina, but I wasn't afraid to talk to Eva and she didn't get mad at me. She did sigh heavily.

"Yeah, well, I suck a little bit. Then again, so does your sister."

"Hey!" Nina scowled at the phone.

"What? You expect me to defend you? I've been asking to talk to Anya for weeks and you kept putting me off."

I thought she'd bring up Anton, but Eva never mentioned it, arguing with Nina about letting her talk to me. Nina said she didn't want to bother me while I was still healing and she didn't think I was ready to hear from her while Eva said maybe I'd be ready earlier if she let her talk to me. Their argument made me laugh, and the noise was so foreign to me that I burst into tears, burying my face against my knees.

"Hey, what's wrong with her?" Eva demanded.

Nina sighed. "She's still not over your brother, and she won't listen to me about calling him."

Eva snorted. "Hey, that makes two of you. Pretty sure Nikolai is depressed. I would suggest a therapist, but he might actually kill me."

My brow furrowed, and I lifted my head, sniffing. "If he's upset, it's not about me. He was just fooling around."

When Eva started laughing, I sat up, confused.

"New tactic. You've got her attention, but you're gonna piss her off if you keep laughing at her," Nina interjected.

Eva sobered, though she was still chuckling to herself. “Sorry. Just... Anya, I’ve seen my brother with other women. He never acted the way he did with you with anyone else. He’s beyond in love with you. I’m pretty sure he wanted to marry you, which is why it pissed him off so much when our mama went all snob bitch on you.”

“But... He let me go. He never said anything or argued. He bought the plane tickets for us to leave!”

She made an irritated noise. “That’s because he’s a man and men are stupid. But also because he’s in love with you and you got hurt because of him. He’s punishing himself. And everyone around him by being a huge asshole and not going to talk to you. He knows I call Nina, and he’s almost desperate for any news about you whenever I hang up. Believe me, that’s not fooling around. He loves you.”

My heart hammered in my chest, and I jerked my gaze to Nina. She smiled softly. “I told you. You aren’t meant to be apart.”

“But– Wha– I–” I was at a loss for words, shaking my head. It was everything I wanted to hear since the day I left. It just wasn’t coming from the right person. If Niko was the one saying all this, I’d probably throw myself at him. Nina was right. I was still in love with him. I just didn’t know what to do about it.

Like she knew what I was struggling with, Eva came to my rescue. “Do you love him?”

“Y-Yes...”

“So then, what are you waiting for? Get on a damn plane!”

Launching myself off the bed, I looked around helplessly. I didn’t know where to start or what to do. All I knew was I wanted Niko back and, for once in my life, I was going to be brave and tell him how I felt. For once, I wasn’t going to be the shy, quiet one. It was my turn for an adventure and I was going to fight for the man I love.

NIKO

I SHOULDN'T BE HERE. I told her I'd let her go. I was a cruel man for lying, but I felt like I couldn't breathe without her. It was distracting and no amount of work could keep my mind off her. I was an idiot to let her go. I should've kept her with me. Surely her hating me while being by my side was better than this.

I was standing down the block from her apartment, staring at the lit up window. For a little while, I could see her sitting in front of it and I could almost imagine she was looking at me. But then she hurried off, and she hadn't been back since. Crossing the street, I shoved my hands into my pockets as I headed towards her home. It was good that I told my men to leave. If they saw me groveling like I planned on doing, they'd lose their respect for me, if they hadn't already while watching me fly halfway across the world to get the woman who left me back. There was no end to how pathetic I was thanks to her.

A few hundred feet from her apartment, the door burst open, and I came to a halt, watching as Anya stumbled down the stairs, dragging a bag behind her. Her sister followed, holding a phone up between them. I couldn't hear the voice on the line, but Anya nodded and spun around, hugging her sister tightly before a taxi pulled up next to her. The driver helped her load her luggage, and it wasn't until she was sliding into the back seat that I realized I was standing there staring instead of calling out her name.

The taxi door slammed shut right as I arrived and she pulled away, disappearing from my life for the second time. I

truly was an idiot.

“Uh... Eva? Why's your brother here?”

Glancing over my shoulder, I frowned at Anya's sister. She looked stunned, her eyes wide, and I heard my sister's voice coming from her phone.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“He's standing right in front of me! Did you seriously not check to see if he was home before sending Anya to the airport?”

My brow furrowed. “The airport? Where is she going?”

“Oh shit, he really is there,” Eva commented. I wanted to throttle her, but she had the luck of being several thousand miles away from me and I was more focused on Anya. I'd deal with her later.

Anya's sister sighed. “She's going to Russia.”

That didn't make any sense. My silence spoke volumes, though, because she rolled her eyes. “To find you! To get you back. Seriously, your sister wasn't lying when she said you were an idiot.”

I shot her a dirty look. “Call her back.”

She shook her head. “Anya doesn't have her phone on her. She said she'd get a new one in Russia.”

“She's traveling alone... without a phone?”

Anya's sister pursed her lips, giving me a flat look. “She won't be traveling alone if you get your ass moving.”

I seriously didn't like this woman.

“Oh man, I love you,” Eva called. Brat.

Spinning around, I searched the street, hailing a taxi. I would've called Ivan to get me, but Anya already had a lead on me and I needed to catch up with her. She shouldn't be traveling by herself. When will she ever learn?

“The only ticket we could find was on Etihad airlines. Her flight leaves in three hours. Better hurry if you want to catch

her,” Anya’s sister called.

Dropping into the taxi, I waved, barking at the driver to take me to the airport. He sped off, and I put my phone to my ear, ignoring the dirty look he was giving me in the mirror.

“Boss?”

“Meet me at the airport. She’s headed there now.”

Ivan sounded confused. “What for?”

A slow smile spread across my face. “She’s going home.”

Thanks to some luck with traffic, I managed to catch up with her. When I stepped into the airport, she was at the airline ticket counter, bouncing on her toes as the worker weighed and tagged her luggage. I froze when I saw her. I didn’t realize just how much I missed her until I saw her again. She looked thinner, and she had dark circles under her eyes, but she was still gorgeous and I wanted to pull her into my arms and never let go. I screwed this up too many times before, though. Now that I was behind her, I decided to wait to approach her. I had a better idea instead.

Once she stepped away from the counter and headed towards security, I went to the first class line. An attendant appeared immediately, beaming at me.

“Checking in?”

Shaking my head, I handed her my passport and my credit card. “The flight of the woman who just checked in, I need to be on it.”

Her brow furrowed, but when she flipped open my passport, her face paled and she started to stammer, pointing at the attendant who had helped Anya.

“I-I’ll check which flight.”

Nodding, I waited impatiently, drumming my fingers on the desk. Anya’s sister said we had some time, but I didn’t like not being next to her. I wanted to watch over her to make sure she was safe.

The one who'd helped Anya switched with her friend, approaching me cautiously. "I apologize, Mr. Romanov, but the seats are full. The woman got the last one."

My brow furrowed. "Even first class?" I found that highly unlikely.

She turned toward the computer, typing something before nodding to me. "There are some first-class seats available, but the woman bought a coach seat. There isn't one available near her."

Americans are idiots. "So move her."

She hurried to do as I asked and my gaze roamed while I waited, landing on a pamphlet on the counter. Plucking it from its stand, I looked it over with a frown.

"Alright, Mr. Romanov, I've moved Miss Richardson to first class and set you up next to her. Is there anything else I can help you with?" She handed me my passport and ticket. I glanced at her and went back to the pamphlet before handing it to her.

"Is this still available?"

Her eyebrows shot up. "Yes, sir, it is but..."

"But what?"

She looked uncomfortable. "Sir, the price for that—"

Waving her away, I shook my head. "It's fine. I want us to move there after the flight begins."

At her confused look, I sighed. My patience was waning, but maybe if I explained, they would assist me. "I want to propose to my girlfriend. We met on a plane. And once she says yes, I want us to be moved there. Can you help me with that?"

Understanding overtook her face, and she beamed at me. "Absolutely, sir. Let me call in the caretakers. They'll start setting things up for you."

Finally.



Anya

“I don’t understand. I didn’t ask for an upgrade.”

The desk attendant had a weird look on her face, and her eyes kept darting away from me. She nodded quickly, forcing a smile.

“Yes, we understand that. However, since your ticket was bought last minute, we had a seating issue, and we moved you to first class. It won’t cost you any extra. Consider it an apology for the inconvenience.”

My brow furrowed. I didn’t really see any inconvenience. If anything, I was the one inconveniencing them by buying a ticket at the last minute and causing issues for them. It cost me most of my savings, but the next flight wasn’t for a few days and I couldn’t wait that long.

“Would you like to go to the first-class lounge? We’ll be boarding in about twenty minutes, but you’re welcome to relax and—”

The flight attendant next to her elbowed her in the side before smiling at me. “The first-class lounge is full, but I’d be happy to bring you anything you need out here. Did you have a carry on? I can bring it onto the plane for you.”

Swallowing hard, I shook my head. Any time anyone used the word plane, a wave of nausea swept over me. I planned on handling this flight the same way I handled the last one, with copious amounts of alcohol. It was going to be expensive this flight. They don’t serve free alcohol in coach, but apparently luck was on my side because just like my first flight to Russia, I got bumped up to first class without even asking for it.

I did a quick scan of the surrounding crowd. I didn’t know why I was looking for him. I knew he wasn’t here, but I wanted him to be the reason I got upgraded. I missed him so much it hurt, and I hated flying without him. It was terrifying, and he was the only person who made me feel better.

There was some kind of delay, so the wait was a little longer than expected, but eventually they called first class and one of the flight attendants waved me over.

“Are you ready to board?”

Grimacing, I shook my head. “Can— Can I wait until everyone else gets on? I... I really don’t like planes.”

She smiled softly. “I get that. I used to hate flying. You get used to it after a while. Tell you what, how about I bring you to your seat and get you something to drink to take the edge off before we get moving? It’ll help more than standing around here watching everyone board.”

Nodding uneasily, I glanced between her and the passageway to the plane until she took my arm gently and led the way. I clung to her, apologizing repeatedly, but she just smiled and nodded until she could deposit me into my seat right up front. There was someone sitting next to me but they were reading the paper and I was too nervous to pay much attention to them. The flight attendant came back a minute later, handing me a glass of champagne. I tipped it back quickly, grimacing at the bubbles.

The flight attendant looked stunned. She hadn’t even had time to walk away yet. Blushing, I handed the glass back to her. “Can I have something a little stronger, please?”

Pressing her lips together to hide her smile, she nodded. “I’ll be right back with your drink.”

An older woman on the seat across the aisle from me smiled sympathetically. “Nervous flier?”

I nodded quickly, fighting with the seatbelt. They were still boarding, I didn’t need it on yet, but it made me feel better. Unless, of course, we burst into flames and I got stuck and couldn’t get off the plane because I decided to fasten my seatbelt early.

I was starting to hyperventilate, looking around helplessly for the flight attendant. The older woman reached across the aisle, patting my hand gently. “I used to be afraid, too. It got

easier when I met my Darren. He always made me feel better. You got a man, honey?”

Biting my lip, I latched on to the conversation with her, just for the distraction. Licking my lips, I clutched the seatbelt tightly, ready to unhook it and bolt at a moment’s notice.

“I, uh... I’m not sure. We... We split up for a bit. It was my fault. Something happened, and I got scared, but... I really miss him.”

The man next to me growled, and I winced. I was being too loud and was probably annoying everyone in a ten-foot vicinity. I really didn’t belong up here. I wasn’t classy enough. Swallowing hard, I attempted to close my eyes, gripping the armrests tightly.

“Miss? I made you another drink.”

My eyes flew open, and I looked up at her gratefully. She handed me the drink with a hot towel, offering me a smile.

“Let me know if you need anything else. I won’t be far.”

My hands trembled as I took a drink. I wasn’t familiar with it, which wasn’t surprising, but it did have vodka in it and I choked out a laugh. Everything about this trip was reminding me of Niko. All that was missing was him.

BETWEEN SUCKING down my drink and the old woman trying to distract me, I made it until the doors closed before panicking. I couldn't do this. I thought I could, but I flew home last time on Niko's private jet and almost inhaled an entire bottle of vodka to do it. I let out brokenhearted sobs between vomiting the next day. On this flight, the flight attendant was a little more stingy. She only supplied me with the two drinks and said she'd bring me another one after take off. Take off was the hardest part and with the amount of panic coursing through my system, I felt stone cold sober.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I whimpered as we taxied to the runway. My stomach turned over and my breathing was too fast, making me incredibly dizzy. We stopped at the end of the taxiway and a sob ripped out of me, irritating my neighbor again. He growled low, but instead of asking me to be quiet, he reached past the divider and grabbed my hand.

“Just breathe.”

Squeezing his hand tightly, I tried to do as he asked. I kept my eyes closed, pretending I wasn't imagining that I heard Niko's voice when my neighbor told me to breathe. Like the first time we flew, he held my hand and whispered in a calm tone about breathing in and out.

“You're okay, malyshka. Just breathe.”

My eyes flew open. That was a little more real than I'd expected. Either my memory was better than I thought or—

Whipping my head to the side, I leaned enough to see past the divider, my heart stuttering. I hadn't imagined it. He was right there, holding my hand and smiling softly at me, his thumb rubbing across my knuckles soothingly.

“Niko?”

It came out breathless and quiet and tears welled in my eyes. He reached for me without hesitation, his hand sliding into my hair as he kissed me roughly. The terror forgotten, I threw my arms around his neck the best I could, cursing the divider between us. I didn't think I could spend the entire flight being this close to him without truly being in his arms.

Our kisses turned desperate, both of us trying to get as close as possible without getting out of our seats. The fasten seatbelt sign was still on, and no matter how tightly I clung to him, we couldn't get any closer. I didn't even feel the plane lifting off the ground, I was so distracted by him.

“What are you doing here?” I closed my eyes as he brushed kisses over my face, savoring it.

“I came for you.”

My brow furrowed, and I pulled away a little. “But how—”

A grin pulled at his lips. “I showed up at your apartment right as your taxi pulled away. Our sisters berated me until I could follow you here.”

My eyes went wide. “You're the one who upgraded me.”

He chuckled. “Of course I did. You don't belong back there. You belong up here with me.”

Tears spilled over my cheeks, but for the first time in weeks, it was from joy, not from heartache. “Say that again.”

The fasten seatbelt sign turned off, and he was out of his seat in an instant, coming around to my side and kneeling in front of me. Cupping my neck, he drew me closer, his kiss so rough it stole my breath away. When he pulled back, I was panting, holding the lapels of his suit jacket to make sure he didn't leave again.

“You belong with me, Anya. I am a selfish man and I cannot let you go. I—”

“I love you, Niko.” He froze, staring at me as I choked on a sob. “I love you. I’m sorry I left. I got scared. I’m still scared. But I love you too much to stay away.”

“Anya...”

Yanking off my seatbelt, I threw my arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. He didn’t hesitate to wrap his arms around me, hugging me so tightly I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t complain. I felt safe and warm for the first time in weeks, and I never wanted to pull away.

Niko pulled away first, pressing his forehead against mine, his big palm pressed against my cheek.

“You are everything to me, Anya. I swear on my life, I’ll keep you safe.”

I couldn’t stop crying and kissing him. Not until he said something I wasn’t expecting.

“Marry me, Anya.”

My breath caught in my throat and my eyes flew open. I hadn’t even realized I closed them, but when I finally looked at him, he held a ring in his hands and his eyes held an intense vulnerability I’d never seen on him before. So sweet and loving, everything I remembered and missed more than anything.

When I threw myself at him, it caught him off guard and we both tumbled to the floor of the aisle.

“Yes!”

I heard him suck in a breath before wrapping himself around me and holding me against him. Over my quiet sobs, I heard the entire first-class cabin clapping and my face flushed, but I refused to move away from him. He eventually scooped me up, sitting in my vacated seat with me in his lap, whispering sweet nothings in Russian in my ear.

“Mr. Romanov, are you ready?”

He hummed his acknowledgement to whatever they were talking about, but he didn't release me. He shifted me, dragging my left hand from his neck so he could put the ring on my finger. Cupping his face, I kissed him over and over, making him chuckle.

“Come on, lyubimaya moya, I set something up for us.”

Scooping me into his arms, he stood. He had to set me on my feet a moment later, the entrance to the little suites too small for him to carry me through. It made me laugh, especially when I saw the grumpy look on his face. Pulling me against his chest, he covered my eyes and walked me forward.

“Niko... Where are we going?”

“It's a surprise. Just trust me.”

Trusting a Russian criminal seemed like a study in contradictions, but I still did. I held his wrists to keep my balance as he slowly walked us to wherever he was leading me.

“Here we are. I've set up the drinks and you can press this button here if you need anything at all.”

“Here? Where's here? Niko, what are we doing?”

Nipping my earlobe, he released me and nudged me forward. Opening my eyes, I looked around with a frown, but I lit up when I saw where he brought us. It was like the single suites in first class, only this one was a double. I could sit next to him without anything in between us. There was a shared TV and a little foot stool and when I turned around, he was closing the door behind him. It gave us privacy, and it was absolutely perfect.

When he stepped up to me, he ran his knuckles down my cheek, a slight frown on his face. “I would've brought you here sooner, but I didn't want to ruin the surprise. I thought it would be easier since you've flown a few times now.”

He was so sweet and I'd willingly deal with a thousand plane rides as long as he was beside me. Not liking the frown on his face, I decided to show him how much I appreciated him, yanking his tie to drag him closer to me and fusing my

mouth to his. I wasn't normally so aggressive and never in the lead position, but we sank into it and I wasn't going to let nerves get the best of me. My tongue brushed against his bottom lip and he groaned, crushing me against him as his tongue dueled with mine.

This was getting very steamy very quickly and while there was a door between us and the rest of first class, the wall didn't go all the way up to the ceiling, so there wasn't complete privacy. I'd make do if I had to, I missed him too much to keep my hands to myself, but it put me on edge a little and I was too focused on listening to make sure no one was walking by.

“Lyubimaya moya, there is more to this surprise. I—”

I didn't need more surprises from him. I just needed him. Trying to express it without words, I slid my hand between us, rubbing his erection. He stiffened, and I was a little worried he didn't like me being so forward, but that worry was wiped out completely a second later when he shoved me up against the wall, his kisses turning rough and demanding as he grabbed my leg and wrapped it around his hip so he could grind himself against me.

I was so caught up in what we were doing, whimpering when he pulled me off the ground and I crossed my ankles behind his back, I didn't notice him opening a door and walking us backwards until we tipped over and landed on something soft. Gasping, I ripped my mouth from his, looking around.

“Is this a bedroom?”

His grin was wicked. “Yes.”

The little room was barely big enough for the double bed with a small tv attached to the wall at the foot of the bed, but the door closed and we were all alone and it was absolutely perfect. Still, I couldn't help but tease him a little, narrowing my eyes at him.

“That was a little presumptuous, wasn't it?”

Dipping his head, he ran his tongue up my neck, making me gasp and shiver. “No. You are afraid of planes. I am going to make sure you have no fear the entire flight back.”

Arching against him, I sighed. “Isn’t there a layover for this flight?” It was what I was dreading the most, adding another take off and landing to an already terrifying trip.

He was busy kissing and nipping my neck and I thought maybe he wouldn’t answer me, but when his lips brushed against my ear, I shivered. “My jet will be waiting for us. A quick plane change and we will be safely ensconced in another bed. You won’t even notice us taking off.”

Biting my lip, I closed my eyes, focusing on the feel of him. I didn’t want to ruin the mood by arguing with him. The jet had been ten times more terrifying than the bigger planes because it felt like you could see and feel absolutely everything. I got so drunk I passed out to avoid it. I got the feeling he’d see it as a challenge if I argued with him, though, so I just let him believe it. There was nothing more sexy than a confident man, anyway.

NIKO

I COULD TELL she didn't fully believe me. There was tension in her body and her ardor cooled a little. I decided the best way to convince her would be to give her a demonstration. I took my time stripping her clothes away, kissing every inch of skin I exposed. I'd been dreaming of her body since she left and I was eager to reacquaint myself. She whimpered, biting her lip as she writhed beneath me.

“Niko... please...”

I growled, her begging setting me on fire. I would punish her later for trying to rush me, but for now, I drew her erect nipple into my mouth, her cries of pleasure washing over me.

“Such a good girl,” I crooned, switching sides. No longer content to let me explore alone, she set to undressing me. I allowed it, enjoying how often she had to pause because I was distracting her with my mouth on her breasts. She'd managed to get my shirt off, but her attention was drawn away and her hips lifted, silently begging for me to go faster. I wouldn't be rushed, not when I hadn't been able to touch her in so long. Not until I got my fill and—

Her hand slipped between us, but instead of rubbing me like she had earlier, she unbuttoned my slacks and slid her hand inside, wrapping around my erection. She was becoming braver, no longer content to lie back and let me have my way with her. Grunting, I nipped at her in punishment, but it did nothing to dissuade her other than make her moan. She began to pump me, shattering my focus and my patience right along

with it. Thrusting into her palm, I shoved the slacks down and grabbed her calves, yanking her beneath me. She gasped and her grip tightened, making me groan.

“Anya... You try my patience...”

Her thumb swiped over the head and my hips jerked of their own accord. Minx.

“I don’t want your patience. I want your cock.” It was barely a whisper and her face was bright red at her first attempt at dirty talk, but it did its job. I launched myself at her, knocking her hand away and repositioning myself. When I pushed inside her, I nearly lost my mind. I forgot how tight she was, how well her body molded around mine. All thoughts of taking things slowly disappeared, and I snapped my hips, taking pleasure from her body.

Her nails dug into my back, spurring me on as she gasped and moaned. It was becoming very difficult to focus on her pleasure, and I soon found myself bucking into her with abandon, lost in the feel of her.

“So fucking wet. You belong to me. I will never let you go again.”

Each whisper made her gasp and thrust her hips up. My sweet Anya liked it when I spoke Russian to her, moaning loudly when I started telling her how she felt around my cock. It was unlikely that the room was soundproof, but neither one of us cared. I felt the lightning crawling up my spine, my balls tightening as I drew closer to release. She was close as well, her legs tightening and her breath stuttering both signs I remembered well to announce her oncoming climax. Her head tipped back, her mouth falling open, and I watched in fascination as it swept through her, making her cry out my name. Her body pulsed around my cock, dragging me over the edge with her. Growling, I pressed my face against her neck, bucking my hips as I rode out the waves of pleasure.

When I collapsed on top of her, her arms wrapped around my head, settling me against her breast as we both fought for breath. I pressed small kisses wherever I could reach, smiling when she hugged me tighter.

“YA lyublyu tebya, Anya.”

She sucked in a breath and when I lifted my head, she was crying again, big tears slipping into her hair as she lay beneath me. It would worry me if she wasn't smiling at me, pulling me closer for a kiss. This woman, this sweet and caring woman, somehow her path ended up colliding with mine. I would cherish her and protect her and when she walked down that aisle, I would make her a queen. She deserved nothing less. I was a cruel and selfish man to keep such a pure and perfect woman in my world, but her light would be my beacon in the dark and in thanks for that, I would let her rule the world.



IT TOOK GIVING her several orgasms before I could draw myself away, and only because she passed out after the last round. I would be smug about it if she hadn't managed to drag me over the edge with her every damn time. The only reason I was still awake was because Ivan messaged me about an update, and I needed to check in with him.

Sliding carefully out of bed, I pulled on my slacks. I didn't bother with anything else. After the first few rounds, I realized Anya was as willing to let me leave the bed as I was to let her. She wouldn't allow me to stray for long, even if I wanted to. Shutting the door to the bedroom, I sat on the two-seater in the main area and scrubbed my hands over my face, willing my brain to function. I didn't sleep well after Anya left and after that much wild activity, all I could think of was going to sleep beside her.

Leaning, I slid the door to the Residence open, glaring at him. “This better be fucking good.”

His eyebrow lifted, a grin pulling at his lips. “You look tired.”

“Fuck you.”

Chuckling, he leaned against the doorway. “You've got someone waiting for you. I'm sure she can handle that.”

A grin crossed my face before I could stop it, and he shot me a smug look. Asshole.

“What the fuck do you want?”

“We found him.”

My eyes narrowed. “Elaborate.”

His grin was devilish, the promise of blood in his smile. “He is in custody at the old house.”

Now that was worth interrupting me for. We found out pretty quickly who was responsible for Anya and Eva’s kidnapping. Apparently, Babin’s minor crime lord father took issue with me threatening his son and decided to take revenge. When Anya and Eva escaped, he and his son went into hiding. We’d been eradicating the world of his family line, but no one thus far had been able to tell us where they were. The little shit was less a concern than his father, who apparently had been hiding a few allies in his back pocket.

“The son?”

Ivan made an irritated noise. “Nothing yet, but I’m sure his father will be able to tell us more.”

I hummed my acknowledgement, sitting back with my arms crossed. It would make sense that they would split up if they felt we were getting too close. I wanted both of them, though. I wanted to make Leonid suffer longer by watching his only son being tortured right in front of him. I learned of his plan to pass Anya around his men and give her back to me broken and I would draw out his suffering for as long as possible for even thinking it.

The door to the bedroom cracked open and Anya peeked out, frowning and wrapped only in a sheet. She relaxed when she saw me and when I beckoned her, she came without question, cuddling into my lap.

“You left,” she pouted.

“Ivan had information for me. I will come back to bed in a moment.”

She didn't seem inclined to leave me, laying her head on my shoulder, so I held her while discussing our other little interloper. Bortnik has been a thorn in my side, but less obnoxious after I killed half his family. He stopped messing with my product for now, but I was not a forgiving man and once I handled Babin and his spoiled seed, I'd be coming for him next. Ilya was keeping an eye on him for now.

"Is Ilya okay?"

Pausing, I glanced down at her. I didn't think she'd been listening. I had assumed she'd want to remain ignorant of most of my dealings, but she was awake and watching us and while her Russian wasn't perfect, it was better than I expected and she probably understood us just fine.

Ivan nodded. "He's well. Spent some time in the hospital, but he was released with a clean bill of health and a mighty chip on his shoulder. He looks forward to payback."

She made a face. "I didn't need to know that part."

Ivan chuckled. "My apologies. He also looks forward to a vacation by returning to your security detail. He says he prefers the quiet and as long as Eva isn't causing trouble, you are easier to deal with than Romanov."

Rolling my eyes, I scowled at him. "He doesn't get to decide that, I do. And for that, he can watch Eva instead."

He grinned, and I got the feeling he threw Ilya under the bus on purpose to punish him for something. Those idiots were always in competition and were sore losers. I didn't mind it as long as it didn't affect their work.

"I'd like Ilya back, though. He isn't overbearing, and he listens to my requests without making me feel like a burden," Anya whispered, frowning.

Ivan's face fell and I couldn't help barking out a laugh. "Sorry, old friend. It is her security, she gets a say in the matter. Looks like you will have to find a different way to punish him."

A calculative look crossed his face before he looked at Anya. "Eva wants to go back to protecting you, too. She has

been texting me non-stop to see if I could convince your fiancé.”

Anya beamed at him, and I chuckled to myself. I’d already planned on giving Anya to Eva. She was the one who saved her, proving herself ten times over. I couldn’t argue her skill anymore. Little sister or not, she did only what was best in getting Anya to safety, she called when she needed help, and she was calm under pressure. She was an excellent bodyguard. The only problem now would be that I’d have to arm her, and I wasn’t looking forward to that.

A flight attendant stepped up to us, a pleasant smile on her face. “Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Romanov. I have your meal ready. Would you like me to set it up for you?”

I nodded, smirking as Anya flushed at the reference to her being my wife. The flight attendant hustled away and Ivan watched her go, his eyes on her ass until Anya threw the remote at him. It smacked him in the chest and his eyebrows shot up as he picked it up off the ground. She scowled at him.

“She has eyes, you know.”

He lifted a shoulder. “Not on her backside, she doesn’t.”

Shaking my head, I took the remote from him. “Don’t piss her off or your next security detail will be my mother.”

He shuddered and stepped back. “I’ll be in my seat. I’ll update you.”

“Only if it’s important,” I growled. “I have better things to do than chat with you.”

Anya brushed her lips against my neck, and I grinned. Definitely better things I could be doing right now. Namely, seeing if I could make her come before the flight attendant got back. Holding her against my chest, I headed for the bedroom. She seemed to have a similar idea because when I set her on her feet, she let the sheet drop to the ground and pressed herself against me with a smile. Much, much better things I could do right now.

ANYA

THEY WOULDN'T LET us stay in bed for landing. I felt okay as long as I was with Niko, but he wasn't happy about it. He kept grumbling to himself and glaring at the flight attendants when they came to check to make sure we were in our seats. Since there was no divider between us, I stayed cuddled up against his side and when we started to descend, he distracted me with a kiss so hot I was panting by the time we touched down. We'd been all over each other since the flight started and still I couldn't get enough of him. Being apart for weeks did a number on me.

He wasn't lying when he said the jet would be waiting for us. We got in a fancy car that drove us down the tarmac to where the smaller planes were and there was even a red carpet to walk on before getting on the plane. When I shot Niko a look, he grinned at me, offering me his arm like a gentleman. Shaking my head, I took it and let him lead me onto the tiny terrifying plane.

He stopped only long enough to greet the pilot and tell the flight attendant not to disturb us unless he called for them before leading me straight to the back of the plane. I hadn't gone in here last time, too busy clinging to the bottle of vodka and crying on Nina to explore. It wasn't a huge bed, probably only a little bigger than the one on the last plane, but the space was bigger. There was a little dresser and its own attached bathroom with a shower in it.

“Why would you need to shower on a plane?”

After shutting the door behind us, he wrapped his arms around me, resting his chin on top of my head. “I sometimes travel a lot and finding the time to get clean got to be a complication I didn’t care for. I’ll show it to you once we take off.”

Shuddering, I shook my head. “No, thank you. If we got into a crash, we’d be naked and wet in the winter and that would make things so much worse.”

He chuckled. “You have an overactive imagination, lyubimaya moya. You are in no danger. Anatoly has been flying for many years and he has never had an issue.”

They started the engine, and unease spread through me. “Yes, well, now that you’ve said it, this is when we’re going to have a problem. Can’t we just take the train or something?”

Nipping at my neck, he spun me in his arms, brushing the hair away from my face. I clung to him, my stomach flipping when the door to the plane slammed closed. To his credit, he never got annoyed with me, even when I was starting to panic. He scooped me up and brought me to bed and decided the best way to distract me through take off was with his head between my thighs. It worked better than I thought it would, and when he lifted his head as we leveled out, he looked smug. Sexy jerk.

He didn’t manage to convince me to get into the shower, but the flight wasn’t as long as the first one, and I used his own tactics against him to keep him in bed with me. I’d never been on top before, but given the look on his face, he seemed to enjoy it. He looked fierce with his teeth bared and his muscles tense, but when he came, his eyes rolled back and he growled, bucking underneath me and dragging out my own climax until I collapsed on top of him.

I fell asleep again about halfway through, and this time he stayed in bed with me. He didn’t wake me until we’d already landed, brushing kisses along my shoulder and whispering in my ear.

“Time to wake up. We’re home.”

Sighing, I reached behind me, running my fingers through his hair. “From now on, I’m only flying with you.”

I felt him smile against me. “I can accommodate that, malyshka.”

The term made me stiffen and he must’ve noticed because he leaned over me with a frown, searching my face.

“What’s wrong?”

I shook my head, not wanting to talk about it, but he guided my face back to his and raised his eyebrows, giving me an expectant look. Swallowing hard, I rolled over and buried my face against him.

“When I was taken, the man who tried to hurt me called me that. It made me feel special when you said it, but now...”

His arms wrapped tightly around me, settling the trembles that started any time I thought about that day. That man ruined the nickname Niko always used for me and I hated him for it. I wasn’t sure if he was still alive or not, when I woke up Eva had dragged me away before I could look around, but I secretly hoped he was dead. He wasn’t going to hesitate to hurt me, I wouldn’t be sad if someone hurt him first.

“You have no idea how much I regret that day... I should have done more to protect you.”

Frowning, I shifted back so I could look at him. “Unless you plan on locking me away for the rest of our lives, I don’t see how you could’ve done more. We were at a cafe in broad daylight. That doesn’t happen often in Russia, does it?”

His brow furrowed. “Not to me, it doesn’t. I will be making a statement with the men who took you. If there were any doubts on what I would do to protect you, that will be made clear very soon.”

My heart tightened, and I cuddled closer. “Is... Is he still out there?”

“No, lyubimaya moya. That was the news that Ivan brought me on the first flight. We have him now and his son will be brought in soon enough. You are safe, I promise.”

I didn't ever ask the name of the man who took me and I didn't know what his son had to do with it, but I didn't really want to know. I might be morbidly curious about most things, but that day needed to stay buried. Niko could handle it however it suited him, and I would pretend it didn't happen and enjoy my life with him. Including planning my own wedding. Nina was going to freak out when I told her.

“Oh, can I pick up a phone soon? I want to call Nina, but I couldn't afford an international plan on the one back home.”

Dragging me out of bed, he helped me get dressed. “I already have one being picked up for you. It will be waiting for you at home.”

My brow furrowed. “Oh, you didn't have to pay for it, I—”

He cut me off with a kiss, nipping at my bottom lip. “I take great pleasure in spoiling you, *krasivaya*. You will have to get used to it.”

“*Krasivaya?*”

He hummed, pulling me against his chest. “Beautiful. There is no end to the number of endearments I have for you. If he ruined one, I will use another. Or several others just because I enjoy the blush on your face whenever I do.”

Ducking my head to hide my smile, I cuddled against him. If he wanted to experiment with nicknames, I didn't mind. I loved when he spoke Russian to me, and the terms of endearment made my heart flutter.

After getting dressed, we made our way home. Niko was unaffected by the cold, but I was shivering against him. In the past few weeks, it'd gotten even colder in Russia and I wasn't prepared for it. It didn't get this cold in New York. He kept me warm during the drive, but every time we had to go back outside, it felt like all the warmth was sucked out of me and I was shivering again in no time.

When we got inside, I was tackled so hard I toppled over and hit the ground. She was nice enough to protect my head, so I didn't get hurt, but it did surprise me.

“God damnit, Eva!”

She ignored Niko's fury, lifting up enough to beam at me. "Welcome home."

Niko wasn't the only one I left behind when I ran away from Russia. Eva was my friend, and I missed her more than words could convey. I had never had that kind of friendship before and I cried a lot about it. Throwing my arms around her neck, I hugged her tightly. We were both dragged off the floor by Niko, who tucked me against his side and glared at her. She paid him no mind and immediately started talking.

"How was the flight? I didn't know he would be coming to you or I would've suggested waiting so you could just take the jet home. Did he find you in the airport like one of those cheesy movies?"

When I shook my head, her face fell, and she shot Niko a dirty look. "You lazy old man. You couldn't be bothered to make your reunion romantic? I bet you made her do all the work because you're too good to—"

To end her tirade and spare her from Niko's ever growing wrath, I flashed her the ring. She stopped mid-sentence and her eyes went wide, a huge grin overtaking her face.

"No way! When? How? Tell me everything!"

Niko made an irritated sound. "Later. We have been traveling and we are tired. Why are you here?"

She scowled at him. "I'm here because my friend just flew in from another country. Oh, I got this for you." She pulled a new phone out of her pocket, handing it to me. "It's got an international number, so you can call your sister."

Doing the math, I shook my head. "I'll call her later. She should still be asleep right now."

She nodded. "Well, at least send her a message to let her know you're alive. She's going to freak out when she sees that thing. Is it big enough? You could land a plane on it."

Laughing, I glanced at the ring Niko gave me. It was a massive, radiant cut diamond on a thin band that sparkled no matter what lighting I was in. It was over the top, but after seeing Niko's lifestyle, I wasn't overly surprised by it.

Eva frowned, taking my hand. “Seriously, you could lay someone out with that thing.”

Niko snorted. “Good, one more layer of protection. Go away, Eva. I’m taking my fiancée upstairs.”

Warmth spread through me and when I looked over my shoulder at him, he grinned at me, kissing my temple.

Eva scoffed. “Smooth.”

He shot her a look. “Go before I decide to change my mind about you being Anya’s security.”

Her face lit up. “Seriously?”

He nodded. “You saved her life once already. I trust you. To a point, anyway. Ilya will still be joining you. Go meet with him and discuss the logistics.”

With a quick hug and a kiss to my cheek, she darted off. Niko used her distraction to pull me away, heading upstairs and to his room. Instead of pushing for more sex, he stripped us both and climbed into bed, wrapping himself around me.

“Sleep, dorogaya. We will start talking about the wedding in the morning.”

He knew just what to say to make me smile.

NIKO

I MADE Anya promise to stay home for the time being. Until Babin's idiot son was caught, I didn't want her to stray from home without me. I would be happy to bring her to wherever she wanted to go once I was through with my work. There was the hope that after meeting with Babin today, I'd be able to find his piece of shit son and the threat would be over. I had no issues dragging it out as long as possible to get him to start talking.

I didn't bring my work home with me. Leonid was being kept in an abandoned house outside the city and because I didn't trust him not to have tricks, he had a full security team watching him. When I arrived, they were all where they were supposed to be and it settled me a little. Stepping out of the car, I looked around for Ivan. He came straight here after we landed. He was in charge of watching the dipshit while I was taking care of Anya.

He was standing by the door smoking a cigarette, a relaxed look on his face telling me nothing had changed since he updated me on the plane. When I stepped up to him, he tossed the cigarette and opened the door for me, following me inside to the basement where Babin was waiting.

There was no heat in the building and Babin wasn't dressed for the weather. They must've found him while he was sleeping because he wore silk pajamas and his feet were bare. His lips were tinted blue, and he was shivering. A small glimpse into what Anya went through while escaping his son the first time. His head leaned against his shoulder, an attempt

to get comfortable for a rest while he was tied to a chair. Without a word, I put my hand out and Ivan handed me his lighter. The clicking woke Babin, but too slowly. I held it under his nose, lighting his stupid mustache on fire and enjoying his screams as it burned off his face.

“You’re awake. Good.”

He panted heavily and shot me a dirty look. “You won’t get away with this.”

Pursing my lips, I shot him a bored look. “I already have. There is someone who is missing the party, however. Where is your son?”

He looked smug, lifting his chin. He probably wanted to look powerful, but given that his face was burned and starting to swell, he just looked like a pathetic fool.

“He’s gone. You will never find him.”

His confidence didn’t concern me. We’d find him eventually. He wasn’t smart enough to hide from me now that his father wasn’t in control. Picking up a hammer from the counter, I walked back up to him. He eyed it, some of the confidence wavering.

“Don’t worry, Babin. I won’t be killing you today.” His eyes lit up until I spoke again. “Not yet. I want to give you a family reunion first. And since there’s no one else in your family left alive aside from your son, his whereabouts would be helpful. The longer you refuse to tell me where he is, the longer I will make you suffer. I suggest being quick about it.”

Without warning, I slammed the hammer down on one of his feet. He clenched his teeth in an attempt to hold in his scream. That was fine. It was more entertaining if breaking them took more time and now that Anya was home and under my protection again, I had all the time in the world.

The second bash of the hammer wasn’t effective in getting him to talk, but it did make him shout. I was recreating Anya’s injuries, starting with the pain in her feet after running through the snow. Then I took a scalpel to his forehead, letting the blood drip down his face. I gave my men a turn, letting them

beat him until he was coughing up blood before taking over again.

He shook his head slowly, blood dripping from his mouth. “I– I won’t... I won’t tell you... anything.”

Squatting in front of him, I smirked. “You say that now. We’ve only just started. I take great enjoyment in dealing with little men like you who think they can come after me and what’s mine. They all break eventually. You will too. Just like you intended to break my Anya.”

His brow furrowed, and he looked up at me. “Th-that is what this is about? She said you were nothing, a tryst during her holiday.”

Said in desperation to keep herself safe, no doubt. I didn’t hold it against her. His statement did make me pause, however.

“What else did you think this was about?”

His jaw snapped shut, and he looked away from me. There was something else. Something he wasn’t telling me. Standing, I waved over Grigori.

“Get the battery. Maybe he will be more forthcoming with a little stimulation.”

Leonid started thrashing in his seat, desperately trying to escape. I wouldn’t normally go straight to shocking him, but I wanted to know what he was speaking about and I wasn’t interested in dragging my feet getting the information I wanted. While they set him up, I called Ilya to check on Anya. He answered on the first ring, like he always does.

“Yeah, boss?”

“Where is she?”

“The library. Eva is convinced there are more books at Anya’s level, but they haven’t had any luck yet. Anya is asking to go to the bookstore.”

Letting out a breath, I relaxed a little. She was still home where I left her, safe and sound. Eva and Ilya weren’t the only people in the house with them. There were at least four by the front gate and a few more walking the property with dogs. I

refused anything less for her. In our home was the safest place she could be.

“Tell her I will take her when I’m done. Eva is wrong. There isn’t anything like that in there. There are books in English on the second floor, though.”

Once I was convinced of Anya’s safety, I hung up. Whatever Leonid was referring to, I didn’t think it had anything to do with her. He cried out, and I glanced over to where Ivan was hammering nails into his hands and feet. Time to start again.

He was a lot tougher than I originally thought, I’d give him that. He refused to speak throughout the shock treatment, though he screamed plenty. He didn’t give in when we doused his body with freezing water, either. He only began to talk once we started to remove strips of his skin. It was a form of torture I planned on using on his son and when I told him that, he went crazy.

“No! You won’t get him! He’s not even here!”

Pausing, I raised an eyebrow at him. “No? Where is he then? At your family home?”

He tried to scoff, though he couldn’t pull it off well while his body was trembling and his teeth chattered from the pain and cold. “That would be the first place people would look. No, he’s not even in the country. I sent him away. He won’t come back. He has our fortune and our name and he will thrive elsewhere, safe from you.”

Nodding slowly, I pushed my chair away from him. His head sagged as he let out a heavy breath. I wasn’t through, though. I just knew how to get his son to come back for him. His phone was on the counter, amongst the rest of his things. We’d keep them in case we needed to hide someone’s identity. Picking it up, I skipped the password protection, using the voice commands to call his son.

Leonid’s head jerked up, eyeing the phone as it rang. He smirked when it went to voicemail, but it rang a second later

and I held it up with a smile when the little shit's name came up on the screen. Answering it, I put it on speaker.

“Father? You said not to call. What—”

“Hello, Babin.”

He hesitated, but before he could hang up, I sliced into his father again, chuckling when he started to scream. His son shouted at me over the line, demanding his father's release. I didn't stop until he started pleading with me.

“Please! Stop!”

The room went quiet outside of Leonid's labored breathing. His son waited for me to speak, knowing I would start again if he interrupted or hung up.

“Do I have your attention now?”

“... Yes.”

“Good. Your father tells me he made you leave the country. It's good that you listened to him. You're so well behaved.” It dripped with condescension. He followed orders, as a son should to his father. But I wanted him to feel the lack of control, to push him to go against his father's orders.

He spluttered, furious. “We made a plan! Release him! This has nothing to do with him!”

My eyebrows went up. “Really? So it wasn't him who took my Anya and tried to hurt her? That's news to me. From everything I've learned about your family, it's your father who makes all the decisions. You are just a pawn in his plans.”

“Enough! Don't listen to him! Hang up this instant and do as you're told!” Leonid barked.

Wrong thing to say. It only reinforced my manipulation. I tutted, patting Leonid's face.

“Such brave words for a man who was sobbing a few moments ago. Should we start again? Give your son another demonstration? I'm sure we can take a video or two.”

I heard the little shit growl, the sound of his footsteps as he paced. “You won't get away with this!”

I chuckled. His father said the same thing. He really was just a pawn.

“Tell you what. If you really are the one making all the decisions, then you should be the one handling this. You come meet me, I’ll set him free.”

“No! Anton! Stick to the plan!”

To emphasize my point, I shot Grigori a look. He grinned and began pulling out Leonid’s fingernails, his screams filling the room. His son’s panicked breathing filled the phone line, and I growled one last warning to him.

“This is your chance, you pathetic little shit. I’ll find you eventually. Hiding will only drag it out. It will drag out his pain as well because I’ll keep him just on the edge of death so long as you cower from me. You can spend the rest of your short life hiding from me or take control like a real man would and come meet me. The choice is yours.”

Hanging up, I tossed the phone onto the counter and cracked my neck. “Alright, Leonid. Let’s start again.”

“YOU CAN’T BE SERIOUS.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

Eva raised an eyebrow at me. “You really think our mother would allow that? You’re marrying into this family, you’re going to have to put up with her too. And she’ll hold it against you until her dying breath.”

Sighing, I slouched back in my seat. We’d spent some time looking through the library, but eventually we got bored and started throwing out ideas for the wedding. I wanted to hide away on a beach somewhere, just me and Niko, but his mother already hated me. I didn’t want to make things worse.

“What if Niko changes his mind because your mother can’t stand me?”

She scoffed. “He won’t. I’m just trying to make your life easier after the fact. As someone who continually gets grief from her, I want to spare you if I can.”

My brow furrowed. “Why would she give you grief? You’re great.”

Eva’s face softened, and she leaned her head against my shoulder. “I like you. I don’t care if you elope or not, you can’t leave my brother because then I’ll be here all alone with those two and I’ll die from the constant complaining.”

Giggling, I patted her hand comfortingly. “It can’t be that bad.”

Making a tick sound behind her teeth, she sat up. “You have no idea. Between our mama chasing me around demanding I get married and Nikolai’s violent moping, I thought I would start sprouting white hairs. I’m only twenty-four. It would be a travesty.”

Ilya was sitting in a chair opposite us and he looked confused. “How do you violently mope?”

She smirked. “You have tantrums and then when no one is looking, you pout and stare out the window. It was really pathetic to watch.”

She was trying to be funny, but it made my chest tighten hearing how upset he was. A small part of me was glad we felt the same way, but I didn’t enjoy hearing about how he struggled with it.

Ilya rolled his eyes. “You are exaggerating. He wasn’t that bad.”

She shot him a dry look. “You say that because you weren’t here. You were in the hospital. Lucky bastard.”

He scowled, and I could feel them revving up for a fight. Putting my hands up, I tried to distract them.

“Okay, agree to disagree and move on. We’ve got better things we could be doing right now.”

Eva frowned. “Like what? He won’t let us leave. I think we can protect her just fine. He doesn’t have to be so controlling about it.”

After the last kidnapping in broad daylight, I didn’t argue with Niko about staying home until he could deal with the people responsible. While I agreed with Eva that it was a little boring, I saw the tension in his face. He was worried, and I didn’t want to stress him out by demanding that we wander. Besides, I was still jet lagged and tired. I didn’t want to go out into the cold right now.

“How about a movie?”

Ilya nodded, but Eva groaned. She was bored and getting antsy to do more. I was trying to come up with other

suggestions when Niko strode into the library, a scowl on his face. Leaping out of my seat, I hurried over to him, throwing my arms around his neck. He let out a heavy sigh and wrapped his arms around me, kissing my neck.

“I missed you,” I murmured.

I felt him smile, the tension leaking from his shoulders. When he straightened, he didn’t look so grouchy, rubbing his nose against mine.

“How are you, zayka? Has my sister been behaving?”

“Hey! I heard that!” Eva snapped.

Snickering, I rested my forehead against his. “Yes, she’s been helping me think of ideas for the wedding.”

His smile set butterflies aflutter in my belly, and when he dipped his head to kiss me, I lifted on my toes to meet him halfway. He’d been gone most of the morning and all afternoon and I didn’t like being away from him after we were separated for so long.

“We could go fill out the paperwork now, skip the fuss,” he murmured against my lips.

I laughed. “I said something similar, but Eva pointed out that your mother might take issue with it.”

He scowled. “She’ll get over it.”

“No, she won’t! She’ll throw a fit and badger you until you give her what she wants!” Eva shouted.

Niko sighed. “There may be some truth to that, but it’s your happiness that I want, lyubimaya moya. If you want no fuss, that is what we will do.”

Cupping his cheeks, I kissed him softly. “It’s not just my wedding, Niko. It’s yours too. What do you want to do?”

A grin pulled at his lips. “I want to take you upstairs. We can discuss it further in bed.”

He didn’t wait for my reply, scooping me into his arms. Eva started complaining, but he ignored her and walked away, heading straight upstairs.

“Why can you carry me up the stairs but Eva can’t?”

He pursed his lips, but I could see him fighting a smile. “I am stronger.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m not so sure about that. She did fight several men to protect me. I haven’t seen you do that yet.”

I was teasing him, but I didn’t realize Eva was at the bottom of the stairs. She burst out laughing, pointing a finger at Niko.

“I heard that! I’m better than you in your own fiancée’s eyes! I’m never going to let you forget that!”

Niko had frozen midway up the stairs and when he turned his dark gaze onto me, I scrunched my nose to hide my smile.

“That was a mistake, zayka. Every time she brings that up, it is you who I will punish.”

My face flushed, and heat settled low in my belly. “Promise?”

He growled, taking the stairs two at a time in his haste to get to the room. When he tossed me onto the bed, pulling off his jacket and tossing it away, I scrambled up to look at him, no longer able to hide my grin. He prowled around the bed, slowly undoing the knot of his tie. When he ripped it off, he reached for me, grinning when I yanked my feet away.

“Do you want me to chase you, krasivaya? It will only make your punishment worse.”

I shivered at his words, considering my options. Curiosity won out, and I launched myself off the other side of the bed, running away from him. I didn’t even make it to the door before he caught up with me, but when he yanked me back against him, my entire body lit up. He grabbed my wrists, yanking them behind my back, and used his tie to secure them.

“I was going to spoil you today, to treat you sweetly like you deserve, but you decided to be a minx. I will take great pleasure in punishing you and only when you are begging for release will I give you what you need.”

My breathing picked up at his sexy threat, my thighs clenching together when he reached around to the front of my shirt and literally ripped it open. It was barbaric and violent and so sexy I couldn't think straight.

“Niko...”

“Be good, Anya, or I will sate my lust and leave you wet and unsatisfied.”

I believed him too. I riled up a very dangerous man and I would only get what I wanted if I gave into him. For some reason, the thought of submitting to him always made an ache grow between my legs. He was dominant and forceful and if I did as he asked, he would make me come so hard I saw stars.

Rough hands slid up my sides to cup my breasts, squeezing them roughly. My head lolled against his shoulder as I pushed my chest into his hands, silently pleading for more. When his thumbs brushed my nipples through the material of my bra, I whimpered.

He released me suddenly, and I nearly lost my balance, but his hand on my elbow steadied me before he nudged me forward. Guiding me into the bathroom, he walked us over to the shower, turning on the taps and letting it heat. While we waited, he turned his attention to me and I trembled under his heated gaze.

“Sweet Anya, ruined by a monster. Now she goes looking for trouble so I can give her what she needs.”

Pressing my thighs together, trying to ease the ache, I licked my lips. “Maybe I wanted you to ruin me.”

His grin grew, and he stepped closer, so close I could feel the heat coming off of him. “Is that right? You approached me in that airport hoping I would fuck you?”

I didn't think it was possible to be any more turned on than I was right now, but when I didn't answer him, he cupped me through my clothes, just barely rubbing his fingers over my clit. I moaned and tried to move closer, but he pulled back and raised an eyebrow at me.

I considered lying to play the game, but I was never a great liar. “No... I approached you because I thought you were handsome and I wanted to pretend I was brave enough to walk up to you just to talk to you.” It was embarrassing to admit, and I flushed, dropping my gaze to the ground.

He ran his knuckle down my neck, and my breath caught.

“You are braver than you think,” he whispered. It was so sincere and sweet, and when I lifted my gaze to his, he smiled softly at me. Dipping his head, he brushed his lips over mine. The sweetness was overwhelming, so when he ripped the shirt into shreds and tossed my bra away, I wasn’t expecting it and all the pleasure zones in my body lit up like a Christmas tree, making me moan.

“Niko...”

He gripped my hair roughly, dragging me against him. “You are sweet, lyubimaya moya. It will not save you from your punishment.”

HIS ROUGH TREATMENT should've scared me, but I knew he'd never really hurt me. He was rough enough to give me goosebumps without actually causing me pain. Yanking down my skirt and panties, he pointed to the shower.

“Kneel there and wait for me.”

Swallowing hard, I moved to do as he asked, kneeling with my back to the spray. He'd waited long enough for the water to warm up and the little glass enclosure started to steam. It made it harder to see him as he stripped out of his clothes, which was even sexier. I knew his body, but it was foggy and hard to see more than the outline of him. It wasn't until he stepped into the shower to join me that I got to truly enjoy him. Big powerful muscles decorated with tattoos, wide shoulders, trim waist. He was every woman's fantasy, and he was all mine.

He stepped in front of me, his massive erection right in front of my face. I knew when he sent me in here what my punishment would be, but it still made me blush. It was his smug grin that lit a fire in my belly. That look felt like a challenge, and I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Open up, zayka.”

Obediently, I opened my mouth for him. Pushing my hair out of my face, he dipped his cock into my mouth, testing me. When I didn't pull away, he grinned at me.

“Good girl.”

It sent a thrill through my body every time he said that. I wasn't really sure why, but I didn't have time to think about it. He thrust his hips, bumping the back of my throat, and I had to focus on not choking on the sheer length of him. He was rough, his hand cupping the back of my head as he fucked my mouth. Unlike the last time where he let me explore him, this felt more like a punishment, using me for his pleasure. It should've scared me, his length choking me as it slid down my throat, but my body responded anyway, my clit throbbing with need.

When I moaned, he bared his teeth, his movements becoming more erratic. "You like that, don't you? You're such a good girl, taking my cock so well."

I moaned again, shifting restlessly. I figured he'd finish in my mouth like last time, but just as his breathing sharpened, he jerked me away from him by my hair. Grabbing me by my arms, he yanked me off my knees, spinning me and shoving me against the glass wall of the shower. The cool surface against my breasts was a shock, and I cried out, but I couldn't shift away or I'd fall because he yanked my hips backwards and pushed inside me without warning.

"Niko!"

He growled, pumping inside me roughly. Each thrust pushed me up against the glass, rubbing my breasts against it. It was more erotic than I expected, the sensation sending bolts of lightning straight to my clit. That combined with his rough thrusts hurtled me over the edge without warning. I screamed and my muscles tightened around him, making him groan. His movements picked up as he sought his own release, but he never moved me away from the glass, so instead of getting a chance to cool down, I was racing towards another finish before the first one was even over.

His hand gripped my hair, dragging my head back as he leaned over me. His lips sought mine, kissing me roughly. The new angle only shoved me tighter against the glass and I whimpered. My legs shook, and I felt myself tighten as I toed the edge of another climax. Niko's lips moved to my ear, his

rough whisper the final nudge as I was thrown over the edge again.

“You’re mine, Anya. Come for me.”

My mouth fell open, and a scream ripped from my throat. My pussy tightened rhythmically around his shaft and he finally let out a roar, bucking into me until he softened and slipped out of me.

My shoulders and wrists were sore when he finally untied me. He massaged the tight muscles, pulling me under the spray to let the warmth relax me. It was supposed to be a punishment, but he still took care of me when we were through and I melted against him, cuddling against his chest.

“You are perfection, lyubimaya moya. You must have done something very naughty to get punished with being handed over to me.”

Tipping my head up to look at him, I frowned. “Being with you isn’t a punishment.”

A small smile pulled at his lips, his thumb stroking my chin. “Only you would think that.”

He didn’t let me argue with him, kissing me until I was quiet before helping me wash up and bringing me to bed. It was nowhere near close to bedtime, but he didn’t seem like he was in a rush to go anywhere, keeping me cuddled against his side, his fingers drifting over my shoulder. My head rested on his chest and I listened to his heartbeat, my fingers tracing the lines of the rose in the middle of his chest.

“What does it mean?”

He glanced down for a second before responding to me. “It means I was in prison when I became a man.”

Frowning, I pushed myself up to look at him. “You’ve been to prison?”

He nodded. “When I first started out, I didn’t have the resources I have now. It was harder to keep myself out of trouble.”

Biting my lip, I looked at the other tattoos. I looked up their meanings, and I didn't want to hear the stories about how he earned them, but I wanted to know more. It felt like it'd be less terrifying if I knew.

“Niko... What do you do?”

Studying me, he reached to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Are you sure you wish to discuss this?”

No, not really. But it wasn't just his life anymore, it was mine, too. Nina never mentioned wanting kids, but I did and if there was going to be a potential of our family being in danger, I wanted to have the whole story.

“Yes...”

His hand cupped my face, and I leaned into it, willing myself to be braver. I loved him and if I wanted to be in his life, I couldn't be timid anymore.

He sighed and lifted his gaze to the ceiling before speaking to me.

“I get things that people want, things that people have difficulty getting on their own. Weapons, drugs, vehicles. There isn't a government that hasn't bought from me. Even your government has bought from me, though they'd never admit it. That kind of power, it's dangerous, lyubimaya moya. My life will never be safe. Even after I retire, I have made many enemies. But I promise I will protect you. You do not need to live in fear.”

He looked so fiercely determined that I knew if anything happened to me, it would be because he was already dead. There was no doubt in my mind that he meant what he said. Kissing his chest right over his heart, I laid my head against him again.

“I know. I trust you.”

His arms wrapped tightly around me, and he placed a kiss on top of my head. “Chem ya zaslužil tebya?”

I smiled to myself. I asked myself the same question sometimes. What have I done to deserve you?



“THIS IS STRANGE.”

We spent a good few hours in bed together, but eventually we had to get up. After we got dressed, I tried for the third time to call Nina. I hadn't spoken to her since I left and she promised she'd call a lot. She didn't want to come back to Russia, she said it was too hard to think about after everything that happened, but she planned on traveling a lot and said she'd make sure to have an internet connection so she could call me often. It was possible that she'd already left on her next grand adventure, but I figured she would've at least told me first.

“What's wrong?”

Niko was fixing his tie. I asked him to bring me to the bookstore for some new practice materials and he planned on taking us to dinner afterwards.

“I've been trying to call Nina, but she hasn't answered yet.”

His brow furrowed. “Is she still angry with you?” He sounded so outraged about it that I lifted my gaze to look at him. He looked ready to start a fight. Rolling my eyes, I focused on my phone, sending her a message. “No, of course not. We talked it through and we're fine. Don't hold a grudge.”

Making an irritated noise, he crossed the room to sit on the edge of the bed next to me. “You forgave her. I did not. No one gets to treat you so poorly and get away with it.”

Waving my hand dismissively, I frowned at my phone. Even if she didn't answer phone calls, she usually answered texts almost immediately. She always had her phone on her. “She apologized. Get to know her before you make any judgment. She was being manipulated.”

Plucking my phone from my hands, he held it out of my reach. When I scowled at him, he caught my chin in his

fingers, kissing me quickly. “I thought you wanted to go to the bookstore. Would you prefer to stay here instead?”

He was trying to distract me from the fact that he was still holding a grudge. Crossing my arms over my chest, I glared at him until he relented. “I will give her another chance because it is important to you, lyubimaya moya. But if she lays a hand on you again, I will not be so forgiving.”

There was definitely a threat there, but I trusted that he wouldn't actually hurt my family. He may refuse to let her see me though and given that his stipulation was she couldn't physically hurt me, I couldn't really argue with that. If she did end up repeating that event, I didn't think I could forgive her either.

Tugging my hand, he helped me off the bed. I could think of a thousand different reasons on why Nina hadn't responded yet, but it still made me worry. Chewing on my lip, I stared at my phone until he lifted my chin with his knuckle, raising an eyebrow at me. I shrugged.

“It's just not like her. I'm worried.”

Cupping my cheek, he rested his forehead against mine. “I'll have someone look into it. I'm sure she's fine.”

NIKO

THERE HADN'T BEEN a word from Leonid's son since our last phone call. I sent a few videos to remind him of what was happening the longer he made me wait, but he hadn't responded yet. It irritated me. The longer it took for him to make his way here, the longer Anya had to remain in lockdown. She seemed fine with it, I took her wherever she needed to go after I was through with my work, but I knew her quiet obedience would only stretch so far before she started getting bored. Already Eva was on my case, demanding we let them go out for a little while.

"Let it go, Eva. He won't ever change his mind," Grigori drawled. She was supposed to be with Anya and Ilya right now, but she decided to crash my office to bitch at me instead.

"This is stupid! You did this on purpose! You asked me to watch out for her knowing she wouldn't be leaving the house! If you can't trust me after everything—"

"Eva, enough," I snapped. "It is not a matter of trust. I will not gamble her safety to appease you. She will stay here where she is safe until Leonid's spawn is in our custody. If the job is too tedious for you, I will replace you without hesitation."

She glowered at me, her hands clenched into fists at her side, but she didn't argue again. Instead, she spun on her heel and stalked out, slamming my office door behind her.

Grigori shook his head. "I liked her more before you gave her a job. She was less irritating."

Ivan snorted. “No, she wasn’t. She could just leave if she wanted to before. She cares for Anya, so she stays here and she is not one to sit still. She would’ve gotten bored with the job eventually.”

It crossed my mind. Eva had always been a wild one. Anya would never be that way. Even her exploration in the bedroom was limited to what I showed her. She wouldn’t push for more, she was too timid for that. I considered pulling Eva from the job, but right now I liked that Anya was so well protected and I didn’t have to split the focus on having someone chase down my sister. I’d reevaluate once the threat was neutralized.

“Any word on Anya’s sister?”

“None. We sent Dmitriy to America to look for her, but he said she hasn’t been home in a few days.”

My brow furrowed. Anya had been worried sick about her sister and said it wasn’t like her to not call for so long. She told me Nina was adventurous and loved to travel, but she normally called Anya every night. The only time they missed the tradition was when they weren’t speaking after Anya’s attack. She told me that was the first time the sisters went that long without speaking and it was a matter of days. It’d been a week since Anya got here and still no word.

“Have someone track her phone. And see if there are any cameras in the area that might’ve seen where she went.”

Finding missing people wasn’t something I did often. Finding my enemies was, though, so I figured I could use the same skill set. If she complained later about the invasion of her privacy, I’d point out the fact that she was upsetting Anya and let her complain to her sister.

“Did the doctor check on Leonid?”

Ivan nodded, a grin on his face. “Said it was an infection. He’s giving him antibiotics. He’ll be fine.”

Leonid was knocking on death’s door with the amount of torture I’d put him through. If I didn’t have the doctor look at him, he would die before I found his son, and that would piss me off. I didn’t like when things didn’t go according to plan.

A few hours later, Grigori sat up abruptly from his position lounging on my couch like an idiot. “What the fuck?”

“What is it?”

His eyes were glued to his phone. “I found a hit on the sister. She was taken from her apartment the day after you returned here.”

“Taken?”

It caught the attention of the room and tension rose considerably. Grigori wasn't overly forthcoming with the information, though, until I growled at him.

“By who?”

He shook his head. “I can't fucking tell. My phone isn't that big, and the video is shit. It's from a camera across the street.”

“Send it to me.”

He did as I asked and I pulled it up on my laptop. He was right. The video was grainy, and it was impossible to zoom in without losing the quality of the image, but we all saw someone come out of Nina's apartment building with her tossed over his shoulder. I could tell it was her because she looked so much like Anya that I immediately had to go check on her.

“Find her. Now!”

Storming out of my office, I went looking for my fiancée. I found her in the sunroom, a book in her lap. Letting out a breath, I hesitated to approach her. I knew she was worried, but it would do me no good to tell her before I had any more information. It would only scare her right now.

She must've heard me because she looked over her shoulder and smiled at me. “You're done early.”

Masking my expression, I stepped up beside her, leaning to kiss her gently. “I'm not done. I just came to check on you. What are you up to?”

She lifted the book with a shrug. “Praktika. Are you okay? You don’t normally come to check on me.”

Running my knuckles down her cheek, I nodded. “Yes, I’m fine. I will be busy for a little while. Tell Eva to order in tonight. I’ll join you when I can.”

Her brow furrowed slightly, and she reached up, cupping my cheek. I leaned into her for a moment before kissing her palm. I could only hope I didn’t have to tell her that her sister was dead. It would break her heart.

My phone went off, and I sighed, kissing her forehead one last time. “Be good, zayka. I’ll check in with you again soon.”

When I turned around, Ilya tipped his head and frowned, but I shook my head. I’d update him later when Anya was distracted with Eva. He’d need to be prepared for her to act out. I didn’t trust her not to try to go looking for her sister herself.

I was almost out of the room when I checked my phone, freezing in place when I read Grigori’s message. They followed the kidnapper, using cameras along the street, until they found one with better clarity. The picture he sent me was the last person I was expecting. We finally found Anton. Apparently, he paid a visit to his ex fiancée the day after I called him. This was not what I meant by being a man about it.



“WHERE THE FUCK IS HE?”

Leonid was slumped forward in his chair and I had to dump cold water on him to wake him. It was getting harder and harder to wake him, his body struggling to cope with what we’d done with him. When he finally forced his eyes open, he barely had the energy to glare at me.

“Time to start talking, Leonid.”

He didn’t answer. I imagine it hurt, given that we ripped out a few of his teeth. I didn’t give a shit though, grabbing his mouth roughly and forcing his face up when he dropped his

head again. He started breathing heavily, flinching against the pain until I held the phone out in front of him, showing him the picture of his son kidnapping Anya's sister.

“You said he would start over somewhere new. He's deviated from your little plan. Where the fuck is he?”

He scanned the photo, his brows drawn down. “Who is that?”

“His ex fiancée.”

Of all the reactions I'd expected from him, I didn't expect him to start laughing. His shoulders shook, his chuckles catching on a wince every once in a while. Grabbing his hair, I wrenched his head back, growling at him.

“Speak!”

He blinked, a smug look on his face. “What do you want to know?”

“Why would he take her? What's his purpose?”

He lifted a shoulder, a grimace crossing his face, ruining his attempt at casual indifference. “How should I know? I told him she wasn't worth our time. Americans very rarely are. I've made a few business partners, but the rest can all rot for all I care.”

He was lying. He looked too pleased by the results to mean what he said.

“Where is he taking her?”

He pursed his lips. “I don't know. Probably to his new home. I did tell him to start over, after all. I'm sure as long as she bears him sons, she won't be treated unfairly. Then again, her sister's fiancé has been torturing his father so he could decide to take it out on her. Have you still been sending him videos?”

When I didn't respond, he huffed out another laugh. “Ah, children. I'm sure you'll find out one day how difficult they are to control. He wants what he wants, so he takes it. He gets this trait from me.”

My eyes narrowed and my gaze shifted to Leonid's phone. Aside from using it to get Anton's phone number that first day, I usually sent the videos with my own phone. I didn't think of using it again until now, but Leonid mentioned my own children and I knew for a fact I wouldn't allow them to wander around unmonitored. I didn't even afford Anya that luxury. There was a tracker put in her phone before Eva gave it to her so that if she was ever in danger again, we didn't have to rely on street signs to figure out her location.

"Tell me something, Leonid. How important is control to your family? How well does your son follow your orders?"

"Very important. He has always followed my orders to the letter. This... deviation was his first act as head of the house, but it is still within the realm of what I told him to do. Continuing our line is the first step in rebuilding our empire."

I hummed, stepping over to his phone. It was password protected, but that didn't matter much. I handed the device to Ivan.

"Have someone open this. I want to know if there's a tracker on his son's phone."

Leonid smiled. "It won't matter. I told him to get rid of his devices and purchase new ones. He—"

"He answered when I called him the first time, didn't he? Maybe he's not as good at following directions as you think."

That made him hesitate, his eyes shifting back and forth as he considered what I was saying to him. A muscle twitched in his lip and he lifted his gaze to me. "It doesn't matter. He isn't in the country. You don't have diplomatic immunity. If you go after him, you'll spend the rest of your life in prison."

Ivan handed the phone back to me and I switched open the tracking app. It was the same one I used, so I knew what to do with it. Turning the phone around, I showed Leonid the map where it showed his son's location.

"Looks like you're not as in control as you thought. Someone's been naughty and disobeyed his father's orders."

Barking at my men, I jerked my chin toward the door. “Two stay here. The rest come with me. It’s time to end this.”

Leonid struggled in his seat, panting heavily with the effort, his body still weak. “No! You’re wrong! He wouldn’t come back here! You’re a coward! I’ll get free soon and you’ll regret this! I’ll take your little mouse and she and her sister will become breeders for my family if you touch him!”

He was trying to bait me into staying, which meant we were on the right track. Still, I couldn’t allow him to speak to me that way. Stalking over to him, I forced his mouth open and Ivan stepped up beside me with forceps and a knife.

“I no longer need information from you, Leonid, so you won’t be needing this.” I cut off his tongue, tossing it to the ground behind me. He screamed, blood gushing from his mouth. Tossing the tools onto the counter, I glanced at one of the men staying behind.

“Call the doctor. I don’t want him bleeding out before the reunion.”

My phone rang as I headed outside and when I saw Ilya’s number, I paused.

“What is it?”

“Anya just got a message from Nina’s phone. It was a picture of her sister tied to a chair with the message ‘Bring me my father or else.’”

Fuck. There went my ability to hide it from her.

“I’m aware. I’m on my way to deal with it. Keep her inside, full lockdown. Understand?”

“Yeah, boss.”

Hanging up, I stormed to my car. This little shit was like a cockroach, constantly reappearing in Anya’s life to hurt her. Once I got my hands on him, I was going to make what I did to his father look like child’s play. No one gets to screw with my family. No one.

“HE’S WORKING ON IT. You need to stay here and wait.”

“Bullshit. How long has he known about this?” Eva demanded.

Ilya shot her a dry look. “How the fuck would I know that? I’ve been here with you two.”

I’d been pacing since I got the message from Anton. I saw Nina’s name come up in my messages and I was elated, thinking she’d finally gotten back to me, but when I saw the picture of her tied up and bleeding, I nearly had a panic attack. Eva had to talk me down while Ilya called Niko to inform him. They spoke for maybe two minutes before Niko hung up, and I hadn’t heard anything since.

“We can’t just sit here. He has to be nearby. And what’s he talking about his father for? I don’t even know him,” I cried.

Both Ilya and Eva flinched, making me pause. “What?”

Ilya didn’t look like he wanted to answer, but Eva didn’t keep things from me anymore. She sighed. “Anton’s father was the one who took us at the cafe. We figured that out not long after you left, but then they both went underground and we couldn’t find them.”

My stomach dropped. “Why didn’t anyone tell me? We left Nina all alone! When did he even take her?”

Neither of them knew the answer to that. I got the feeling Niko did, but when I tried to call him, he refused to pick up. He only sent me a message saying he was handling it and to

stay home. I couldn't sit on my hands, though. That awful man had my sister and was doing god only knows what to her.

"He said to bring his father. Where is he? Is Niko bringing him for an exchange or—"

Eva scoffed. "No. He won't do that. Nikolai doesn't negotiate. He's going to go after Nina himself, and Anton's father will stay wherever he is. He's in our custody, right?" She looked at Ilya, who dipped his chin once in agreement. "Like I said. He won't be doing a trade."

Which meant he was gambling my sister's life by going after Anton without giving him what he wanted. I couldn't let that happen. He was going to do something stupid and make Anton angry, and Nina was the one who was going to get hurt.

"Take me to him."

Ilya sighed. "You're not going anywhere. Romanov will handle this. You—"

Spinning around, I glared at him. "I don't care what you have to say. Anton has my sister, and Niko is going to get her killed. You've only got two choices: take me to Anton's father or stay the hell out of my way."

Storming past him, I headed for the door. I didn't know where I was going, but I was sure I could find someone to bring me where I wanted to go.

A hand grabbed my elbow when I got close to the front door and spun me around. When I growled, Eva's hands went up and her voice dropped to a whisper. "Look, I'm not bringing you to Anton's father. I don't even know where he is. But I can figure out where Niko is going. We can at least be there to try and talk some sense into him. Or maybe distract Anton or something. But we gotta be quiet about it. Tell Ilya you need to lie down or something. I know how to sneak out of the second floor."

Letting out a shaky breath, I nodded sharply. Ilya wasn't far behind her and he looked pissed, so I used my already out-of-control emotions in my favor, bursting into tears. Eva pulled me into her arms, stroking my hair and shushing me.

“It’s alright, Anya. Niko will handle this.”

When Ilya stepped up to us, he sounded irritated. “It would have been better if she didn’t know. That man is tormenting her on purpose to piss off your brother.”

That was probably true on both counts. I didn’t say anything, though. I played my part, sniffing in Eva’s arms, until she wrapped an arm around my shoulder and steered me towards the stairs.

“I’m going to take her to lie down. Maybe she can sleep through this mess until Niko has her sister again.”

Ilya grunted his acknowledgement and when I peeked my eyes open, he walked away, his focus on his phone. Once we got to the top of the stairs, I sucked in a breath and wiped the tears from my cheeks, frowning at Eva. She smirked at me.

“You’re a good actress. I think he bought it. Follow me. We can get out this way.”

She took my hand, leading me down the hall past Niko’s office. There wasn’t much here outside of guest rooms from what I remembered when I explored with Katya, but Eva led me to one on the end, looking around before sneaking inside and pulling me after her. This room was smaller than the others, almost like a servant’s quarters. There was no attached bath. Instead, the one door off to one side led to a small closet with some stairs.

“How did you find this?”

She shrugged. “I got bored and started snooping when Niko bought the place. He’s always going on and on about how I should know several ways to get out of any situation without being caught, so he can’t complain that I know about it. Come on, we have to be quiet because it connects to the kitchen, and Ilya likes to hang out in here and flirt with the staff.”

We tiptoed down the stairs, past the landing that led to the kitchen all the way into the basement. When she opened the door and poked her head out, sneaking into the next room, I frowned.

“Since when do we have a garage?”

Snorting, she took my hand again. “You’ve only done a basic exploration. There’s a lot more to the place than meets the eye. Pretty sure there’s a vault behind one of Niko’s shelves in his office, but I’ve never been able to get in there by myself to snoop.”

That sounded interesting, but I doubted I’d be able to ask without giving away the fact that Eva snoops so much. It was working out in my favor at the moment, so I didn’t want to draw attention to it.

There was a box on the wall with a bunch of keys, and she grabbed a familiar set, spinning it around her finger as she strode over to the Ferrari in the corner. I dropped into the passenger seat, scowling at her when she started the engine without buckling. Rolling her eyes, she exaggerated buckling her seatbelt.

“Happy?”

She didn’t wait for my reply, peeling out of the spot and pulling up to the garage door. “Might want to hold on to something. We’ve only got one shot to get out of here before they realize what’s happening and close the gate again.”

“Wha—”

As soon as the door was open enough for her to sneak under it, she slammed her foot on the gas, tearing out of the garage and racing for the front gate. Letting out a screech, I clutched at the emergency handle for dear life, my stomach threatening to revolt when she fishtailed before barreling towards the gate. It looked like it opened when the garage door did and the gate guards looked confused before they saw her coming. One of them shouted, and the gate started to swing shut again and I squeezed my eyes shut. It was a massive wrought-iron gate. If we hit it head on at these speeds, we’d be seriously hurt.

“Hold on!”

I held my breath, waiting for the pain, but other than clipping the side mirrors, she made it out unscathed, cackling

as she rolled down the window and flipped off the guards. She jerked the wheel, spinning onto the road, before taking off again.

“Now they’re going to have to wait for the gate to open again before following us. I’ve done that three times. You think they’d learn by now.”

A small part of me was starting to regret going with her. This was going to land me in a world of trouble with Niko. I seriously doubted he’d be content with a regular punishment once he figured out what we did. It was only the reminder that my sister was in danger that shored up my resolve. We needed to get there before Niko got her killed because if he was the reason that Anton killed her, I would never forgive him.



“How DO you know where they’re going?”

She pursed her lips, considering me for a moment before glancing back down at her phone. We’d pulled over closer to the city, hiding in her friend’s car shop so Ilya wouldn’t see the expensive car parked out on the street.

“I may or may not have set a tracker on Grigori’s phone when he pissed me off a few months back. I don’t use it often, if I started showing up where I wasn’t supposed to be then Niko would murder me, but it’s come in handy when I wanted to avoid them. They don’t know that I can see them coming.”

Eva was a lot more mischievous than I thought. She knew how to sneak out of the house, steal cars, put trackers on people, and I knew she could fight after the day she rescued me. The question was, what didn’t she know how to do?

“Well, fuck.”

I frowned. “What?”

“I know where they’re going. And you’re not going to like it.”

Shooting her a confused look, I waited for her to explain. She scowled.

“Looks like they’re heading for the house we were kept in when we were taken. It’s over an hour from here and they’ve got a head start. We’re going to have to book it to catch up to them.”

My stomach churned. I never wanted to go near that house again and the thought of my sister being kept in the same place made my chest tighten to the point where I felt like I couldn’t breathe. What if he was hurting her the way they planned on hurting me?

Eva was watching me, waiting for me to panic, probably, but I grit my teeth and clenched my hands in my lap, willing myself to stay calm for Nina.

“Just go. I don’t want her to get hurt because my fiancé is overconfident.”

She scrutinized me to make sure I meant it, but when I glared at her, she smirked and nodded.

“Alright, let’s go crash a party. I hope you don’t get car sick.”

NIKO

THE DIRECTION we were headed was familiar, and the closer we got, the more angry I became. We even passed the spot where I found the girls, the car they'd been in now completely buried in the snow. No one would move it until the snow thawed in the spring. We'd searched the building for Leonid and his men, but it held no clues as to their whereabouts, so we left it alone, hoping they'd come back to it eventually. After Leonid was taken, it was abandoned. Apparently, we should've been watching it a little longer.

We were almost there when Ilya called again.

“What?”

He was barking at people, raw fury in his voice when he replied to me. “She fucking took off! I swear to god, I'm going to tie your sister to a chair and leave her there to starve!”

He knew better than to threaten Eva, brat or not, but I waited to say anything about it, needing to know his reasoning first.

“So have one of the guards step in to watch Anya and—”

“She took Anya with her!”

Deep, unbridled fury swept through me with gale forces, leaving me stiff and frozen as I fought to stay in control.

“SHE WHAT?”

We pulled over and I promised a slow and painful death to Ilya for letting them get away before hanging up on him. I

pulled up the tracker on my phone to find Anya. Luckily, she'd taken her phone with her, but my blood ran cold when I realized where they were heading.

“God damnit!”

Ivan stood beside me, his face dark. “Where are they going?”

Growling, I spun around and dropped back into the car. “They’re headed our way. Hurry the fuck up. I want that little shit bound and gagged before they arrive.”

Then I was going to be giving my fiancée a serious lesson in obedience. Of all the stupid, reckless things she could’ve done. I expected her to be upset, to cause a fuss. I figured she’d try and talk her way into leaving. The men knew to placate her, but not let her leave. I never considered Eva being so bored that she would willingly put Anya at risk coming here. Once I got my hands on her, I would show her exactly what happened to those who work for me and disobeyed an order. And if anything happened to Anya, I would have one less sibling by the end of the day.

I wasn’t sure how she managed to figure out where we were headed, but if she could track our location, she might be able to track the fact that we were gaining speed. The roads were icy and dangerous, but Eva wouldn’t pay any attention to that. My mind was stuck on the millions of ways my sister could get my fiancée killed, so by the time we arrived at the house, I was rage-filled and needed an outlet before they showed up. We piled out of the cars, ducking when a shot went off and I heard Nina scream.

“No closer! You want her, you send my father to me!” he shouted.

More cautious now, we searched for signs of him. I finally found him on the second-floor balcony, his hand wrapped around Nina’s throat and the gun pressed against her temple. She was battered and bruised, tears streaming down her face. It only incensed me more with how much she looked like her sister.

“You want him? You give us her first,” Ivan called out.

He shot Ivan a dirty look. “I am not an idiot! Where is he? I want to see him!”

Tipping my head towards my car, I watched him carefully. We had a man setting up with a sniper rifle, but I preferred not to use him if I didn’t have to. The death would be too quick and I wanted him to suffer.

“He is here. Too weak to come out on his own. You will have to help him.”

“I can’t see him! Let me see him! I’ll kill her!”

He was erratic, his face unshaven, and his hair disheveled. This was not going according to the plan his father left him, and he wasn’t equipped to handle it. His pathetic attempt to force my hand in relinquishing his father was an act of desperation. He had no allies, no one else was here to protect him. It was just him between me and Anya’s sister.

“He doesn’t want to see you. He’s very angry that you didn’t listen to him. He thinks you’re a fool and unworthy of your family name.”

I was picking at him, wanting him to keep his angry focus on me. A few of my men were trying to sneak around the house. It would take them a moment and there could be alarms they needed to disarm, so I needed to stall him.

“You’re lying! You didn’t bring him! I’ll kill her! I’ll kill her and go after her entire family! I know where they live! I have men waiting—”

“If you kill her, you lose all your leverage and your safety. Let’s stop wasting time now. Come out and bring her to me and I’ll kill you quickly. It is the only offer I will give you.” It was a lie, but he didn’t know that. I wouldn’t even offer normally. I preferred to toy with them, but Anya and Eva were on their way and I didn’t want her to see this.

“I want my father!” he screamed.

Nodding slowly, I pulled out my gun, opening the door and pointing it at the back seat. “You will see him as soon as you

come out. You are keeping him from getting his antibiotics. Your stalling is killing him faster than I was.”

His eyes darted around helplessly. This truly was a foolish attempt on his part. It almost seemed too foolish, and my hackles went up. Without giving away my suspicion, I spoke low to Ivan.

“Either he’s more a fool than I thought or we are being set up.”

He grunted his acknowledgement, looking around slowly. We had to pull past a gate to get in, meaning our escape would be bottlenecked if there was danger. It put me ill at ease, especially with the knowledge that Anya and Eva were on their way.

“Where are they?”

“Ten minutes out,” Grigori growled. He was the one sitting in the back seat, pretending to be Anton’s father. We needed a body back there to sell the lie, and Grigori pulled the short straw.

Growling, I turned my focus back onto Anton. He kept looking at the skyline, like he was waiting for something. My suspicions grew.

“I have another offer for you.”

His gaze swung to mine. “What?”

“Let her go and I’ll let you walk.”

His eyebrows drew down. “You lie.”

I shook my head. “I have more important things to be doing right now. You give her to me, we’ll let you get into a car and drive away.”

Motioning with my hand, a few of my men turned their car around and left it running with the door open for him. I would even let him drive away. All the cars had trackers, and we’d be right behind him anyway, but I needed him away from here before Anya arrived. She was making my life difficult with her recklessness.

He looked like he was considering it, his gaze flicking to the horizon again before landing on me.

“What about my father?”

“He stays with me. He took Anya, he faces the consequences for that. You can walk away now with your family fortune and your freedom, and I will be satisfied with just his life.”

Anton shouldn't play poker because he didn't seem to realize when someone was bluffing. He nodded slowly, taking a few steps back. His eyes seemed to be locked on the horizon, though.

“What is he looking at?”

“Nothing. There is nothing there,” Ivan replied, his own gaze on the horizon.

Anton disappeared from view, and a moment later the front door eased open. He had his gun pressed against Nina's side, using her as a shield with his hand grasping her throat tightly. He murmured something to her, his grip tightening, before he took a few steps toward us.

“What do you want us to do, boss?”

I put my hand up, drawing the attention of my men. “Let him pass. I gave him my word.”

Triumph lit up on his face, and he edged forward again. Each step was wrought with tension and I could see Nina's struggle to draw in a breath, her face turning red. Anton took the long way around, making sure none of us were behind him. He picked up the pace once he passed our cars, dragging her backwards. He would do either one of two things. Either he would take the deal and push her out of the way right as he jumped behind the wheel, or he would attempt to take her with him. Nina locked eyes with me, terrified and pleading with me to help her, but before I could step forward to talk Anton into tossing her my way, a revving engine broke the quiet and drew everyone's focus toward the street in front of the gate.

“Son of a bitch!” Grigori snapped.

Dread and fury filled my gut as a familiar Ferrari spun into the driveway, blocking the exit and Anton's escape. He turned his wild gaze on me, screaming at me.

"You lied!"

Shoving Nina forward, he lifted his weapon towards the back of her head. I heard Anya's scream and irritation swept through me.

"Fuck, fire now!"

The single shot didn't come from Anton's gun. It came from the sniper. Before Anton's finger could reach the trigger, he collapsed to the ground. Nina stood frozen, her face pale and her body trembling, until Anya came out of nowhere, throwing her arms around her sister.

"Nina!"

Snarling, I stalked over to them, dragging them both away from Anton's body. I ripped them apart, handing Nina to Ivan before turning my furious gaze towards Anya. I had never been more angry with her than at this moment.

"What the fuck were you thinking?"

Instead of backing down instantly like she normally would, she attempted to shove me, screaming at me instead.

"Me? What about you? You were gambling my sister's life! You are too cocky and it almost got her killed!"

Incredulous, I grabbed her arms to stop her from her continued assault, yanking them behind her back. "Do not lie to yourself, krasivaya. It was your foolish attempt at interrupting us that nearly got her killed. If she had come to harm, it would be on your head, not mine."

She didn't argue with me. She burst into tears, fighting against my hold on her until I drew her against my chest. Her wailing was the only thing that held my temper at bay. Her actions, while foolish and misguided, I understood. It was Eva who brought her here. Lifting my gaze slowly to my sister, I leveled her with a furious gaze.

“Grigori, Ivan, bring the girls home. Make sure the doctor looks at Nina. None of them are to leave the house. Understood?”

They both nodded. Ivan and Grigori were normally my security, as they were the very best. If they couldn't get the girls home safely, they weren't as good at their jobs as I thought. Nina went silently without protest, still in too much shock to say much. Anya was a little more difficult, not because she was causing trouble, but because she needed my comfort. I kissed her forehead before passing her off to Grigori.

“Go help your sister. I will be home soon.”

Still sobbing, she nodded and slid into the back seat with Nina. I watched as Nina's chin trembled and they threw their arms around each other. They would cause no more issues for us. It was Eva who was still fighting me. She crossed her arms and lifted her chin, scowling at me.

“I can drive myself. And I'm not going to your home. I'm going back to my apartment.”

Marching up to her, I grabbed her arm roughly, snarling low enough that Anya wouldn't overhear me. “You will go where I tell you to go. You put both Anya and Nina's life at risk with your carelessness. This is why I never allowed you to work with me before. You are too brash and you will get people killed. Never again will I trust you with Anya. You can't be trusted to guard her.”

She looked hurt, failing in her attempt to hide it behind a glare. “She was going to leave anyway. I was protecting her.”

“She was distraught that her sister's life was in danger. Had you done your job right, you would have kept her where she was safest. We would have handled it on our own without your interference. I—”

The noise of a helicopter heading our way made me freeze. Anton had been looking at the horizon, waiting for something. Or someone.

“Seek cover! Now!”

ANYA

I WASN'T REALLY PAYING attention to what was happening outside the car. Nina was falling apart in my arms and I was busy trying to soothe her as best as I could through my own tears. I had no idea the kind of damage Anton had done to her. All I could do was hold her and tell her it was okay. It wasn't until I heard Niko shout that I looked up.

“Seek cover! Now!”

Grigori ripped me and Nina from the back of the car, shoving us towards the woods that surrounded the property. Niko was at my side in an instant, covering my body with his as we ran. Ivan was covering Nina in the same way, stopping only to pick her up off her feet as he dodged forward, her movements too slow to keep up. I didn't know what we were running from until a helicopter appeared overhead, raining bullets down on the cars we'd arrived in.

Screaming, I clung to Niko, sucking in a breath when we hit the tree line and the snow made us sink up to our knees. Niko cursed under his breath, plucking me off my feet and into his arms. I was worried he would struggle, but he was a lot taller than me and seemed to move easier than I had been. He had his back turned, but I could see the helicopter turn around sharply, heading our way.

“Niko, watch out!” I screamed.

He lunged to the side, hiding behind a tree, but they started shooting before we could get fully covered. A bullet clipped his arm, making him snarl. I could hear more bullets peppering

the surrounding trees. Ivan had Nina in a similar position as me, keeping her pressed against the tree with his body covering hers. She had her hands over her ears, her eyes squeezed shut. I couldn't see Eva, but I couldn't exactly look around right now.

Once the helicopter swept over and went to turn around, Niko yelled at me. "Stay here! Don't move!"

"W-Where are you going?"

He didn't reply, his gun at the ready as he faced down a freaking helicopter. I could see it heading towards us, peeking around the tree, and he still didn't move, letting out a slow breath. I wanted to close my eyes, I knew I shouldn't watch, but my gaze was glued to him, watching in horror as they started firing again, aiming for my fiancé.

"Niko!"

He pulled the trigger, and he wasn't the only one. Multiple blasts went off, hitting the helicopter at all sides. When I swung my gaze towards the helicopter, I watched as one of the pilots tried to pull up and away, but the engine pitched and whined and the helicopter started spinning, heading for the ground. Straight towards us.

"Move!"

I was ready and leapt to my feet, dashing towards Niko. He grabbed my hand and booked it away from the oncoming crash. I had to basically put my knees to my chest to get through the snow, but Niko dragged me with him and yanked me behind another massive tree right as the helicopter hit the ground, shaking the earth below our feet. There was a second of calm before it exploded. Niko wrapped himself around me and even though we were far enough away to be safe, I still felt the heat of the fire as it expanded outwards.

Niko waited a second, checking the sky for more enemies before shouting at his men to get inside the house and call for backup. I hated that I had to set foot in that house again, but we couldn't stay out in the open and my clothes were soaked from the snow. Niko picked me back up and trudged through

the deep snow, past the wreckage of the helicopter, towards the house. He settled me on my feet in the living room, his hands skimming my body as he checked me for injuries.

“Are you hurt?”

Shaking my head, I fought back tears. “I’m sorry.”

He sighed. “I know. Go check on your sister. I need to see who is hurt.”

He led me over to where Ivan was checking on Nina. She was freezing and trembling, but it didn’t look like she was bleeding and when I sat next to her, she hugged me tightly. Niko watched us for a moment before growling at Ivan to stand guard. My heart seized when he walked away, but I knew he had a job to do.

I was beyond stupid coming out here. If I had stayed home like he asked, he would’ve gotten Nina out safely. I saw them when we arrived. It was just Anton and Nina facing down all of those men. No way would Niko let him leave with her. I was panicked and overwhelmed and managed to convince Eva to sneak me out, even though she probably didn’t want to. I scanned the crowd for her, letting out a breath when Grigori brought her inside, a rough grip on her arm. She was yelling at him and trying to free herself, but she fell silent when Niko approached her.

I held my breath as he stepped up to her. I didn’t see him as the type of person to hit a woman, but then again, I never saw him as a criminal either and I was dead wrong about that, too. He stood over her, a dark look on his face before he snapped his fingers and pointed at her. A few men rushed her and when they handcuffed her, I finally mustered the courage to protest.

“N-Niko! It was my fault! Please don’t hurt her!”

Either he didn’t hear me or he didn’t care to respond, stalking away. It was Ivan who shook his head at me.

“He is not going to hurt her. He doesn’t trust her to stay put and out of trouble while he handles business. She wants to act like a crazed animal, she gets to be treated as such. And no,

it was not your fault. You were emotional. She was bored and tried to play the hero. She knew better.”

I fell silent, tightening my grip on Nina. Eva was trying to help me get to my sister. They couldn't put all the blame on her. I was afraid of what the consequences would be, but for now, my sister was alive and that was what mattered.



MORE CARS ARRIVED EVENTUALLY and Niko sent me and Nina home. Eva was staying with him where he could watch her. The car we were leaving in was driven by Ilya, and he was not happy to see me. He and Ivan helped Nina into the back and he glared out the window the entire ride home.

The doctor was waiting for us and we settled Nina into the guest room next to Niko's and mine. For the most part, she was okay. Anton had been so busy planning the helicopter assault that he didn't touch her outside of the initial kidnapping. He threatened her a lot, but he never had time for anything else. She had a few bruises, and the doctor suspected a cracked rib. She was also starving and dehydrated, but he gave her an IV and Katya brought her some soup and eventually she settled to sleep.

“She is exhausted. She will probably sleep a lot for the next few days. I will check in on her in the morning.” He handed me a bottle of pills. “These are for anxiety, if she has nightmares. They will make her drowsy, so not during the day if she can avoid it.”

“Thank you.”

He waved, heading out quietly. I'd have to leave her alone eventually, I doubted Niko was going to let me sleep in here with her, but he wasn't home yet and I was still worried about her. I sat on the edge of her bed, lightly running my fingers through her hair. A lot of this felt like my fault. She told the doctor she was taken a week ago, the day after I arrived back in Russia. I shouldn't have left her alone. I knew Niko was a criminal. The minute he said there was still a threat, I

should've asked him to send someone to protect her. She was one of the most important people in my life and I was so wrapped up in my happily ever after that I abandoned her.

Once I was sure she was asleep, I wrote a note on her nightstand that I was just next door and slipped out of the room quietly, almost walking directly into Ilya, who was standing guard outside. His eyes narrowed when he glanced over his shoulder and I dropped my gaze to the floor.

"I'm sorry."

He didn't respond, stepping away to give me room to fully exit and shut the door behind me. I felt guilty. Ilya had been nothing but kind even though he was stuck watching out for me, but I didn't really know what else to say. So I said it again in Russian.

"Mne zhal'. YA byl napugan." It was barely a whisper, and I kept my head down, slipping away and heading for Niko's room to wait for him.

Right as I pushed the door open, he sighed. "I'm aware you were scared. You still should have waited."

Staring at my toes, I nodded.

"I do not blame you, Anya. I blame Eva for listening to you. If it were my sister, I would have asked to be there too. But you are not a fighter, you are a hindrance in those situations. Your job is to stay home, so we have one less person to worry about."

"I agree."

My head jerked up when I heard Niko's voice. He was standing at the top of the stairs, his face still dark and clouded. He strode past Ilya without a word and grabbed my chin to keep my gaze on him.

"Had there been others with him, they would have gone after you without hesitation. You are my weakness, the one thing that I would give up my empire for. You don't have security because I am paranoid. You have security because the threat is real. Your sister was in more danger because you

showed up. If there is ever a time where I need to go handle business, I need to know you'll stay here."

Tears slipped down my cheeks. "I just don't want to lose you. Either of you. You're my family."

He sighed, pulling me against his chest. "And you are mine. So stay home and be safe so I can focus and come home without worrying about you."

I nodded, burying my face against him. He let me cuddle against him for a little while before scooping me up and bringing me into the room. We changed for bed and he slid in behind me, wrapping his arms around me. After everything that happened today, it was exactly what I needed. I soaked in his warmth and his strength and eventually I drifted off, knowing I was safe as long as he was here with me.

NIKO

“YOU’RE BEING REASSIGNED.”

Eva scoffed, her arms crossed tightly over her chest as she defiantly refused to look me in the eye. Her petulance only made this easier for me. She couldn’t be trusted with Anya. My fiancée was too easily manipulated to be paired with someone so reckless. I would be looking for another female to join Ilya, one who would be vetted and could be trusted to not let Anya’s tears manipulate them into poor decisions.

“Anya’s sister, Nina, is an avid traveler. You cannot always be armed while watching over her, so you will need to practice your defensive skills often. She is not pleased about the arrangement, so work that out between the two of you. I will not allow my sister-in-law to be used against me again.”

Her head whipped forward, and she looked confused. “Wait. What?”

I continued as though she was actually respectful and didn’t interrupt me. “I will need frequent updates of your whereabouts and if I find out either of you has gotten into any trouble because you were too reckless, you will both be brought back here and will remain in lockdown indefinitely. This is your final chance, Eva. Screw up again and you will never be trusted in this family outside of your duty to marry and bear children.”

Her eyes searched mine, but I kept my face blank. I was too soft-hearted thanks to Anya. She pleaded with me not to punish Eva too harshly, saying it was only the fact that she

tried to leave on her own that made Eva suggest coming to join us. I knew that wasn't true, but Anya would never believe otherwise and it would hurt her to watch Eva suffer. Since Nina had been demanding to leave and return to her life, I decided to send Eva with her. Their lifestyles matched. Nina wasn't content to sit at home and read like Anya. She would keep Eva busy, so hopefully she would stay out of trouble. And while Eva was reckless and brazen, I did believe she could do well as a bodyguard, given the right environment.

She looked suspicious, but she nodded once, turning and stalking out of the room. Grigori would ensure they made it safely to the airport and trackers were put into both their phones and their bags, so we could make sure they weren't doing anything stupid.

Pushing out of my chair, I grabbed my jacket. There were still more people to deal with. Ilya and Grigori would remain here to watch Anya, with the reminder that if they so much as looked at her wrong, they would be dead within the hour.

When I stepped outside, Ivan was waiting for me.

“Are they both in custody?”

He nodded. “Spending some quality time with Babin. They were easy to find.”

Shoving my hands into my pockets to protect them from the cold, I started down the stairs, coming to a halt when I heard Anya's voice. She was peeking out the front door, a frown on her face, a very annoyed Ilya standing behind her.

Shaking my head, I turned and jogged back up the stairs to speak with her. “You can't be out here alone.”

She made a face. “I'm not alone. You're right here with me.”

Flattening my lips to hide my smile, I raised an eyebrow at her. “Zayka...”

She grinned at me. “I'm not causing trouble. You didn't say goodbye.”

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I slid my hand into her hair and kissed her roughly. “Ty budesh’ moyey smert’yu, zhenshchina.”

Her bright smile put me at ease and when I jerked my chin to urge her back inside, she wiggled her fingers and did as she was told.

She always put me in a better mood, so I was relaxed and eager to get started when we arrived at the old house. I grabbed a box from the trunk of my car, holding it under my arm as Ivan led the way downstairs. The guards greeted us with nods, standing back on either side of the door as I headed to the counter and put down my package.

“Where ith mah son?”

Babin has been demanding news of his son since we left to go deal with him. Given that we cut his tongue out, it was garbled and difficult to comprehend, but I knew what he wanted. I was still sour about the fact that Anton died so quickly. I wanted to hurt him more. I took comfort in that Leonid would suffer greatly when I finally told him the news.

“Are you getting along with your new roommates?” I queried, ignoring his demands. After the shitshow that was dealing with Babin, I went after the other two people who were causing me trouble. I was tired of dealing with them and decided not to wait to have them brought in. Bortnik was gagged, the man loved to talk, and next to him was the woman who decided to tell the world who Anya was to me. I stepped up to her first, forcing her face up with a rough grip on her chin.

“Hello, Ivanka.”

She was sobbing, shaking her head. She had her own gag, but when I removed it, she started to babble immediately.

“Please, please, I didn’t do anything!”

Tutting at her, I released her face. “We both know that isn’t true. Had you kept your mouth shut, your punishment would have been a lot less severe for upsetting Anya. But you decided to give secrets to my enemies.” I feigned boredom,

picking up different tools and looking at them before setting them back down. I already knew how I would handle her. I just wanted her to suffer more.

“They made me! I had no other choice! I promise, I would never do anything to hurt you!”

Shaking my head, I turned to face her. “I greatly dislike when people lie to me. Shall I show you what happens to those who do?”

I didn't hurt women often. They generally knew better than to fuck with me, but I dealt with all people who betrayed my family the same way. Her being a woman wouldn't spare her.

Ivanka and Bortnik were the first to go, mostly because I enjoyed watching the panic on Leonid's face as I carved them apart. He still believed his son would get him free, but I was going to dissuade him of that notion as soon as I was finished with the other two.

Bortnik's final screams rang out before his body went limp. His body couldn't handle the torture as long as Babin had. Probably because he was fat and did nothing to care for himself. Rolling my chair away, I took the offered cigarette from Ivan. I didn't smoke often, I preferred vodka as my vice, but when I was working like this, it helped to keep me calm and not get lost in the bloodlust. Handing it back to him, I blew the smoke out in Leonid's face, rolling my chair to grab the box off the counter.

It no longer surprised me that Bortnik and Babin were working together to steal my products. That was what he thought landed him here, which meant I got to enjoy this next part even more.

“I got you a gift.”

He looked suspicious, shifting away from me when I put the box in his lap. It wasn't until I flipped it open that curiosity got the better of him and he peeked inside. His eyes widened, and he started screaming, his whole body trembling.

“Unfortunately, your son wasn’t a very good listener, so I couldn’t keep him alive. I didn’t want him to miss the reunion, though, so I brought him here.”

Little shit might’ve lived through the sniper shot. My man said he aimed away from the heart to give us a chance at getting him back here, but the helicopter attack riddled him with holes before we shot it down. His body was burned along with the rest of the evidence against us, but I brought his head for his father, so he could see the end of his family line before his death.

“You shouldn’t have come for my family. Because of your arrogance, your entire family was murdered. What do you have to say for yourself?” I paused before smirking at him. “Oh right, I forgot. Well, I’m sure I can guess what you’d say. I was going to kill you today along with the others, but I think I’ll wait a little longer. Give you some time with your son.”

He jerked his head up, an actual whimper coming out. It was a tad cruel, leaving him here with the head of his son in his lap, but since I couldn’t break Anton, I would break Leonid instead and then send him to the depths of hell where he belonged.

“Enjoy the quality time, Leonid. I’ll come check on you in a few days.”

His screams followed me as I walked away, shutting the door on his sobs. I instructed my men to spread the word on what happened here. People needed to know what I’d do to protect my Anya. I had no issue ripping apart every single one of my enemies to make my point. No one touches her, not without facing me.

I told her she was my weakness, but she was also my greatest strength. She made me more cutthroat, more dangerous, because I promised her I would return home for dinner. I wouldn’t waste my time with useless people anymore. Anything that stood in the way of me getting back to her would be dealt with promptly and violently.

Heading home, I felt myself relax. For the first time in a long time, I had someone waiting for me at home. I could

almost imagine her waiting in bed for me, flashing me that sultry look that she has been perfecting since we were reunited. She still needed punishment for the day of her sister's rescue, and my hands itched to spank her ass raw. Perhaps this time I would use a belt to emphasize my point. I wasn't afraid of going too far anymore. She met every challenge I gave her with avid enthusiasm. She really was the perfect woman.

My phone ringing pulled me from my thoughts of Anya naked and tied to the bed, and I frowned when I saw Ilya's name.

“What's wrong?”

He cleared his throat, his voice gruff. “Your mother is here.”

Fuck.

ANYA

I'D BEEN HELPING Nina and Eva pick their next great adventure. Aside from stopping at her home to grab her things, Nina wasn't willing to sit still. She said it was because she hadn't traveled in a while for fun, but I got the feeling spending time in her apartment after being kidnapped made her uncomfortable. It'd probably make me uncomfortable, too. I'd probably never be able to go back to that little cafe where I was snatched from.

We all sat in the kitchen, arguing the merits of a warm weather country in the winter versus overcrowding because of tourists, when a familiar voice spoke in the hall.

“Where is Niko? I want to speak with him.”

I sighed heavily. I'd been hoping to avoid his mother, but I knew I'd have to face her eventually. It would've been nice to have Niko here to protect me, but when she came into the kitchen and locked eyes on me, I lifted my chin. I was going to marry him. I was not going to let her bully me, and after everything that had happened, I was getting better at standing up for myself.

“You're still here.”

She still refused to speak to me in English. Nina was watching her with a frown on her face, her Russian not good enough to keep up with the conversation. Eva had been poking through the fridge, but she straightened abruptly, frowning at her mother.

“What are you doing here?”

She scowled at her daughter. “I am here to speak with my son. You couldn’t be bothered to wear a dress? At least Niko’s whore wears a skirt.” She gestured at me roughly.

Eva’s lip twitched, hiding her own scowl. “Don’t call her that.”

Her mother made an irritated sound, ignoring her. “I have a man I want you to meet. He is very successful and should be able to provide for you—”

“Mama, I’m not interested. I’ve got work and I’m leaving soon. Stop trying to set me up with people.”

Her mother’s face darkened. “You know I don’t like when you lie to me. You will do your duty and marry. At least one of my children should be continuing the family line.”

“One of your children is. Niko is getting married,” she snapped.

Her mother’s brow furrowed before her gaze jerked to me. My hand with my engagement ring was in my lap, but the thing was massive enough that she could probably see it across the whole house if she wanted to. She let out a startled sound before raising her furious gaze to me. She wasn’t bothering to hide her emotions anymore.

“You! You’ve manipulated my son and are trying to force him into marriage! What is it? Are you pregnant? He may feel obligated, but I will set him straight!”

Tipping my head, I smiled at her, answering her in Russian. “I’m not pregnant. Not yet, anyway. If that’s what he wants, I’d be happy to start trying.”

Her face paled when she realized I could understand her. My accent still sucked, but at least I could talk to her. Slipping from my stool, I stood and faced her down.

“I think we started off with a misunderstanding. Niko and I aren’t looking for your approval. And if you want to be a part of our children’s lives, you will need to learn to speak more respectfully to me. Niko has enough on his plate without adding you.” I really hated confrontation, but I felt my resolve shore up when Niko stepped into the kitchen, a proud look on

his face. He crossed his arms, watching us curiously as his mother spluttered.

“You lied to me! You acted as though you didn’t understand me!”

I made a face. “That’s not true. I just didn’t respond to your poison. I’m more interested in what Niko thinks of me than you.”

“I think you’re perfect, zayka.”

She jumped and spun around, taking a step back. “Nikolai…”

He stepped around her, coming over to me and cupping my neck, kissing me softly. “Such a good girl,” he murmured.

I flushed and bit my lip, leaning into him.

“She— She is threatening to keep me from my grandchildren! She is awful, Nikolai! You can’t seriously be considering—”

Niko’s face hardened, and he swung his attention back to his mother. “They will be her children as well as mine. She gets to decide who can see them. She is right. If you can’t treat her as her station dictates, you don’t get to be part of our children’s lives.”

I frowned. “My station?”

He grinned at me. “Yes, lyubimaya moya. You are to be a queen amongst peasants. I am well known and people who wish to remain in my good graces act accordingly. They will treat you the same. Better even because if they upset you, I’ll rip them apart.”

“How romantic,” Nina drawled sarcastically. Niko looked annoyed, but she was only teasing, a smirk on her face. Eva stepped up beside her, holding her hand out for a high five. Maybe Niko should’ve reconsidered putting those two together. I got the feeling they were going to cause trouble and just not tell anyone about it.

Running his fingers through my hair, Niko drew me closer, whispering in my ear. “You did well, lyubimaya moya. Care to

join me upstairs? I think your courage deserves a reward.”

Biting my lip, I nodded, taking his offered arm. His smoldering smile was only for me because his face flattened as he turned around, back to the cold criminal everyone else saw him as. Only I knew better. There was no one sweeter on this earth. And criminal or not, I was going to spend the rest of my life with him. I'd never be more thankful that I got on that plane.



“ARE YOU READY, DOROGAYA?”

Swallowing hard, I nodded. His fingers laced into my hair, and he shot me a smoldering grin that made my heart and my pussy flutter. There was no limit to the effect he had on me. I doubted there would ever be a time where that look didn't have me melting.

“Deep breath.”

Sucking in a breath, I let him push me under the water. With my eyes squeezed shut, I relied on touch and his guidance to find his cock and pull it into my mouth. His hips jerked, and I vaguely heard his growl, though it was muffled under the water. Focusing on relaxing my throat, I let him fuck my mouth, the water splashing with his movements.

My heartbeat pounded in my ears and I had to drag myself out of the water twice for air, but he pulled me back and I kept going, wanting to finish what I started. Using my hand to cover the distance I couldn't, I pumped him roughly. He always got louder when I did that and now was no different. I wasn't the only one who liked to be handled roughly.

My chest felt tight and the sound of my heartbeat got so loud I couldn't hear him anymore, but I didn't stop. I felt him tense and his movements turned erratic and I knew he was close. Right before I thought I might pass out, his body arched, and he came, thick ropes of cum coating my throat. His hands released my hair, and I sat up gasping and spluttering. The whole thing was overwhelming and tiring, but when my body

started to relax and I cuddled against his chest, I felt clearer and everything felt sharper, more in focus. I could see why he enjoyed it. It was a fun challenge. It probably wouldn't be something I did as often as he liked to, but I wouldn't say no to trying again either.

His big hand stroked my hair softly, both of us just lounging in the tub. A good portion of the water had spilled out with how wild we were, not just when I was giving him head, but from all the stuff we'd done before that, too. Neither one of us could be bothered to refill it, though. I just nuzzled closer, stealing his warmth and shutting my eyes.

“I have to go on a trip this weekend.”

I frowned, dragging myself up to look at him. “Go where?”

“Somewhere for work.”

He still tried to keep most of his work stuff private. I didn't mind so much. After everything that happened with me and Nina, I liked pretending everything was normal. He hadn't left on a trip before though, and I pouted mostly to myself.

He cupped my face, his thumb stroking my cheek. “Would you like to go with me?”

My eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

“Really. You can keep the bed warm for me when I am gone.”

Shooting him a dirty look, I crossed my arms. It made him laugh, dragging me back against him with his hands on my waist.

“I am only teasing, lyubimaya moya. I am not bringing you with just for that. When I am not busy with work, I want to show you the city. You experience things with such youthful exuberance, it is a treasure to watch.”

My face flushed, and I bit my lip. I wasn't adventurous like Nina and traveling was never really a high priority, but with Niko, I felt like I could really enjoy it. I wouldn't have to worry about being targeted by thieves or kidnappers. No one

would dare go up against him. I felt safe with him and I could probably handle the plane ride as long as we were together. He did have an excellent way to distract me from my fear.

It was hard to imagine where I started after all this time. I was a shy and quiet call center employee, too terrified to get on a plane. I tried to distract myself by doing something kind and giving into my curiosity about the handsome stranger who dropped his passport. Since then, I'd been swept off my feet, joined the mile high club, faced dangers I never would've thought I'd ever survive, and fallen in love with the man who started it all. I couldn't believe how far I'd come, and it was all thanks to him. I may not be overly adventurous, but with him, I felt like I could take on the world.

Leaning into his hand, I smiled at him. "Where are we going?"

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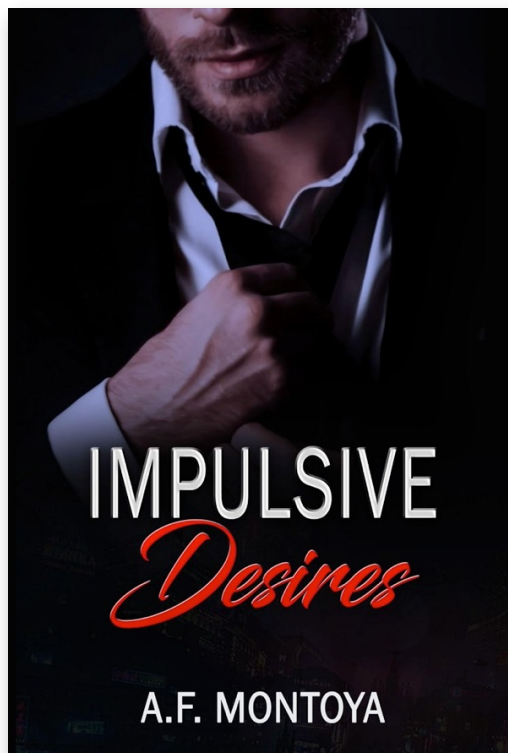
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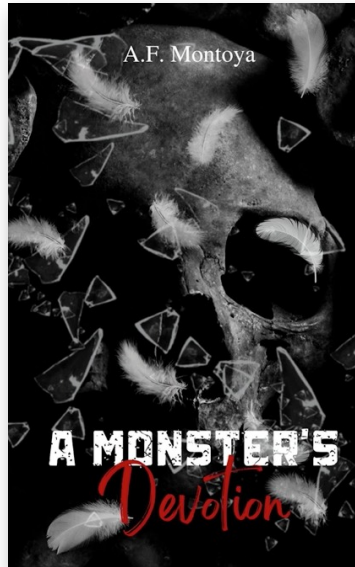
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