



 *Santia*

PRINCESS

STEPANOV BRATVA BOOK TWO

NICOLE FOX

SATIN PRINCESS

STEPANOV BRATVA

BOOK 2

NICOLE FOX

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SATIN PRINCESS

BOOK 2 OF THE STEPANOV BRATVA DUET

On the worst day of my life, I let Anton Stepanov save me.

One night of freedom—that's all he offered.

But what he ended up taking was so much more.

Now, I'm on the run from the devil who rescued me.

What I didn't realize is that devils come in all shapes and sizes.

Someone I trust is betraying me.

Someone I love is hiding things from me.

And Anton is coming to reclaim what's his.

I have to figure out what is real and what is a lie.

If I don't, it might cost me my life.

It might also cost me my baby.

Satin Princess is the second and final book in the Stepanov Bratva duet. Anton and Jessa's story begins in the first book, Satin Sinner.

JESSA

“You’re shaking.”

No shit I’m shaking, I want to say. The video is still playing on a loop in my head. Anton’s hands around his own wife’s throat...

And then the disappearing picture that followed. The one that showed the blood. Endless blood matting Marina’s silky blond hair. So much fucking blood.

I glance at Chris. He’s still watching me. I’m not even sure he’s been looking at the road for more than five seconds in a row since he picked me up.

“I’m fine,” I sigh.

“You keep saying that.” His tone is drawn tight with worry. “So why don’t I believe you?”

“Chris...”

“What happened?” he interrupts, undercutting the sensitive, patient vibe he had going when I first got into his beat-up Ford.

It’s been his car for as long as I can remember. I was with him when he made his first payment. That was almost eight years ago now.

My eyes burn and my throat feels tight. Is it the pregnancy that’s making me nostalgic? Or is it the knowledge that I’m about to leave all this behind? My life, my friendships, all the memories that are contained in old Fords and first apartments?

“J, you’re really scaring me,” he says, pumping the brakes when all I want is for him to slam on the gas and get me out of here. “Did he do something?”

“No!” The answer comes out harshly. I give Chris an apologetic look. “He didn’t do anything to me.”

“Then what—”

“I just... I realized I was in over my head.”

“I still don’t understand.”

Someone honks loudly behind us, and I put my head in my hands, hoping to stave off the headache I know is imminent.

“We need to find a cheap motel somewhere remote,” I tell him.

“A cheap motel? You have an apartment.”

“I can’t go back there. It’s the first place he’ll look.”

“My place then?”

“That’s the second place. Besides, I’ve already involved you in this mess just by calling you.”

“So the ship has already sailed on involving me,” he points out. “We might as well go the whole nine yards and avoid getting hepatitis from some shithole La Quinta in New Jersey.”

He puts his blinker on and makes a left, heading in the direction of his apartment.

“Chris, please,” I say urgently. “A motel, any motel. There’s that sketchy-looking place right off the bridge in Queens. Next to that purple high-rise?”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Please. We’ll talk more when we get there,” I plead. “I just need some quiet now.”

He mutters something under his breath, but I’ve already stopped concentrating on Chris. My head feels like it’s about to explode.

Then the shrill ring of my phone slices through the moment of silence.

“Is it him?”

I shake my head. “No, it’s Freya.”

“Oh. Then just ignore it.”

I shoot him an annoyed glance. “How would you feel if I ignored your calls?”

“That’s different.”

“No, it’s not. Freya’s my friend, too,” I argue. “And she’s worried about me. She has been since I agreed to work in Anton’s home. Just like you.”

He gives me a grudging sigh of acceptance, but doesn’t offer anything more.

“Freya?” I say, picking up.

“Everything okay with you?”

It feels like a leading question. Especially given that my earlier text to her was unnecessarily chipper.

“Um... sure.”

“I knew it!” she cries.

“What?”

“Something is up. That text felt off.”

“What was off about it?” I ask. Dammit, I’ve got to get better at lying.

She ignores me. “Am I right? Did something happen?”

Oh, something happened all right... “It’s a long story.”

“Are you still in his house?” she asks.

“No, I left.”

“Are you heading to the apartment then?”

I glance at Chris. He’s changed directions again, which I’m hoping means he’s taking me to the motel like I asked.

“Uh, no. Not exactly.”

I hear movement on the other end of the phone. “Wherever you’re heading, I’ll meet you there.”

“Freya—”

“You’re my friend, Jessa. You made this alien city feel safe, and I won’t ever forget that. Let me be there for you now.”

I actually get choked up hearing her say that. Helping her drunkenly navigate her way to her apartment really meant that much to her? It felt ridiculous to expect anything in return for basic human kindness—quite literally the least I could do—and yet here she is, willing to rush to my side at a moment’s notice.

“I’ll drop a pin where I’m headed.”

“Thank you,” she sighs.

We hang up, and as I set my phone down, I realize I’m shivering. The heater in the car is on, but I’m still shaking like a leaf in a hurricane.

This is gonna be fine, I tell myself. Everything is gonna be fine.



Half an hour later, Chris pulls up at the motel. It’s even more rundown than I remember.

The walls are painted a faint shade of Pepto-Bismol pink that somehow makes it even more depressing. Everything looks faded like an old photograph.

“Jess,” Chris says, ducking down and staring at the motel through his windshield. “Are you sure?”

“It’s perfect,” I say firmly, climbing out of the car.

I follow a sign that points toward the “Foyer.” That sounds a little uppity for a place like this, and sure enough, it turns out to be a little bit of a euphemism. To be more accurate, the sign should probably say something like “Shitty Little Folding

Table Crammed in the Front Hallway with a Smelly, Balding Man Seated Behind It Browsing Porn on His Phone.”

“Good evening,” he drones without looking up. “Welcome to the Last Resort Motel. How may I be of service?”

Last Resort Motel. Jesus. Even the name of the place is depressing. “One room please.”

He glances up at me for the first time and then does a double take. “*You* want a room?”

“Uh, yes.”

He gives me a thorough once-over that makes my skin crawl and then pulls a key down from the wall of rings behind him. “Sorry,” he mutters. “You’re a different sort than the type of guests we usually receive.”

I suppose that’s what passes for a compliment around here. Sighing, I pull out my purse. “How much?”

“Forty dollars,” he says. “How many nights will you be staying with us?”

“Just the one,” I say.

He nods and accepts the cash I fork over. Then he hands me the key and offers me a toothy smile that’s missing a few teeth.

“Have a fabulous stay.”

I bite my tongue to keep from saying, *Somehow, I doubt I will.*

Chris looks distinctly uncomfortable when I walk back outside and find him standing next to the door. We have to walk up two flights of stairs to get to my room. I’m spared a view of the apocalyptic-looking purple high-rise condos across the road, but in return, I get an eyeful of a vile dumpster that hasn’t been emptied since the Clinton administration.

I close the curtains the moment we enter the room. Then I bolt the door shut.

The place is just as underwhelming as I expected. There’s a single bed pushed up against one wall with one cigarette-stained bedside table. A door to the right leads to what I assume is the bathroom.

I'm not ready to view the guaranteed horror show that is the shower, so I collapse onto the bed and stare at the ceiling. The only silver lining is that my headache has receded somewhat.

I feel the bed sink with Chris's weight. He's right next to me, his hand grazing against mine. The narrow bed doesn't offer much room.

"Okay," he says. "I think it's time you told me what happened."

"Maybe we should wait for Freya. I don't think I have the strength to repeat the story twice."

He pushes himself up on his elbows and looks down at me. "How bad is this, Jess?"

I blink and two tears squeeze out of the corners of my eyes. "I was wrong about him, Chris. I... read him all wrong."

"What did he do to you?"

"That's just it. He did nothing to me. In fact, he's been lovely to me."

Chris looks both confused and annoyed. "I don't—"

"He killed his wife," I blurt out.

Chris stares at me with wide eyes, and I realize that saying the words out loud is the final nail in the coffin.

"He told you that?" he asks incredulously.

"No, I... found out."

"How?"

More tears spill over. I can't even focus long enough to concentrate on his question. "I was so sure, Chris. So stupidly sure he didn't do it."

"Why?" he asks, looking at me with a searching expression. "You saw him kill a man right in front of you. Is 'wife-killer' really such a stretch from that?"

The opening to confess is right there. But I can't bring myself to admit that I've watched him kill more than once.

“That was different. They were both dangerous men in dangerous situations.”

“What does that even mean?”

I shrug. “It’s the underworld.”

The words leave my lips naturally. Only after I say them do I realize that I just mimicked him. The beautiful man with the intense gray eyes and the ability to destroy me without even trying.

He’s miles away and corrupting me still.

“*It’s the underworld?*” Chris repeats incredulously. “Jessa, you need to go to the cops.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” he argues.

“Because it won’t make a difference. He’s too powerful, too connected, too... everything.” I pause, then add, “And anyway, even if I could go to the cops, I wouldn’t.”

Chris looks ready to strangle me. “Why the hell not?”

“Because... I love him.”

I didn’t mean for it to be a big declaration. I didn’t mean to say it at all. I’ve barely come to the realization myself, so I shouldn’t be making grand announcements.

The moment I say it, though, it feels like the air gets sucked out of the room. Chris goes deathly silent.

The clock on the wall ticks.

Ticks.

Ticks.

“Are you gonna say something?” I ask when I can’t take his silence any longer.

“I will. As soon as I figure out what the fuck *to* say.”

“It wasn’t something I could control.”

“Actually, it was,” he says, sounding angrier than I’ve heard in quite some time. “It was the very fucking definition of

something you could control, Jessa. If you'd returned his fucking phone at the beginning, this could have been avoided. In fact, if you'd just declined his offer to work on his boat like a normal girl would have, we wouldn't be here at all."

I sit up a little. "A 'normal girl'?"

He doesn't back down. In fact, he doubles down. "You'd just discovered that your fiancé was cheating on you. On your wedding day, no less. And instead of dealing with your emotions, you decided to avoid them completely and rebound with the most dangerous man you could find."

"It wasn't a rebound—"

"The fuck it wasn't!" he snaps.

"You really think you're in love with him?"

I nod. "I know it."

"You barely know *him*."

"I don't have his fucking Social Security number memorized, so I can't possibly love him? Is that it? Is that a prerequisite to falling in love?" I seethe. "Since you seem to be the expert and all."

He's about to say something snarky, but he reins it in. Instead, he takes a deep breath and shifts position so that there's a little more distance between us now. "I'm sure he's an expert at convincing women that they're in love with him," he says carefully. "But you're too smart to fall for that, Jess. I know you are."

"Don't do that," I snap. "Don't make me feel like trusting my feelings makes me less intelligent. That's not fair."

"You know what's not fair?" he asks. "It's not fair that you keep making one terrible life decision after the next, and I'm expected to show up for you but keep my opinions and my advice to myself."

His words strike a nerve, which of course means that he has a point. Usually, I'd argue, but I don't have the energy today. "I'm sorry. But I wasn't lying before. This will be the last time."

“I doubt that very much.”

I take a deep breath and lay it all out there. “I’m pregnant, Chris.”

His eyes go wide and his shaking hand goes perfectly still. I imagine I looked similar when Anton gave me the news.

I reach out and take his hand in mine. It’s hot to the touch. “This time, it’s going to be different—because it has to be, Chris,” I say gently. “It’s not just me anymore.”

He doesn’t say anything for a long time. Then finally, he leads with one whispered word. “Jess...”

“Didn’t think I could make a worse life decision than falling in love with a Bratva don, did you?” I ask with a shaky laugh. “Guess you underestimated me.”

“Jess...”

“Please,” I beg. “Stop saying my name like that.”

He takes a deep breath and exhales softly. “I don’t know how to help you this time.”

“That makes two of us,” I say, grasping his hand tightly.

He returns pressure after a moment. “You can’t stay here, can you?”

“No,” I whisper hoarsely. “I can’t.”

JESSA

I see her shadow move across the window before she knocks. Chris jolts like someone just pounded on the door.

“It’s just Freya,” I tell him gently.

“Right.” He sighs, flustered. “I’ll get the door.”

He’s been quiet for the last twenty minutes. Too quiet. I watch as he walks to the door and opens it with a somber expression on his face.

“Hi,” he says. At least he doesn’t sound too annoyed.

“Is she okay?” Freya asks immediately.

“She’s in there,” he says, stepping to the side and avoiding the question. I wait for him to shut the door after Freya enters, but he just stands there in the threshold.

“Chris?” I ask, sitting up on the bed.

“I’m gonna get some fresh air,” he says. “Can I get you anything? Something to eat or drink?”

My stomach is feeling a little empty. And even though I have no appetite, I nod. I have to think about my baby.

“Some fruit if you can find any,” I say. “But really anything would be fine.”

He nods and slips out. I watch his shadow pass by the drawn curtains just like Freya’s did, and then he’s gone. Freya rushes to the bed and sits down in the same spot Chris just vacated.

It's a weird sort of crossing paths. For some reason, it makes me shiver. Like there's a hidden meaning I'm missing.

"You look tired," she remarks.

"Good to see you, too," I laugh bitterly. But I'm not even offended. I *am* tired. I'm exhausted.

"I've never been one to beat around the bush. What happened?"

"He killed her, Freya," I whisper.

"Oh God..." She covers her mouth. "His wife?"

I nod. "I didn't want it to be true."

"I know you didn't."

"I feel like such an idiot right now."

"Don't," she says earnestly. "You fell for him."

She's staring at me, the lamp on the bedside table highlighting the unique color of her eyes. The mix of blue and brown, as though her genetics couldn't quite decide. Today is the first time I've seen her look truly disheveled, the night we met notwithstanding. Her dark brown hair is tied back in a messy bun that lacks finesse and she's only wearing a little, badly smeared lip gloss. She looks prettier for the lack of it.

Her hands are wrapped around mine so tightly it's almost painful. But I'm grateful that she's here. That she understands.

"You knew from the beginning, didn't you?" I ask. "That I had feelings for him?"

"I've been where you are right now, Jessa," she says with a sigh.

"Why didn't you warn me?"

She raises her eyebrows. "What could I have said? You were gonna do what you were gonna do. And if I'd judged you, you'd have just cut me out of your life. I didn't want that."

It's an honest answer, and it only makes me more grateful for her. "You're speaking from experience, I take it."

“Unfortunately,” she says. “Got room on that bed for one more?”

Smiling, I slip to the other corner of the bed so that Freya can get in next to me. The headboard behind us looks padded, but it’s barely more than plywood. I make a conscious decision not to wonder how any of the many repulsive stains I can see might’ve gotten there.

“How did you find out?” she asks.

“I got a message.”

She glances at me incredulously. “I’m sorry, what?”

“This message came from an unknown number. I almost didn’t open it, but it was a video.”

She tenses immediately. “What was on it?”

“Footage of a fight between him and Marina.”

“That was his wife?”

“Yeah. That was her.”

“So... you saw her?” Freya asks curiously.

“Yes. I mean, kind of. She was onscreen, but the image was so grainy that I wouldn’t be able to pick her out of a lineup. Anyway, all I know about her is that she was blonde and beautiful.”

“Who told you that?”

“Anton.” Even saying his name hurts. It’s like pouring salt in a wound.

“What else did he tell you about her?”

“He said she was crazy.”

“How?”

“She was apparently insanely jealous,” I say. “She was possessive and controlling. She had a temper, too. That, at least, I can attest to. I saw her storm one of his meetings on the video that was sent to me.”

“Do you have the video?” she asks.

I take my phone out and open the video for her. I close my eyes and rest the back of my head against the headboard while she watches it.

“Wow,” she breathes a few moments later. “That was...”

“Terrible?”

“That’s one word for it.”

“Even if he’s telling the truth and she really was crazy, that doesn’t justify him killing her.”

“Definitely not,” Freya agrees.

I glance at her. “I can’t make excuses for him anymore, Freya. No matter what my feelings for him are.”

She glances towards the window. “Did you tell Chris?”

“Which part?”

“The part where you admit to falling for a Bratva don.”

I sigh. “Yes.”

“That explains the hurt puppy dog expression on his face when I arrived.”

“Don’t be mean about him,” I beg. “He’s a good guy.”

She sighs. “I’m sorry. I just... I’m worried for you.”

“I can’t stay here, Freya,” I tell her. “I left without saying anything to him. But when he finds out I’m gone, he’ll come after me.”

“How can you be sure?”

I think back to a few hours ago. Anton was sitting next to me on a very different bed. He held my hand, kissed me, promised me a future that I was ready to jump into with both feet, eyes closed.

I want you in my bed.

“He wanted me to move in with him,” I admit.

She raises her eyebrows in shock. “Really? But why would he want that?”

I shrug. "I asked him the same thing. It didn't make any sense to me. It still doesn't. But the only explanation that makes sense is that... he might have feelings for me, too." I say the last part in a whisper, as if voicing it too loud will break it apart.

"Wow," Freya says, floored.

"Is it crazy that I still kinda want to stay?" I whisper. I'm fairly sure that of everyone in my life, Freya is the least likely to judge me.

"With him?" she asks.

I nod, avoiding her eyes.

She doesn't answer for so long that I start to feel my anxiety building. Then finally, she puts her hand on mine again. "Nothing seems crazy when you're in love," she says gently.

I give her a grateful smile. "Thank you, Freya. You're the only one I can talk to without feeling ashamed."

"You have nothing to feel ashamed about. He does, though."

I shrug. "I don't think Anton wastes his time feeling bad about things. He takes life head-on."

"I understand the appeal."

"Was your ex-boyfriend like that?" I ask.

She gives me a sad smile. "He was very similar."

I can tell how much her past still weighs on her. She can't bring herself to talk about it too much. Leaving an abusive relationship is one thing. Leaving your home, friends, and family at the same time is a whole different kind of challenge.

"What are you gonna do?" she asks.

"Leave," I say simply. "I don't know where I'll go, but I know I have to leave."

"How soon?"

"Tomorrow, if I can manage it. If I stay in this city too long, he will find me."

Her expression changes. It becomes more focused, more calculating. She gets up and starts pacing by the foot of the bed. “I’ve got an idea. Hear me out, okay?”

I’m reluctant, but I owe it to her. “Okay.”

“London.”

I frown. “Um, was that the whole plan or am I missing a few parts?”

“I’ve been thinking of making a trip back to England lately,” she says. “How about we go together? That way, you’d have a place to stay and I can go back home with an escort.”

“What about your ex?”

“He’s no longer an issue,” she says confidently. “And anyway, he won’t have any idea that I’m back in the country.”

It does seem like the best possible option at the moment. *England*. I’ve never been, and the prospect of having an ocean between Anton and me sounds very appealing.

“When would you leave?” I ask.

“I was planning on leaving in a few weeks, but I can move up my plans. We can buy our tickets right now and be on a plane tomorrow.”

“That’s so... soon.”

“It fits into your timeline.”

I nod, trying to wrap my head around the idea. Everything in my life has gone topsy turvy, and I’m not sure which way is up anymore.

“I know it’s scary, Jessa,” she says, moving closer to me. “But it’ll be scarier if you’re on your own, won’t it?”

She has a point.

“Are you sure you want me to come? This could get you involved in a serious way. I don’t want to cause you any trouble.”

She waves away my worries. “I’m one hundred percent positive.”

I lean over and throw my arms around her. Her hair smells like flowery shampoo and something else slightly chemical.

“So we’re doing this?” Freya asks, pulling away. “We’re really eloping to England together?”

I nod and giggle nervously. “If you’re sure I won’t be imposing—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she dismisses. “You’re my friend.”

“Okay,” I whisper. “Okay.”

“Yay!” She claps her hands together. If I wasn’t so nervous, her excitement might be catching. She sits on the edge of the bed and pulls out her phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for flights. I can book right now.”

Fear snakes up my throat. I glance at the walls to check if they really are closing in on me from all sides or if my mind is playing tricks on me. I try to count my breaths, but even that doesn’t help.

“Are you going to withdraw your savings?” she asks, glancing up from her phone momentarily. “I’d recommend that. If you use your card, he’ll probably be able to track you.”

“Good point,” I mumble, but I don’t think I’m audible.

Suddenly, I want to see Chris. I want to hear him say that this is a good idea.

“While you do that, I’m gonna go find Chris, okay?”

She barely looks up from her phone. “Sure. I’ll book the tickets.”

I nod and leave the claustrophobic little room. One glance to my left and I see Chris standing by the staircase, staring off into the distance.

I walk over to him, but he barely acknowledges my presence. “Are you mad at me?” I ask.

He turns to me. “How can you even think that?”

“I know I’ve been irresponsible—”

He shuts me up by taking my hand and pulling me right into his arms. He holds me so tight that it forces tears to my eyes.

“I’m going to miss you so much,” he says. I can hear how choked up he is.

“Oh, Chris...”

“It’s okay,” he says. “I know you have to go. It’s the right decision.”

Hearing him say that makes me feel both better and worse. I cling to him, wondering when I’ll be able to see him again.

“I’m going to England,” I tell him when he finally lets me go.

“England?”

I nod. “With Freya. She wanted to make a trip back home, and this way, I won’t be totally alone. At least, not in the beginning.”

“Well, then... I’m glad.”

“Even though you don’t like her much?”

He sighs and gives me an embarrassed smile. “I was unfair about Freya. And I’ll admit, my dislike for her came from a childish place. I didn’t really want to share you. Not when we’d just renewed our friendship.”

“I never saw it that way—”

“I know you didn’t. Because you’re a mature and loving person,” he says with a forced laugh. “I was just being stupid. She seems to really care about you and that’s all that matters.”

“She’s been through something similar. She can relate to what I’m going through.”

He just nods. “Like I said, I’m glad you won’t be alone.”

I take his hand and give it a squeeze. “You’re still my best friend, you know? You always will be.”

“That’s what you say now.”

“It’s what I’ll say always,” I say firmly. “You mean the world to me, Chris. And I hate that I won’t see you when I want to.”

“I know. Me, too.”

“I’ll keep in touch though,” I promise him. “I’ll find a way.”

“Just be safe. And keep that baby safe, too.”

I grin sheepishly. “You never even asked if I wanted to keep it.”

“Didn’t have to. I knew you would.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he says with a sad smile. “You’ve got too big of a heart to ever get rid of something that belongs to you. And this baby belongs to *you*, Jess. Remember that, okay?”

I know what he’s telling me: my baby may have a murderer for a father, but it’s got me as a mother first and foremost. That trumps everything else.

“You always know what to say. Even the things I don’t know I’m worried about yet.”

“I’m your best friend, remember?”

“I remember,” I say. “I’ll always remember.”

ANTON

“Where’s Jessa?”

Lev gives me a puzzled look. “You lost her?”

“She was supposed to be resting in her room,” I say impatiently. “Dr. Spegal said she should get as much rest as possible.”

“Is that your version of an early push present?”

“Am I supposed to know what the fuck that is?”

Lev rolls his eyes. “You know, the gift you give the mother of your child for pushing the kid out? My sister has a couple of kids and she got a push present for each of them. A diamond bracelet, a new purse—shit like that.”

“If she thinks she’s getting shit like that from me, she’s delusional.”

Lev gives me a smirk. “You realize that Jessa is no Bratva princess, right?” he says. “She’s a normal girl who might expect to have normal experiences. Especially now that she’s pregnant.”

I wave a dismissive hand. “She’ll adjust.”

“Really?” Lev asks. His eyebrows are doing that annoying thing they do when he thinks he knows better. “Because I doubt she’s ever going to adjust to watching you murder people.”

“That was the last time.”

“Anton, brother, you and I both know it’s not the last time,” he sighs. “This is our life. Deals, meetings, betrayals, and murder. It’s a never ending cycle. You need to make sure she’s prepared for it.”

When I found out Jessa was pregnant, everything felt flawless, perfect. But now, fissures are appearing. I’m trying my damndest to hold it all together.

Just then, one of the maids passes through. I stop her. “Margarit, have you seen Jessa anywhere?”

“No, sir, I haven’t seen Ms. Jessa.”

“Go ask the rest of the staff,” I order. “Let me know when she’s found.”

She gives me a deferential nod of her head and backs out of the room, leaving without turning her back on me. It’s a habit the staff has developed over the years.

Lev notices it and rolls his eyes. “You’re a don. Not royalty.”

“What’s the difference?”

“A king with an heir,” Lev muses with a smug smile. “Who would’ve thought?”

Not me, that’s for damn sure. But seeing the brightness in Jessa’s eyes when it finally sunk in that she was pregnant... it was nothing short of magic. A piece of happiness that I never imagined I would experience for myself.

Which is strange in its own right. Love—if that is truly the name for whatever this is between us—is the one luxury I never expected to have.

“Mr. Anton, sir?” Margarit interrupts cautiously, once again standing in the threshold. “Mr. Caplan saw her a few hours ago.”

I rack my memory for the matching information. Caplan—broad-shouldered, gray-bearded, stern. He works security at the front gate. Mother with terminal cancer. I got her enrolled in an experimental drug trial. Last I heard, she’s in remission.

The man in question steps into view, his face darkened slightly from what looks like an uneven sunburn. “Don Stepanov, Ms. Jessa left the compound two hours and thirty-six minutes ago via the western gate.”

I stare at him in disbelief as Lev rises to his feet.

“What do you mean, she left?” he asks for me, since I’m having trouble finding my words for the first time in my life.

Caplan is starting to look nervous now, if a man that dour can ever seem nervous. He shifts from one foot to the other, wringing his hands together the entire time. Margarit, sensing that a storm might be brewing, steps to the side and all but disappears behind the door. Though she knows better than to leave without being dismissed.

“Don, sir, I apologize if I erred. You told me she had the freedom to come and go. She... she said she was leaving so... so I—”

“It’s okay, Caplan,” I say before the man suffers a nervous breakdown. “You did nothing wrong.”

He looks visibly relieved. “I told her I could call her a cab, but she insisted on walking down to the end of the hill.”

“Which means she was probably being picked up?” Lev infers, turning to me.

I nod and wave a hand at the security guard. “You’re excused. Both of you.”

Both Caplan and Margarit disappear instantly, visibly happy to be done with this impromptu little interrogation.

I rub my throbbing temples. “What the fuck happened?”

Yulian strolls in, oblivious and nonchalant. “Whatcha talking about?”

“Jessa left,” Lev fills in.

“Oh. Weird. When’s she coming back?” Yulian asks.

He still doesn’t get it. To be fair, I’m not sure I fully understand it yet. One thing is obvious: Jessa left of her own volition. After I told her how I felt, what I wanted.

What changed between that conversation and now?

“I don’t think she is coming back,” I snarl as my instincts start buzzing.

“Why would she leave?” Lev asks. “She was happy to stay. You said she agreed to move in here with you.” His mind is already racing with theories, probabilities, truths and lies and courses of action. It’s the only way he knows how to be.

I used to be the same—until she burst into my life.

“Move in here?” Yulian gawks at me, dumbfounded. “Jesus, I thought you were just having fun with the broad.”

Lev rolls his eyes. “If you had any powers of perception, you would have realized that Jessa was never just a distraction for him.”

“Maybe she was more freaked out about the pregnancy than she let on,” I ponder.

But even as I say it, I know it’s not true.

I saw her face when she heard the news. She was happy. Thrilled, in fact. Once the initial shock had worn off, there was only joy and excitement left.

According to Caplan, she left two and a half hours ago. Which is right after I left her in my room. Something crucial happened in those few minutes.

I need to figure out what it was.

“What pregnancy?”

Lev and I both turn to look at Yulian. I realize that in all the madness of removing Rodion’s body, addressing his men, and establishing a new alliance with Yaromir, I had neglected to tell my brother the biggest news of all.

“Jessa’s pregnant,” I say bluntly. “The baby is mine.”

“Ha!” He slaps his knee. “What’s the punchli—oh. Shit. You’re serious? You’re serious. Fuck me, you’re serious.”

“She’s my woman, plain and simple,” I say, unwilling to spend a lot of time dissecting this.

“You’ve never said that about any woman. Including the one you married.”

“Because she wasn’t mine,” I say harshly. “She was forced on me. I never wanted her.”

“But Jessa is different?”

“Night and fucking day.”

Yulian still looks completely blindsided. It’s almost like he’s the one who just found out he’s going to be a father. “Pregnant... wow.”

I don’t have time for this shit, though. He needs to catch up or fuck off. “Did anyone speak to Jessa after I left her?” I ask.

Lev and Yulian both shake their heads.

“She was alone when I left her,” I remind them.

“With her phone,” Lev says after a moment.

Yulian frowns. “What does her phone have to do with anything?”

Lev looks irritated. “It’s a device used for talking to people who may otherwise be far away.”

“Fuck off,” Yulian says. Then he frowns. “You think someone called and talked her out of staying? Maybe one of her friends?”

“Whoever is doing this isn’t a friend,” Lev says softly.

I turn to him. “You think that the person trying to undermine me is the one who got to Jessa?”

Lev nods. “What other explanation is there?”

“Nah, c’mon,” Yulian protests, looking between Lev and me. “There are tons of other explanations. Also, who is trying to undermine you?”

“Grow the fuck up, Yulian. Rodion didn’t get suspicious of me on his own.”

“The hell he didn’t! He knew about your problems with Marina. Papa Bear got mad. Simple as that.”

“Yes, and every time I managed to convince him that I didn’t have anything to do with her death, he came back, his suspicions stronger than ever.”

“Because someone was stoking the rumors,” Lev adds. “Putting fuel on the fire.”

“This is all just a theory, though,” Yulian points out. “Right? No hard evidence?”

“Think about it,” I tell my brother. “The rumor was circulating through the underworld from the moment Marina was found dead. Someone was fanning the flames.”

“And why would this person choose to include Jessa in their schemes?” Yulian asks skeptically.

“I don’t know yet. But I guarantee you one thing: I’m going to find out.”

Yulian grunts in acknowledgement, then pulls out his phone and starts hitting keys manically.

“What are you doing?”

He barely glances at me. “Trying to see if I can find any leads. See if maybe we can close in on whoever it is that has it out for you.”

Lev meets my eyes and shrugs. “It’s not a bad idea...”

“No, it’s not,” I admit. But my focus is not really on the shadow enemy I’m fighting at the moment.

It’s on the woman I love who’s carrying my baby.

Lev seems to sense the same thing. He moves next to me and says softly, “We’ll find her, brother. I swear to you.”

But I don’t need reassurance; I need answers.

“I have no doubt,” I tell him. “But in what state of mind? Whatever forced her out of here was convincing enough to make her do a one-eighty on me. On us.”

“Is it possible she stumbled across something she shouldn’t have?”

“Like what?”

Lev gives me a knowing look. “The tapes?”

I scoff at the suggestion. “Those tapes are under lock and key in my office. But I have a feeling I know who she might have called.”

“Who?” This time, it’s Yulian who asks.

His eyes still dart between me and the phone, but he seems interested. “A man named Christopher Eckhart,” I say grudgingly. “A friend. The two of them are close.”

“How close?”

Too damn close for my liking, is the answer that comes to the tip of my tongue. But I repress the unwanted thought. “They’ve been friends since college.”

“Is that all they are?” Yulian probes.

Lev throws him a warning look, but my brother is too distracted to pay attention.

“Of course that’s all they are,” I growl. “She’s carrying my baby. She agreed to move into my home. Do I look like the kind of man who shares?”

Yulian raises his eyebrows, his expression turning stubborn. “She did all that right before she left without telling you. Sounds like she may have been telling you what you wanted to hear.”

I narrow my eyes at Yulian. “You really think I’m that easy to fool?”

“She is the first girl I’ve heard you refer to as ‘your woman,’” he says. “As far as I’m concerned, anything is possible now. I wouldn’t be surprised to see pigs flying past the window.”

Lev steps between us before I can get angry. “Don’t listen to him, Anton. I’m sure there’s an explanation for why Jessa left, and the sooner we find her, the sooner we find out what it is.”

“Have you tapped her phone?” Yulian asks.

“No.”

“What is this, amateur hour?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “She wasn’t my prisoner. I didn’t see the need.”

“So we wait for her to use her credit cards?” Lev suggests.

“She won’t,” I say confidently. “She’s too smart for that.”

“Then—”

“Like I said, she’ll be with Chris.”

Yulian looks unimpressed. “Wherever he is.”

“It won’t take that much effort to hunt him down,” I point out.

“Lev?”

“On it.”

He’s already heading out the door. That’s good.

On the other hand, it leaves Yulian and me alone, which isn’t ideal. My brother isn’t the best company when I’m already on edge. He has no filter, and there is no one as good as family at driving you fucking crazy.

“I should have nipped that goddamn rumor in the bud a long time ago,” I growl to no one in particular. “I shouldn’t have left it to run its course.”

Yulian slumps into a seat and kicks his feet up. “Some rumors run their course. Others just pick up steam. Especially when there’s a little truth to them. Streisand Effect. Like Barbara. The singer, you know?”

I turn to my brother as my irritation melts into anger. The kind of anger that requires an outlet. My fists clench.

Yulian notices. “Hey, c’mon now, you know what I mean.”

“I don’t, actually. Why don’t you explain it to me?”

He sighs. “Listen, brother, I’m on your side. If you say you didn’t kill her, then I believe you.”

“Do you?” I ask.

My voice is low but sharp. Even Yulian can’t miss the implication of violence.

“How can you even ask me that?”

“Because from the moment you found Marina’s body, you’ve looked at me differently.”

“Differently how?”

“Like you’ve been trying to figure out if I killed her or not. Like you don’t believe the words that come out of my mouth.”

Yulian stares at me for a second, still waiting for a punchline that will never come. Then he sighs. “Anton, when I found her... well, it wasn’t a suicide. Someone killed her. I know what I saw.”

“She pissed off a lot of people.”

“I know that. She had enemies. But it’s just, like, the timing of everything, you feel me?”

“Listen to me, little brother,” I say, fighting through my anger in order to get the words across. “If I had killed Marina, I would have taken credit for it.”

I meet his eyes and watch as something sad flashes across them. “I believe you,” he murmurs.

“Good. Then let’s put this irritating topic to rest.”

“Agreed,” he says, with a catch in his voice I can’t quite explain. “Listen, we also need to talk about Yaromir and the Ivanovs. They’re—”

“No,” I say, cutting him off. “I don’t give a fuck about the Ivanovs right now.”

“But they’re ripe for the plucking,” he protests.

“Not my top priority.”

The shock on Yulian’s face fades after a moment. “Wow, you really do care about her, don’t you?”

“Don’t look so surprised,” I snap.

He smiles. “You first.”

JESSA

“This is where you grew up?”

After fourteen hours of travel, a time change, two airplanes, and a car ride, it’s possible I’m hallucinating the stately mansion in front of me.

But if I’m hallucinating, then so is Freya. She’s looking up at the house with a fond smile.

When she turns to me, the smile remains, though it starts to look a little sheepish. “Actually, this was just the country home where we spent our summers.”

I whistle under my breath. “Wowza.”

Her embarrassed smile only gets more pronounced. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Are you kidding? It’s a huge deal. You neglected to mention you’re a rich kid.”

She waves me away with her hand. “No, my parents are rich. I’m broke as can be.”

“Potato, poh-tah-to, tomato, tom-ah-to.”

The suited driver carries our bags up the polished stone steps that lead to the entrance of Freya’s country house. The facade is made of red brick and what looks like a buttery yellow sandstone. They might clash, were it not for the delicate ivy creeping up the walls and tying everything together like fine emerald thread.

I take it all in, shaking my head in awe. “It’s so nice,” I mumble. “Actually, ‘nice’ doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

The doors open before we can reach them. The man standing at the threshold is an older gentleman wearing what can only be described as a butler’s uniform.

“This is Clark,” Freya says, gesturing me inside. “He’s been with my family for almost two decades now.”

“Ms. Freya,” he says with a half-smile. If he smiled fully, I think his face might crack. His eyes flit to me with disinterest. “Welcome to Laurel Manor, madam.”

“That’s a pretty name,” I say, hoping the austere British butler will warm to me in time. “Do you know its history?”

He hesitates slightly, his eyes moving to Freya and then back to me. “I believe the family that built the manor were called the Laurels.”

“Oh, that’s interesting.”

His expression suggests otherwise.

Freya links her arm with mine and pulls me into the manor. It really is beautiful. Despite the elements of contemporary living that make up the interior—shimmering glass framed in sleek black metal, floating steel stairs, a few harsh, abstract paintings—there are also little nods to a bygone era. Like the diagonal timbers that make up the walls and the large casement windows that overlook the backyard.

“I’ll ensure your bags are put in your respective rooms,” Clark says, even though he makes no attempt to pick up our luggage.

I’ve traveled light. One suitcase and a duffel bag. It was more than slightly depressing how neatly my life could fit into two bags. I even put my first frying pan in the suitcase. It’s the only sentimental possession I allowed myself to bring. Everything else is consigned to the dustbin of my past.

“Don’t mind Clark,” Freya whispers once the butler is gone. “He seems like a stuffy old codger, but that’s only because he is.”

She laughs at her own joke while I shake my head. “He doesn’t seem to like me,” I say.

“He just doesn’t know you,” she dismisses. “He’s accustomed to seeing the same type of people all the time.”

“Is it really just that? Maybe he loathes Americans in particular.”

“Sure, but who doesn’t?” Her eyes twinkle and then she yanks on my arm. “Come on. I want to show you the gardens.”

It’s lovely outside, if a little gloomy. The clouds hang over us, casting a gray pall on the freshly mowed lawn. I’m wearing a light sweater, though I’m not quite sure it’s up to the task. I’m usually better at handling the cold, but not recently. I wonder if the change has anything to do with my pregnancy.

“You okay, Jessa?” Freya asks, watching me with a worried expression on her face.

I nod. “I’m... fine.”

“That wasn’t convincing at all.”

I take a deep breath. “It’s really beautiful here. And you’re so nice to do this for me. I just feel... sad, I guess.”

“Of course you do. You just left your home and you have no idea when you’ll go back. Or even if you’ll go back.”

That sends another storm of shivers running down my spine. I can’t imagine never going back. America might not have always been perfect, but it was home.

I’m still hoping it will be home to my child, too.

“I really, *really* appreciate you bringing me here, Freya,” I tell her sincerely. “I don’t know how I could have done this without you.”

She waves away my gratitude. “You would have figured it out.”

“I’m not so sure.”

She gives me a reassuring smile. “You’re a capable woman. And you’ll get through this. You just need to put Anton behind

you.”

“That’s a big ask,” I mutter, mostly to myself.

“Because you’re in love with him?”

I glance towards her, wondering why she makes me repeat it so often. I hate addressing the truth of my feelings because it only reminds me that I can never lean into them.

“I’m trying not to think about him, actually.”

She fidgets uncomfortably. “Listen, Jessa, you’re my friend and I feel like you deserve my honesty, so I’m giving it to you: trying to ignore his memory won’t work. All you’re doing is suppressing your feelings for him.”

“What do you suggest I do then?”

“Stay here with me for a while,” she says. “And we’ll figure it out. Together.”

“No,” I insist. “I need to get back on my feet. I need to figure out what my next move is going to be.”

“Who needs a move? Do an anti-move. Do nothing. Sit and meditate in my garden for a month, eat until you explode, learn how to, like, juggle or play piano or something. Whatever you feel like doing.”

“It’s not that,” I say, frustrated that I can’t seem to put my feelings into words. “I just want something real, something reliable. My life sure as hell wasn’t perfect, but there were things I could count on. I could count on my job, my friends, my apartment. I had roots. I was comfortable. I was happy.”

“You can do all that here, you know,” she points out.

“In England?”

“Why not?” she asks. “I’d be here to help.”

I frown. “You’re not going back to the States?”

“I’m not sure yet,” she admits. “It was fun for a minute, and then I got homesick. I guess I’m just hoping that my favorite part of the States will decide to stay here with me.”

I laugh. “If you’re referring to me, then I’m flattered, but you really didn’t get around much.”

“I saw enough to know.” She smiles, but her expression grows serious after a moment. “As you can see, my family has money, Jessa. I can make sure that he won’t find you.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want you getting involved.”

“I’ve got news for you: I’m already involved.”

She’s right. I can try and pretend like I’ve kept my friends out of everything, but it’s far from the truth. I dragged Chris and Freya into this mess right along with me. The guilt makes me lightheaded.

“Is there a place we can sit?” I ask feebly.

“There’s a bench right here,” Freya says, pointing behind us. “Jessa, are you okay? You look pale all of the sudden.”

“I’ll be fine,” I say quickly. “This pregnancy is just really taking it out of me.”

I turn and sit down on the bench. Only when I look up do I realize that Freya is staring at me with wide eyes and a jaw hanging to the floor.

She closes her mouth and then opens it again. “Pregnancy?”

Oh fuck. How have I gone this long without telling her about the baby? “Oh God, I’m sorry. I meant to tell you. I thought I had... but that was Chris.”

“You’re pregnant?”

I nod. “I found out the same day that I discovered the truth about Anton.”

She flinches. “And he’s the father?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus,” she breathes. “Joseph and Mary, too.”

“I know, that was pretty much my reaction.”

She tosses her head from side to side, as if to make this new revelation sit right in her brain. “When—what—how did you find out?”

“Ironically, Anton was the one who told me. I passed out after—well, I just passed out. And when I woke up, there was this doctor examining me. He asked me when my last period was, and I still didn’t connect the dots. Not until Anton entered and dropped the bomb on me.”

“He knew before you did?”

“Yes.”

“And how did he seem?” she asks.

“He seemed...”

The memory flashes in my mind. The way he had looked at me. Like I was important. Like I mattered—not just in a general sense and not just because of what I was carrying inside of me, but because of who I was. Who I was *to him*, in particular.

“Happy,” I finish. “He seemed really happy.”

“So he actually wants this baby?”

I frown at the sour expression on her face. “Anton has done a lot of shitty things, but not wanting to be a father isn’t one of them. What’s with that look?”

“Because, Jessa,” she says, her tone harsher than I’ve ever heard it, “if he wants this child, he’s not just going to forget about you. He’s going to hunt you down.”

Hunt. The word feels aggressive and intimidating and jarring. And also wrong, somehow. Once again, I have to resist the urge to defend Anton.

“Which is exactly why I can’t stay here long,” I tell her instead of cracking open that particular can of worms. “I don’t want you getting in the middle of this.”

Far from mollified, she’s starting to look pissed off. “I’m not letting you deal with him alone, Jessa. We’re in this together now.”

“Why do you care so much?” I ask, both touched and curious.

“Because you’re me. I feel like I’ve been in your exact position before. And I wish I’d had someone in my life who

was willing to get in the trenches with me.” She kneels down in front of me and takes my hand in hers. “I went through some dark times, Jessa,” she says softly. “And there has to be something good to come out of my darkest moments. I think this is it. I went through all that so I could help you.”

“You really believe that?” I ask, slightly in awe of this woman. She’s so strong, so fierce. She makes me feel capable.

“I have to,” she says with a sad smile. “For the sake of my mental health, if nothing else. So just let me help you.”

“But—”

“No buts, Jessa. Just say okay.”

She stares at me, her blue-brown eyes catching the one ray of sunlight that has managed to squeeze between a gap in the cloud cover.

“Okay.”

She smiles and leans back. “Good. I’m glad we’ve got that settled.”

She’s using the word generously, though. Because I know, deep down, nothing is settled. I’m going to have a baby in seven or eight months. I don’t have a job or a plan. I don’t even have a family I can rely on to help me if things get tough. Both my parents are of the mind that children should be born within the confines of marriage. Anything else is simply unacceptable.

I don’t want to face their judgment. I don’t want lectures, either. Because the simple truth of the matter is, as utterly inconvenient and scary as this pregnancy is to me, it’s still something I’m happy about.

Despite the circumstances that led me here.

Despite Anton.

I close my eyes and try to push his face from my mind. But no matter what I do, I can still see him. I can picture the tender smile that played over his face minutes before everything fell apart.

I also see now what I should have seen then: if something feels that good, it can't possibly be trusted.

"I take it you're going to keep the baby?"

"It wasn't ever a question," I admit.

"You're a brave one. It's going to be okay, Jessa," Freya says. "You'll see. I have you now."

I smile at the way she phrases it. "I appreciate that. More than you now."

She's quiet and contemplative for a moment. Then she asks, "You miss him, don't you?"

I'm too tired to pretend anymore. "It's weird how much. I haven't even known him for that long."

"I wonder how many other women have felt that way about him," she muses. "Probably quite a few, if I had to guess."

That sends a wave of unease straight through me, but I don't address it. I don't want to.

Freya presses on. "I know how you feel, Jessa. I know what it's like to want something you know is bad for you. I know what it's like to love a man you know you must leave." She hesitates for a moment before her eyes finally find mine again. "And I know what it's like to want a baby whose father you can't keep."

It takes a moment for me to catch up with her words. "Wait... You mean... you were pregnant?"

"With my ex's baby," she confirms with a sad smile. "I lost the child, though. Somewhere in my second trimester."

"How?"

"We had a bad fight," she explains. "He hit me, I started bleeding, then I miscarried a few days later."

My chest clenches hard. "Oh my God, Freya..."

A tear gathers in the corner of her eye, but she manages to keep her composure. "That's when I decided to leave him,

once and for all. That's why I came to Los Angeles in the first place."

"I didn't know."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner," she says. "I just... I didn't want you to pity me."

"I don't pity you. I feel sympathy for you," I tell her, grabbing her hand. "I can't imagine what you must have gone through."

"I tell myself it was a good thing that I lost the baby," she says. "A child shouldn't be born into a hateful home. But most days, I don't believe myself."

The tear slips down her cheek. I want to cry, too. She turns her face up to me slowly.

"Would you hate me if I admitted that I was jealous?" she asks in a small voice. "I'm happy that you're happy to be having this baby. But I'm also—"

"It's okay," I say immediately. "I don't hate you. I understand."

She gives me a teary smile. "Thank you. Would you excuse me for a bit?"

"Of course. I'll be here."

She nods and heads into the manor. I have a feeling she wants some privacy so she can cry in that desperate, no-holds-barred way that's cathartic for the soul.

I wait until I'm alone before I pull out my phone and try to call Chris. He doesn't answer, so I hang up, count to fifty, and call right back. He always jokes that I catch him right when his hands are full or he's in the bathroom.

But when the call goes unanswered a second time, I decide to send him a text instead.

Hey Chris, I just wanted to check in and tell you that I'm safe. It's beautiful here and I'm glad I'm not alone. I miss you though. Wish I could see your face right now. It always calms me down. Don't waste too much time worrying about me. Xoxo, Jess the Mess.

I finish the text and set my phone down next to me. It's getting colder, but for some reason, I can't bring myself to go back inside.

I place my hand over my belly. Weirdly, I still don't feel pregnant the way I expected to. I try to imagine the kind of life that I can realistically give my child, and I keep coming up blank. Well, not quite blank—more of a twisting, inexplicable emptiness that makes me feel like I'm going to throw up. Like the future itself is making me sick.

So when my phone buzzes with a text, I turn to it gratefully.

CHRIS: *I'm glad you're safe. Where did you end up? Is it comfortable? I miss you too.*

I wonder why he hasn't just called me back, but I figure he has a life, too. I don't want to disrupt it any more than I already have.

ME: *It's called Laurel Manor. It's every bit the amazing English country house you would expect. I can almost imagine Elizabeth Bennet walking through the gardens. That's where I'm sitting right now. Wish you were here too.*

CHRIS: *Sounds nice.*

He doesn't respond after that, and I close the conversation thread feeling weirdly disappointed. I've put Chris through a lot. I can't expect him to just keep calm and carry on like everything is normal. Still, it sucks to be physically and emotionally far away from him.

But as I sit, staring out over the landscaped gardens, I realize that the sadness inside of me is actually longing. Loneliness.

And it's specific to one person.

The person I most wish was here with me right now.

Spoiler: it's not Chris. Like Freya said, it's for the man I know I can't have.

The man I know I have to leave behind.

The man who's breaking my heart.

JESSA

I wake up to nausea and the light patter of raindrops hitting my window.

The guest room in Freya's family's estate is more than nice enough. The room is big and the bed is comfortable and the fresh-cut lilies in a vase by the window are such a thoughtful touch.

But all that lovely ambience can't permeate my sleep, apparently.

I tossed and turned all night, dreams plaguing me. At one point, I sat up in bed and saw Marina's ghost standing in the corner of the room, watching me, as gray and fuzzy and indistinct as she was in that video.

Except for her eyes—her eyes were a bright, eerie blue. She didn't blink as I tried desperately to wake myself up.

Of course when I did finally wake up, I was alone. Nothing in the corner except the delicate floral wallpaper.

Sleep was elusive after that, and now, I'm tired of trying. I pull back the covers and walk over to the windows. The garden looks like a dream from here. The bright spring colors are a contrast to the gray day and the fresh coating of rain adds a magical sheen to the landscaping.

I stand there for quite a while, my thoughts zipping by like a high-speed train, moving far too quickly to get a clear look.

But my peaceful garden gazing is cut short when a bout of nausea hits me sideways.

“Oh no.”

I rush to the bathroom and just barely make it before my stomach empties. It rips through me ruthlessly. When there’s nothing left to come out, I release my iron grip on the toilet bowl and get to my feet. I wash my mouth out three times over and decide to soak in the clawfoot tub until the feeling passes.

All I can think about is how well Anton took care of me when I fell sick on the job. A man who brings a woman freshly made lemonade can’t be *completely* evil, can he?

On second thought, maybe I better not answer that question.

I soak until my fingers turn pruny, wishing I could disappear beneath the soapy water and escape my thoughts. Then I get out of the tub and dry myself off. There’s a full-length mirror on the opposite wall of the bathroom, so I drop my towel and go to stand in front of it.

I definitely don’t look pregnant. My stomach, while lacking in definition, is extremely flat. Even my breasts don’t look much bigger than normal.

I run my fingers over my nipples and draw in a sharp breath. They’re sensitive. That’s new.

Though Anton had the unique ability to draw new sensations out of me. I circle my hand over my skin, letting myself imagine him for just a moment.

Then I freeze.

“Goddammit.” I exhale sharply and turn away from the mirror.

I’m here to move on. I *have* to move on.

I rifle through my suitcase and pick out jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt, and one of my favorite beige cardigans. Once I’m dressed, I head downstairs to look for Freya.

I find her in the kitchen, sitting in front of a table laden with scones, jams and pastries.

“Hey,” she says when I enter. “Did you sleep well?”

I decide that telling her about my nightmare would be pointless. “I slept fine. Overslept, in fact.”

“Well, you need the rest. So does your baby.”

I nod, eyeing her as subtly as I can. Rubbing my pregnancy in her face is the last thing I want to do. I know she won't take it that way, but I also don't know what her triggers are. Traumatic loss has a funny way of erupting again at the tiniest little inclination.

She deserves better than that.

“What can I get you?” she asks, gesturing to the table.

“I think my stomach needs to settle a little,” I say. “Feeling a bit nauseous.”

“Oh, morning sickness? The worst. That's definitely something I didn't enjoy about pregnancy,” she says. She seems placid enough. Maybe I'm overthinking the sensitivity-to-her-loss thing.

“Maybe I'll have a scone later.”

She nods. “They're homemade. Marge is an amazing pastry chef.”

I glance around to the portly older woman busying herself in the back of the kitchen. She has poodle-like curly hair and an expression that reminds me of a stern middle school teacher.

“But it's important you get something into your system,” Freya continues. “Marge has this amazing nausea remedy. She made it for my mother when she was pregnant with me.”

I glance at Marge. She's stirring a drink with a yellowish tint. It's definitely not lemonade, though.

I wonder briefly how Freya knew I was having morning sickness. She just asked me if I was feeling okay but her maid-slash-chef is already whipping up a cure? Weird.

I put the thought out of my head as soon as it arises. I'm not in Anton's thrall anymore. Not everything is a conspiracy.

“It tastes a bit funky,” Freya warns. “But it'll settle your stomach.”

When Marge brings over the drink, I accept it with a smile. But the older woman barely looks at me. Apparently, British

hospitality isn't the warmest.

I take a sip of the drink. It actually tastes okay. "It's sweet."

Freya nods. "Yeah, it can be."

I take a bigger sip, and I realize that the sweetness is more of a distraction, to hide the distinctly sour taste just underneath. But Freya is right: it does settle my stomach, so I end up finishing most of my glass in a few gulps.

"Do your parents know we're here?" I ask when I'm done.

"They do. I called them ahead of time to let them know we'd be staying at the manor for at least a few weeks."

"Will they be coming down any time soon?"

Her mouth twists. I don't know if it's irritation or hurt or something else entirely. "Um, no, actually. They have a few events to attend this month, so they can't spare the time."

"We could go down to London to see them," I suggest.

"Not necessary," she says quickly. "Honestly, I'd rather just avoid them."

"Things are still strained between you guys, then?"

She sighs and bites into a jam-filled scone. "They didn't believe me," she says. "When I told them about my ex and what he was doing to me. They just... they made excuses for him."

I shake my head in disbelief. "How could they possibly not believe you?"

"I've been asking myself the same thing for-fucking-ever. But every time I went to them, they'd tell me how lucky I was. They said he was a perfect match for me, that I just needed to figure out how to 'handle' him."

"That's bullshit."

"One hundred percent. So you see why I'd prefer to avoid them. We'll have more fun out here alone anyway," she says with a false smile. "Who needs them?"

"Right." I give her a sad smile.

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” she snaps suddenly with more venom than usual.

“I’m not,” I insist, my smile fading away at once. “I was actually just thinking about my own parents.”

“Oh.” She softens. “Same boat?”

“Not nearly as bad, by the sound of it,” I clarify. “But my mother did advise me to forgive Dane and take him back.”

“Seriously? Is she aware that he was shagging your maid of honor on the day he was supposed to be marrying you?”

“I made her aware of it. She still seemed to think that I should bank on second chances.”

Freya snorts derisively. “I don’t believe in second chances. They were invented by the men who knew they were going to fuck up the first time around.”

I laugh and wince at the same time. “There have to be some exceptions, right?”

She shrugs. “None that I’ve ever come across.”

I can’t really fault her cynicism. She’s been through enough to warrant it. But I can see now that her easygoing nature is a front. A makeshift façade to hide how broken she is underneath.

“You know, it’s gonna turn around for you,” I say confidently.

She brings her troubled eyes to mine. “How do you know?”

“Instinct,” I tell her. “You’re a good person, Freya. And you’re going to get what you deserve.”

She looks away, fighting her emotion. “You know the crazy thing about all this?” she murmurs a moment later. “I still love him.”

She is gazing down at her lap as though there’s an unsolvable code written across her legs.

I do feel sympathy for her. But maybe I’m a bad person, because I’m also caught up in my own problems, wondering if I’m hurtling down the same path as Freya.

Will I have to live the rest of my days running from the man I'm in love with? Will I have to spend the rest of my nights fighting my feelings for him, praying that one day they'll just disappear?

"He wasn't good to you," I remind her—or maybe it's myself that I'm reminding. "He hurt you, Freya. He abused you. Whenever you find yourself missing him, you need to remind yourself of that."

"Is that what you're doing now?"

I can hear irritation in her voice, but I don't take it personally. "I'm trying," I admit. "It's hard. Mostly because... well, he never actually treated me badly. In fact, he was... kind."

"Kind?" she repeats, sounding shocked.

"Yeah," I say. "He isn't what you'd expect him to be. I assumed he'd be this controlling, obnoxious brute. But the reality is, he can be tender."

My description of him has my heartstrings tugging in a million different directions. And yet, I can't stop. Simply talking about him is comforting.

Maybe a part of me wants to keep certain memories alive. I have a feeling I'll be living off them for years to come.

Even if everything else good in my life rots away into oblivion.

"What's that like?" Freya asks.

"What?" I ask, stuck between her question and my own reverie.

"What's it like to have a man treat you with tenderness?"

I have the urge to reach out and hug her, but I don't want her to think I'm pitying her. So I focus on the glass of orange juice in front of me that I still haven't touched.

"It was this... perfect feeling," I whisper. "A mixture of feeling comfortable and safe. Like... like I could trust where I was." I frown, wondering if I sound completely batshit. "Does that make sense?"

“Actually, it makes perfect sense.” But her expression falls as she says it.

“Surely you and your ex had some happy moments before it all went to hell?” I ask, not wanting her to retreat to that dark place in her heart. “Surely he treated you well at the beginning?”

“He was the cocky, confident type,” she explains. “He hooked me with his charm, not his sensitivity. That should have been my first warning.”

“But you fell in love with him?”

“Trust me, it’s hard not to fall in love with a man like him,” she says. “He’s just so...”

“Sure of himself?” I offer.

She snaps her fingers and nods. “That’s exactly it. I’ve always felt like I was flailing, you know? Like half the time, I don’t even know myself. He just made me feel like he was the one thing in life I could count on. He was the constant.”

“The constant. That sounds familiar.” We exchange a sad smile. “Guess we’re both in the same boat, huh?”

“Apparently,” she says with a tired sigh. “I dunno about you, but I’m sick of it.”

“What about the guy you’re seeing?” I ask.

“What guy?”

“The one you told me about, you clown,” I remind her with a laugh. “But I guess the fact that you need to be reminded doesn’t bode well for him.”

She gives me a half-hearted laugh. “You’re right about that. It was never going to be anything.”

“Because of you?” I ask pointedly. “Or because of him?”

“Both?”

“Sounds like a question.”

She bites her lip and sighs. “Because of me. Final answer.”

“Because you’re not letting yourself move on.”

She raises an eyebrow. “You make it sound like I have control over my feelings.”

“Well, it has been a while and—”

“What about you and Chris?” she asks.

I stare at her, perplexed. “Chris?”

“It’s obvious the two of you are meant to be,” she says. “And yet you wasted your time running after a man that you couldn’t possibly have.”

“I... that... Chris and I are friends,” I insist. “*Best* friends, in fact.”

“Right. And best friends never hook up? If that’s the case, a lot of romance novel authors are going to be out of a job all of the sudden.”

“I’m not saying it never happens—I’m just saying it’s not happening for us.”

“If Anton hadn’t been in the picture, would you have considered it with Chris?”

I stumble over my tongue. Because the honest truth is I can’t possibly tell what I might have done if I’d never met Anton. I can’t see my future anymore. I can’t see alternate realities, either.

All I see is him.

“You sabotaged your own life, Jessa,” Freya says gently. “Just like I did. Sometimes, I think I’m still doing it.”

I shake my head. “I love Chris. I do. But I don’t think I could ever be with him, like, romantically.”

“Really? Even though he’s the first person you call when shit hits the fan?”

“That’s because—”

“Do you feel safe with him?” she interrupts. “Are you comfortable around him?”

“He’s my best friend!” I insist. “Of course I feel all those things with him.”

“Then maybe forgetting Anton is the first step.”

I have no idea what to say to that. So I don't say anything at all.

Freya gives me a smile. “I'm not trying to be a bitch, you know,” she says. “I'm just trying to show you what's right in front of your face.”

“Yeah. I know.” I nearly jump a foot when my phone starts ringing.

Freya laughs. “Who is it?”

“Not sure,” I say when I glance at the screen. “It's an unknown number.”

Freya jerks upright. “Do you think it's him?”

“Anton?” I stare down at the phone, wondering if he's on the other end. It makes me feel close to him, though I have no idea if I'm right. I'm not sure if I want to throw the phone across the room or squeeze it to my chest.

Freya holds out her hand. “Let me answer it just in case.”

“I got a new phone,” I remind her. “And a new number.”

“He might have more resources at his disposal than we realize. Let me answer it.”

I'm too flustered to argue with her, so I pass the phone over. She answers the call, using a deeper tone than her usual tempo.

“Hello?” Her frown relaxes a second later. “Oh, Chris. It's just you...”

I exhale along with her and reach for the phone.

“She's right here,” Freya says. “Hold on.”

I take the phone while Freya sinks back down into her seat and pulls her own phone out. “Hey Chris,” I say, craving the sound of his voice. “Whose phone are you calling from? I don't have this number saved—”

“I don't have my phone on me,” he says urgently. “Be normal and make some excuse to walk away. Do it now.”

I freeze, rattled by his tone. “Um, okay, cool,” I say, trying to sound as casual as possible. “I’m gonna take this outside,” I say to Freya.

She gives me a nod but doesn’t look up from her phone. As I walk, I blab on about the house and England, about the flight here. I talk about everything and nothing until I’m far enough away from the house that I can be sure Freya won’t be able to hear us.

“Okay,” I say, dropping my casual tone. “What the hell is going on? Why do you sound so freaked out?”

“Where are you right now?”

“You know where I am. I told you last—”

“Where’s Freya?”

“Back in the house where I left her,” I say impatiently. “Why?”

“Jessa, I don’t think she’s who she claims she is.”

My heart clenches. “What are you talking about? Of course she is.”

“Jessa, I’m fucking serious. I’ve had an uneasy feeling about her since we met. And since you decided to leave the country with her, I decided to... to do some digging.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I was right to be worried.”

“You’re not making any sense right now, Chris.”

“I called Simon,” he says.

“Simon who?”

“Simon Cooper, Jessa,” he says with exasperation. “Your landlord.”

“Okay?” I say, trying to reign in my confusion. “Why?”

“I mentioned Freya. I asked about her lease. He had no clue who she was.”

I can't tell if the chill I'm feeling is a result of the wind or if it's something else entirely. "Maybe he was confused."

"He's the landlord. He knows who he's renting to. And he said he never rented an apartment to anyone named Freya. But he did rent the apartment below yours—to a man. Apparently, it was a short-term rental agreement and the man in question paid in cash."

I'm gripping the phone so tightly my hand is actually starting to hurt. "I've been in her apartment, Chris. She was definitely living there."

"I don't know who that bitch is," he growls. "But she's not who she says she is, Jessa. Get the hell out of there, do you hear me?"

"Chris—"

"I'm serious. You don't follow your instincts, Jess. But this time, I'm going to need you to dig down deep and listen." He's pleading with me, his voice breaking with fear. "And if you can't do that, then at least listen to me. Trust me. You promised me you would, remember?"

Had I promised him that? At this point, I'm not sure. Then again, I'm not sure of anything anymore.

"Please," he continues desperately. "Please, Jess. Don't trust her. Don't act differently, either. Just get your shit and go. If you can't get your things, then leave them. They're not important. You are."

I hear something behind me and my grip around the phone tightens. "I've got to go."

"Jessa—"

I hang up before he's done talking.

Then I turn to find Freya looking right at me.

ANTON

Hey Chris, I just wanted to check in and tell you that I'm safe. It's beautiful here and I'm glad I'm not alone. I miss you though. Wish I could see your face right now. It always calms me down. Don't waste too much time worrying about me. Xoxo, Jess the Mess.

I've been staring at the text for the last half an hour. So many things stand out. So many things to focus on. So many things to get fucking pissed about.

I miss you. That's one.

Wish I could see your face right now. It always calms me down. There's two.

Xoxo. I'm counting that as three, four, five, and six.

"Can I get you anything, sir?"

I look up at the blonde flight attendant. She's being paid double for the journey since it was so last-minute. And since it's a private jet, she's giving me her full attention. Right now, I don't actually mind.

"Whiskey."

She gives me a bright smile. "Coming right up."

I watch her walk away, but I take no pleasure in the sight. There was a time when my cock would have stiffened at the sight of her tight skirt, the way her ass moved beneath it, the promise of more.

But as it stands, I don't feel anything.

I have another forty minutes before the plane touches down in England. From there, it'll take me at least another half an hour before I can get to my destination.

Laurel Manor.

I scroll down the conversation that Jessa thought she was having with Chris. The *Xoxo* makes me clench my teeth every time I read it.

If I didn't know better, I might have suspected there was something going on between the two of them. But upon closer inspection of their texts, it's clear to me that Chris has feelings for Jessa. Unfortunately for the poor bastard, they're not reciprocated.

I scroll up and stop at a random date. March 4th. Three years ago. Jessa sent Chris a picture of a dog in the park. *Reminds me of Cupcake*, read the caption.

CHRIS: *Like the dessert?*

JESSA: *LOL no, dummy, the neighbor's dog. You don't remember Cupcake???*

CHRIS: *Guess not. If you had a dog, what would you name it?*

JESSA: *I'm so glad you've asked, because I've actually given this topic quite a lot of thought. And I've come to the conclusion that I would name my dog... Risotto.*

CHRIS: *The sad part is, I know you're serious.*

I scroll down from there, trying to find a snippet of conversation that will hold my interest. I find it about a month later.

April 7th. Jessa sent the first text at 1:17 am. *How was your date? If you're still with her, then I think I know how it went.* The text is followed by a wink emoji.

Chris replied almost instantly. *She was nice. Really smart and very beautiful.*

JESSA: *Awesome. So you think you'll see her again?*

CHRIS: *Nah.*

J: *Nah?*

C: *We didn't have a whole lot in common.*

J: *It was one date. Give it some time.*

C: *When you know, you know. And I know what I want.*

J: *A perfect woman?* She added a GIF of a woman palming her forehead.

C: *No... just the perfect woman for me. Vanessa, as lovely as she was, is not for me. I want things to be easy and natural with the woman I end up with. I want to be comfortable.*

J: *How are you supposed to get comfortable with any woman if you won't go on a second date with her?*

C: *I was comfortable with you from the first moment we met. There's two minutes between Jessa's previous message and this response. I can picture him languishing over whether to send it or not. Chewing his nails, tapping his heels, agonizing again and again.*

J: *That was different.*

C: *How?*

J: *We're best friends.*

Chris's final text that day doesn't arrive until almost nineteen minutes later. *You're right.*

I'm so engrossed in my deep dive into Jessa's relationship with Chris that I don't notice the attendant reappear.

"Here's your whiskey, sir," she says. "Can I get you anything else?"

"No."

"A blanket? A hand towel? Some snacks?"

"Just some peace and quiet," I say in a tone that suggests she's worn out her welcome.

Her face drops and she nods, but she heads to the back of the plane dutifully. and I turn my attention back to Chris's phone.

I scroll up a little to the beginning of a conversation that was started on December 18th by Chris. *I was thinking, if you want some company this Christmas, I could come with you to your parents place. Act as a buffer. What do you think?*

J: *Aw Chris, that's an awesome offer. But I'm not going to be going to their place alone this Christmas.*

C: *No?*

J: *I'm taking Dane. I want to introduce him to them.*

C: *That's just... just... I'm surprised. It's so soon.*

J: *We've been together six months. And it's serious.*

C: *Really?*

J: *Yes, why are you being weird?*

C: *I'm not.*

J: *Do you not like Dane?*

C: *He's fine.*

J: *So that's a no.*

C: *I just think he can be a little full of himself sometimes.*

J: *He's just being funny.*

C: *I doubt that very much.*

J: *Really, Chris? Can you make an effort with this one? I like him.*

C: *Okay.*

J: *Gee, thanks for the enthusiasm.*

I skim down for a while.

J: *So that's it? You're not going to talk to me?*

Chris's reply text comes a full day later. *He's wrong for you, Jessa. I won't apologize for being honest. I think it's a mistake that you accepted his proposal. The guy is a douchebag.*

J: *You're being a douchebag right now.*

C: *I'm being your friend. I'm trying to stop you from making a horrible mistake with your life.*

J: *That's right, Chris. It's MY life. My freaking life. So how about you let me live it as I see fit?*

C: *Fine. Just don't ask me to be a part of it then.*

J: *You can't be serious.*

C: *And yet here we are.*

J: *Why are you doing this?*

C: *Because I love you. It's obvious to me what this means. But it's not obvious to Jessa.*

J: *And I love you. You're my best friend, Chris. I want you to be my best man.*

C: *That's not a thing.*

J: *It's my wedding day. It'll be a thing if I decide to make it a thing.*

C: *I'm not gonna be your best man, Jess.*

J: *Can't you just support me?*

C: *Not when I know this is gonna end badly.*

J: *Guess this conversation is over then.*

C: *Guess it is.*

After that, there's months and months of silence. The next text comes about three months later, from Jessa. *It's weird not talking to you. I miss you. Can we talk?*

Are you still getting married?

Yes.

Then there's nothing to say.

Two days later, Chris writes another text. *For the record, I miss you too.*

I close the conversation thread and tuck the phone away. It's a strange feeling, to be threatened by someone else's

relationship with Jessa. I've never experienced anything remotely similar before.

Then again, I've never cared this much about a woman before.

I sip my whiskey, taking comfort in the dull burn in my tongue and throat. At this point, I'll take anything that gets my mind off my woman, my baby, our future.

When my phone rings, I'm tempted to ignore it. I only pick up because it's Lev. "Yeah?"

"Where the fuck are you?" he demands. "Dimitri told me you got on a jet?"

"I did."

"I thought you were going to go see her friend?"

"I did."

"What happened from there?"

"I started to smell a rat."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that shit is going down. I need to get to Jessa right now."

"What did the friend say?"

"Not a ton. But I'm not surprised. He doesn't trust me."

"So he's still alive?" he asks dubiously.

"Of course he's still alive. I wasn't planning on killing him."

Though based on some of the text messages I read off his phone, I could amend that decision.

"I assume he told you where Jessa is?" asks Lev.

I snort. "No, he's the loyal type."

"I'm confused why he's still alive then."

"I let him live, but I took his phone."

"You and Jessa deserve each other. Two kleptomaniacs. Remind me to lock my phone up when you're around."

I smile. “I texted her earlier with Chris’s number. She gave away her location.”

“Rookie mistake.”

“She’s not used to covering her tracks.”

“So where is she?”

“England.”

There’s a pregnant pause. “Well, that explains the jet.”

“I should be landing soon.”

“And you know where to go from there?”

“Of course. She told me everything.”

“You mean she told Chris everything,” he corrects.

I’m not sure if Lev is trying to piss me off or wake me up to whatever he thinks reality is, but he doesn’t know shit. “Chris can’t save her. I can.”

“Save her from what?” Lev asks immediately.

The suspicion has been twisting in my gut for the last twenty-four hours now. But I can’t confirm anything until I find Jessa.

“I left in a hurry,” I say. “So I didn’t let Yulian in on my plan, either.”

“Do you even have a plan?” Lev asks incredulously.

“Always. Where is my brother?”

“Fuck if I know. Balls deep in some hooker, if I had to guess,” he says. “I’ll have him call you when he emerges.”

“Actually, tell him that I’ll contact him if I need to. I want both of you on stand-by.”

“For?”

I glance out the window and notice that we’re losing altitude. “I’ve got to go. We’re landing soon.”

“Jesus, Ant, you’re really not going to tell me—”

I hang up while he’s still mid-sentence. The stewardess approaches me with a hopeful smile, but I turn pointedly

towards the window and she retreats.

The landing is smooth. I'm at the door before the jet has even come to a complete standstill.

"Get the door open," I order.

The attendant is smart enough not to argue with me. She wrenches the door open, and I jump the two-foot distance between the jet's door and the rolling staircase that's been brought out just for me.

I skim down the stairs. When I'm on the tarmac, I look around for the black Aston Martin I ordered to be waiting for me on the ground when I arrived.

The driver is shifting it into park. The moment he steps out of the car, I push him to the side.

"Keys?"

"They're in the side of the door, sir."

I get in, slam the door shut, and press my foot down on the accelerator. The engine roars and the car rips forward.

I speed through the narrow streets, checking the directions that I've hastily entered into the navigation system.

Forty-five minutes to Laurel Manor. But if I really step on the gas, I can make it there in twenty.

I'm coming for you, Jessa. Get ready.



I'm taking the corners in the road hard when my phone starts ringing. I pick up and Yulian's voice comes through the moment I hit the speaker button.

"Is Lev lying or just high?" he demands. "Are you really in fucking England?"

"I am."

"Where in England, specifically?"

"Where she is."

“That’s really specific,” he growls.

“Why do I need to be?” I ask. “You can’t be here in the next ten minutes, can you?”

“Wait... you’re ten minutes away from her?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus,” he hisses. “When did you even leave?”

“A while ago.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me?” he asks, sounding angry.

“Or Lev?”

“I can deal with this on my own.”

“For fuck’s sake, Anton, you don’t always have to act like you can do every goddamn thing by yourself.”

“Why not? I can.”

“That’s ego talking.”

“No, it’s experience talking,” I snap. “I’ve been at this a lot longer than you have, Yulian.”

“Excuse me, we’re only two years apart—”

“And it might as well be two decades. You were shielded because you were the second son. I was in the trenches way before my time because Otets wanted a super soldier and a ruthless leader all rolled into one,” I snarl. “And just to be clear, I don’t have to tell you or Lev anything. I am your fucking don. I *choose* to inform you when something concerns you. This does not.”

There’s a second or two of silence from Yulian’s end.

“I just want to be there for you,” he says reluctantly. He’s always been better at talking about feelings than I have. But I know it’s not easy for him, either. “You don’t have to do everything alone.”

I’m silent. There’s nothing to say.

“Good luck then, brother,” he sighs in a resigned tone. “Go get your woman.”

“I intend to.”

He hangs up before I do.

According to the navigation system, I’m minutes away from Laurel Manor. With every second that ticks by, I feel the heat of my suspicions grow more and more intense.

It isn’t what Chris told me.

It isn’t even what Jessa has told me.

It’s about the uneven strum of my heartbeat. The way everything feels like it’s been coming down to this moment.

Because even when the die was cast and it seemed like my nightmare was over, I didn’t believe it. I was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And now, at last, here it comes.

Except it is about to fall on my entire future. My woman. My child.

If that comes to pass, there will be no mercy. No reprieve. Only blood and pain.

My revenge carved onto her skin.

JESSA

Freya's sudden appearance startles me. I press a hand to my heart and chuckle. "Hey. I didn't even hear you come out."

She smiles, but something about it seems off. Why do her eyes look secretive all of a sudden? Why are her hands fisted so tight I can see the white of her knuckles?

"Is something wrong?" Freya asks.

I take a step back without even realizing it. Good question—*is* something wrong? Chris says yes.

But Freya has been there for me. She's opened up her home to me. She's shared her innermost trauma with me. Was all that a lie?

I open my mouth to respond, and in those two seconds worth of hesitation, I make a decision.

I've trusted people before and look where that got me. I'll listen to Chris this time, because I've ignored him twice now, and both times cost me dearly.

"I'm fine," I say, forcing myself to smile. "It's just nausea. You know how that goes."

"I know," she says with a solemn nod. "Maybe you should sit down."

There's a bench only a few feet away from me calling my name, but I shake my head. "Actually, I was thinking of going for a drive. Maybe I'll go explore the city."

“The city is like two hours away,” she says. “We can head into town if you want, but it’s not very exciting.”

“There’s no need for you to come with me. I don’t mind doing some window shopping on my own.”

“Nonsense. I love window shopping.”

“But you don’t need to window shop,” I say. “You can actually shop.”

“I may look like a rich girl, but that doesn’t mean I am one,” she says rather defensively. “My parents are the ones with the keys to the kingdom.”

“Maybe you should try to mend fences while you’re here? If you wanted to go into London to talk to them, I would understand.”

She frowns. “You trying to get rid of me or something, Jessa?”

Keep things casual, I think. Stay calm. Be normal.

I titter like she just told a joke, but her blue-brown eyes bore into mine. So deep and intense that I start to feel unsteady and I stumble in place.

“Geez, sorry,” I say, trying to regain control of the moment. “I just feel a little... weird.”

“Weird how?” she asks.

“I don’t know. A little dizzy.”

Freya moves forward and takes my arm. I almost give myself away by flinching, but I succeed in holding it in. I let her drag me over to the bench.

“Sit down,” she says in a stern tone. “I don’t want you falling and hurting that baby.”

She sounds sincere. Like she’s genuinely concerned for me and the baby. Again, I have to fight competing emotions of self-preservation and guilt.

What if Chris is wrong about her and she’s exactly who she says she is?

As much as I love and trust Chris, I still cling to the hope that he's wrong. Because the thought that I could have fallen prey to another pretty face and some charm is almost too much to bear.

"Feel better?" she asks.

"Slightly," I admit. "Getting off my feet did help."

She nods. "I know this is all difficult, Jessa. But trust me, I've got you."

Her smile is so sincere that it makes me mad to think that Chris would put all these doubts about Freya into my head.

She's a good person.

But then... I thought the same thing about Dane.

And Salma.

And Anton.

"Do I need to get you some more of Marge's miracle tonic?" she asks.

"No, that's okay. I don't think I can eat or drink anything right now."

We sit in silence. The urge to study Freya, to try to get inside her head and figure out what she's thinking, is strong. But I don't want to stare at her too much and give myself away.

Though it might be too late for that. Something in the way she holds herself tells me she knows I'm observing her.

"You seem distracted, Jessa," she remarks. "Are you sure nothing is wrong?"

My stomach twitches uncomfortably, but I bite down my discomfort. "I'm sure. I just feel a bit weird, is all. It's just the pregnancy hormones."

"I miss being pregnant," Freya says softly.

I feel the urge to wrap my arm around her and comfort her, but I don't. Chris's warning is still echoing in my head. I feel insane, ping-ponging back and forth between two

irreconcilable options like a little girl plucking petals from a daisy.

He loves me, he loves me not.

I trust her, I trust her not.

“It’ll happen for you one day,” I tell her. “Not everyone is meant to have babies in their twenties. Some people find motherhood later in life.”

“But it’s not really a question of having *a* baby. It’s more like... I want *that* baby. *My* baby. The one I lost.” She glances at me. “Do I sound crazy?”

“Not at all,” I say gently. “You sound human. You sound like a mother who has lost a child. I can’t even imagine what you must have gone through.”

She nods. “I’m still going through it. Not sure it’ll ever end, really.”

“Of course, I didn’t mean to imply—”

“It’s okay, Jessa. I know you didn’t mean it that way.”

Her voice is soft. Melancholy. Like she’s thinking of an alternate reality. One where she was happy with her ex. Where they had a baby they could raise together. Where the bruises never came in the first place.

Looking at Freya feels a little bit like looking at a mirror. She looks the way I feel inside, trying to bat away my own alternative reality.

One that includes Anton. A shared home. A family.

“We’re both strong women,” I say, mostly for myself. “We can get through this.”

But even as I say it, another bout of dizziness has me gripping the edges of the bench so hard that they leave indentations in my skin.

“Jessa...?”

I open my mouth to speak, but white spots appear in front of my eyes instead. The garden disappears for a moment

underneath a haze of chalky hallucinations like television static.

“I... I feel weird,” I say.

“Just breathe,” Freya tells me.

I can feel her hand on my back. But then she removes it suddenly.

“Freya...?”

“Don’t worry,” she says softly. “Give yourself a minute. It’ll pass.”

She’s standing in front of me now, her form blocking out most of the sparse sunlight filtering down into the garden. The grass looks like it’s purple now. The sky looks red. It feels like everything is shifting so fast I can’t keep up.

I try to breathe through the sensation, but the discomfort in my stomach grows with every inhale. There’s an eerie dread running down my spine.

“Freya, I... I think I need to see a doctor.”

She squats down in front of me and takes both my hands. Her expression is concerned, her eyes determined. “You don’t need a doctor, Jessa.”

“Ye... yes I do,” I insist. “I feel r-really bad. Something’s wrong, Freya.”

“Oh, I know, sweetheart. The drink is meant to make you feel this way.”

I retch once, twice, again and again. “I—I thought it was supposed to make me feel better?”

She shrugs. “I had to say something to get you to drink it, didn’t I?”

I blink away the white spots and focus on her face. Is my mind twisting reality or did Freya just say that to me?

My vision floats erratically for a moment before it settles on Freya’s face. Her murky blue-brown eyes are brighter than I’ve ever seen them.

And the look of concern on her face flows seamlessly into a cruel smile.

My hands are still clasped in hers. It's only when I try to remove them that I realize she's the one gripping me.

"What's happening?"

"I don't expect you to figure it out right away," she says. "But I'm sure you'll get it all eventually."

"Chris was... right about you..."

"Did he call to warn you about me?" she asks. "Well, he definitely isn't as gullible as you are, that's for sure. Too bad you don't listen to him."

A knot of pain twists in my stomach and I cringe. "Please," I whisper. "I need a doctor."

"A doctor would only save your baby," she replies in the same gentle tone she's been using all this time. "And that's not what I want."

I have so many questions that I can't get them all out at once. Instead, I sob while Freya squeezes my hands painfully.

"It'll hurt for the next few hours," she tells me. "Miscarrying is never easy."

"Wh—why...?" is all I can squeeze out.

"Why should you get the life I wanted?" she hisses. "Why should you have the baby that was meant for me? It's not fair. So I'm changing the narrative."

I shake my head. "You're not making any sense..."

"That's because you still don't understand, you stupid bitch."

Her tone never changes. It's still soft and melodic. Still comforting and gentle. There's a disconnect between her tone and the words coming out of her mouth.

Her head twists to the side and for the first time, I realize just how blind I've been. Just how gullible.

"You're wearing contacts," I breathe as a shiver rocks through my spine.

“God, yes, and they’re so uncomfortable. Very annoying.” She releases my hands and touches her eye. Carefully, she plucks out one and then the other. “I’m glad I can be rid of them now.”

When she looks up at me again, the murky brown of her eye color is gone. Now, there’s only a bright, uninterrupted blue.

“Oh God...”

Seeing those eyes sends a wave of déjà vu coursing through my extremities. I’ve seen those eyes before. Fierce, vengeful, full of pent-up rage.

I’ve seen them in a nightmare. Or at least, what I thought was a nightmare.

“You were in my room last night.”

She nods. “I watched you for almost an hour last night, and I still don’t see what he sees in you.”

My whole body goes cold. Realization sets in. It’s impossible. And yet...

“Marina?”

She smiles in obvious relief. It’s as if she’s been waiting a long time to hear someone use her real name.

“Hello, Jessa,” she says. “It’s nice to meet properly.”

I turn to the side and dry heave right onto the grass. But before anything can come out, I feel pain at the back of my head.

Before I know it, I’m being pulled upright, forcing my head towards the sky. Marina is standing over me with a fistful of my hair in her hand.

“Oh no, you don’t,” she says calmly. “You’re not throwing up my special little remedy. Not until it’s worked its magic.”

She is frighteningly beautiful. I can see that now. Her terrible blue eyes are vibrant. I can even picture the true color of her natural blonde hair peeking out from beneath the boring brown dye.

“Everyone thinks he killed you.”

She nods. “That’s what they were meant to think. I needed time.”

“Time for what?”

“To plot,” she says simply. “To plan. Of course, you came into the picture and threw a spanner into the works. So I had to readjust.”

“*You* sent me that video,” I gasp. “*You* sent me that picture.”

“I needed to break your faith in Anton.”

“He thinks you’re dead.”

“Everyone does. You’re the only person—apart from my men, of course—who knows I’m alive.”

“Your father...?”

A look of regret passes across her face. “I didn’t plan for that. I never expected Anton to be so ruthless.”

“He’s a don.”

Her eyes snap to my face. “I know what he is,” she growls. “I know him better than you ever will.”

She’s still gripping my hair tightly, but I’m in so much pain that I hardly notice. I’m more concerned with keeping her talking.

“What were you hoping to achieve?” I ask.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she asks. “Revenge.”

“For what? Because Anton wanted to divorce you?”

Her eyes narrow, her blue eyes flaring.

“He would never have divorced me,” she says. “That was just a threat made in anger. He would never have left me.”

“And you call me the gullible one.”

Her hand moves so fast that I only realize she’s struck me when the pain sears across my left cheek.

She squeezes my face in one hand and brings it forcibly to hers. “Like I said, I know him better than you ever will. That

was how we were. Passionate and fiery. We fought hard and we fucked harder. Did he ever tell you that?"

I flinch, but say nothing.

She laughs. "No, why would he? That wouldn't have helped to get you into his bed. Because that's all he really wanted from you, Jessa. He wanted to fuck you. He would have forgotten you soon enough."

"He asked me to move in with him."

I should keep my mouth shut, but anger is overruling my sense of self-preservation.

"Because you're carrying his baby," Marina snarls. "Do you think he would have made the offer if your womb was empty?"

I shake my head. "He has... feelings for me."

Marina throws back her head and laughs. "You poor, deluded little lamb. You're not interesting enough to hold his attention. Trust me."

My vision blurs again. But this time, the white spots turn dark. Marina takes on a shapeless form and I feel my consciousness start to slip.

No. If I pass out now, she'll kill me. She'll kill my baby.

I try to keep my grip on reality. I force my eyes open. But even then, I can't see anything clearly. There's only foggy shapes and searing light and a lot of fear.

"You're a novelty, Jessa," Marina continues. "You're a pretty little distraction. He's had women like you before and they've never lasted."

I slump to the side. I can't hold up the weight of my own head anymore.

"Don't fight it," she says in her calming tone. "There's no point."

No, no, no, no, no...

I hear the screech of a ringtone, loud and demanding.

“What is it?” Marina snaps, answering her phone. “*What?*” She sounds furious, but even in my hazy state, I recognize that she sounds scared, too. “How long?”

I close my eyes, feeling the fight leave my body. Marina drops me to the ground and stomps away. Her footsteps fade out, and then there’s only silence.

I lie there for a long time. Minutes? Hours? I can’t be sure. The whole time, I’m willing my eyelids open, begging and pleading with my body to cooperate. It’s an epic fight, but I manage to get them parted. Just a crack.

Just enough to see a face hanging over me.

Marina’s?

No.

Another face. Familiar. Comforting. Beautiful.

I must be dead. That’s the only reason I can think of for why I’m seeing Anton.

Tears slip from my eyes. I’m not sure if I’m sad or relieved. But if he’s here with me... death won’t be so bad.

ANTON

The doctors keep telling me her body is strong. But Jessa still hasn't woken up since I found her. Even in the moments when her eyes flicker open, they stare unseeingly at me before fading shut again.

"You can go rest if you want," Dr. Mathers says, walking into the suite in her light blue jeans and thick sweater. She doesn't wear the white doctor's coat and, for some reason, I trust her more than the rest of the idiots tending to Jessa. "Standing by her bed is not going to wake her up any sooner."

"No, that's what I hired you people for," I snap. "And yet here we are."

She gives me a solemn nod, unfazed by my irritation. "Her body needs time to recover. She'll wake up when she's ready."

"And the baby?" I demand. "Nobody else has been able to tell me anything."

Her face drops visibly. I almost regret asking the question. "It will be touch-and-go for the next twenty-four hours. We're monitoring the baby carefully, though. I can assure you of that."

"Save her," I say firmly. "Just make sure you save her."

Mathers nods. "I'll do my very best."

"Do better than that."

If she's scared of me, she shows no sign of it. She just gives me a determined nod and slips back out of the room.

I turn towards the floor-to-ceiling windows that look out over London. The view from the seventeenth floor is far from shabby. All I want is for Jessa to wake up and take a look at it with me.

The sound of my ringer slices through the quiet. I reach for my phone. “Yeah?”

“Where are you?” Lev asks.

“The Four Seasons. In the King’s Suite.”

“Ah. I’m assuming that means you got your woman back.”

“In a manner of speaking.”

Sensing my tone, Lev’s voice falls to match it. “Okay. What went wrong?”

“Everything.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Not worried,” I reply. “But ready. You should be ready.”

“Should I get Yulian?” he asks. “Should we be on a conference call for this?”

“No, I’m not interested in talking to Yulian right now.”

“Um... okay. Is there a reason?”

“What do you think?”

The pause on the other side is deliberate. “Do you want to talk now? Or should I call back later?”

Lev has always had a way of cutting through my defenses. One second, I want to hang up on him, but the next, I’m opening up.

“I got there just as she lost consciousness,” I tell Lev. “She was poisoned.”

Lev could ask a million questions. But, ever the pragmatist, all he says is, “Poisoned with what?”

“An old-school homebrew to force a miscarriage.”

He hisses, a sharp inhale. “Someone tried to kill the baby?”

My hand tightens around the phone. “So it would seem. The bitch who helped her run, then jammed the knife in her back. Freya.”

“Where is this bitch now?” Lev asks.

“She made a run for it before I could catch her,” I say. “Before I even saw her. But it doesn’t matter. I know who she is.”

“Anton... you’re starting to lose me again.”

“Doesn’t this feel familiar to you, Lev?” I ask. “She used to pull these fucking deceptive mind games all the time.”

“Anton—”

“Listen to me, Lev.”

The silence on the other line is heavy. He’s already caught up—he’s no fool—but I keep talking anyway. There’s something cathartic about walking him through my process of realization. It helps curtail the rush of murderous adrenaline that shoots through my body every time I think of the bitch who tried to kill my family.

“We never saw Marina’s body, did we?”

Lev grunts in frustration. “Yulian did.”

“Exactly. Yulian fucking did.”

It takes Lev a second to understand what I’m suggesting, but then he scoffs. “What reason would Yulian have to lie about the body?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “But I’m going to find out.”

“Listen, the devil knows Yulian and I have had our differences over the years. But there’s no way he would—”

“He was sloppy, Lev,” I say. “He was clumsy. He got rid of it before I could verify if it was her or not.”

“Did you see her there today?” Lev asks.

“No. She made a run for it right before I arrived.”

“Then how do you know it’s really her?”

“Instinct,” I say. “Experience. Fate.”

“Fate?” Lev repeats incredulously. “Since when do you believe in that kind of hocus-pocus bullshit?”

“I should have been the one to kill her,” I snarl. “I wish I had done it. I wish I deserved the rumor that’s being spread as we speak.”

“Oh, fuck. *She* spread it,” Lev whispers, connecting the dots.

I nod grimly. “Who else?”

“And her father died for it.” Lev exhales. “She was alive all this time and she didn’t even go to the man who raised her. He died not knowing she was still alive.”

My grip on the phone tightens. “She doesn’t trust anyone. She wouldn’t have wanted to risk her plans by going to him. Rodion would have tried to talk her down. And when that failed, he would have come to me himself.”

“She gambled with her father’s life. She lost, but he paid the price.”

“I don’t think you need to be reminded of what a heartless bitch she is. And in this case, I don’t mean that as a compliment.”

I can practically hear him cracking his knuckles, a thinking habit of his. “Okay, so why involve Jessa?”

“Because Marina knew I was interested in her. Do you think she got any less possessive after her fake funeral?”

“Point taken.” He sighs again. He’s doing a lot of that. “How is Jessa?”

“She’ll survive,” I say. “It’s touch-and-go for the baby.”

I say it with a sense of detachment that I absolutely don’t feel. The thought of losing another child—another *wanted* child—feels like the kind of failure I’m not accustomed to experiencing. The kind of failure I refuse to let come to pass.

“Fuck,” Lev breathes. “I’m sorry, brother.”

“It’s not over yet.”

“I know—”

“I’m going to make the bitch pay this time,” I vow, more to myself than to him. “I’m going to make her suffer before I blow her brains out.”

“How do you plan on doing that?” Lev asks. “She can disappear into thin air if she chooses to. She’s got the resources.”

“But not the temperament. She won’t be able to disappear without getting revenge. Without making me suffer.”

“Do you really think that’s what she wants?”

“Without a motherfucking doubt.”

Yet another sigh. “She’s going to be out for Jessa’s blood now,” he warns. “As well as the baby’s.”

“I know. Which is why Jessa is not leaving my sight from this day on.”

“Does she have any say in that?”

“Not at all.”

Lev sighs. “Go easy, Anton. She’s not from our world. The extremes of it all... they’re going to be difficult for her to adjust to.”

“As long as Marina’s out there, I’m not taking chances with her life.”

“So this is real, then?” he asks. “Between you and Jessa?”

I hesitate for a moment. “I don’t even know how to answer that. All I know is that it’s personal. That bitch came for Jessa, which is as good as coming for me.”

Lev chuckles. “That answers my question.”

“What’s funny?”

“I just never thought I’d see the day. Anton Stepanov, man in love.”

In love. The words feel alien. And yet what else could it be? What else could describe the tightness in my chest every time I look at her? What else could describe the quickening of my

heartbeat, the way my eyes find hers again and again and again? What else could describe the endless dreams?

Jessa stirs. I rush to the side of her bed.

“Lev, I’ll talk to you later. Say nothing to Yulian yet. I want to speak to him first.”

“Understood.”

I hang up just in time to grab hold of Jessa as she darts upright in the bed. Her eyes snap open, but they stare blankly at the wall opposite us. She isn’t seeing what’s here—she’s seeing the demons in her own mind.

“No!” she whimpers in a half scream. “Please... no... no!”

When I manage to push her back down onto the bed, her eyes are closed again. There’s a fresh sheen of sweat coating her brow.

I grab a hand towel next to her bed and wipe her down gently. She mumbles feverishly in her sleep and tosses around, still whimpering. “No... no... no...”

Who’s she talking about? Is it Marina? Is it me? Are we one and the same to her now?

“Jessa,” I whisper in her ear, “it’s okay now. You’re safe.”

She shakes her head with frustration. Her eyes flutter, but they never actually open properly. Her fingers curl around my arm and she digs in deep enough to break the skin, not that I give a damn. She can tear my flesh to pieces if it will bring her even a moment of comfort.

“Please,” she whispers.

I have no earthly idea who she’s pleading with. “Listen to me,” I say, raising my voice, hoping that some part of what I’m saying will get through. “You are safe, Jessa. You’re with me now.”

The shaking subsides somewhat, but not enough to reassure me that she’s out of the woods. I keep soaking the towel and running it along her forehead. I’m still doing it when Dr. Mathers walks back into the room.

“How’s she doing?” she asks coolly.

“You tell me,” I snap. “I’m not paying you ten grand a day for fucking nothing.”

She takes that in stride and gives me only a polite smile. “Would you mind moving to the side a little so I can examine her?”

I get up reluctantly and watch as she gets out her stethoscope to check Jessa’s vitals.

When she starts examining her stomach, Jessa moans violently. Her spine arches so far I worry it might snap in half.

“Will you be careful?” I growl.

Once again, Dr. Mathers doesn’t so much as flinch. “Her sleep is fitful. It’s the trauma manifesting itself physically.”

“Make it stop.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do anything about it.”

“Then what use are you?”

She looks slightly uneasy as she stands and turns to me. “I understand this is difficult to watch, Mr. Stepanov. That’s why it’s important that you get some rest yourself.”

“I don’t need rest.”

She doesn’t look convinced. “You look dead on your feet.”

“I just said I’m fine.”

She looks like she wants to argue, but she knows a lost cause when she sees one. She nods in resignation and turns towards the door. “I’ll be back in a half hour to check on her again. If she makes it through the night without miscarrying, I think it’s safe to say we’ll be out of the woods.”

I expect her to leave, but she stands there awkwardly, her eyes darting between Jessa and me.

“Anything else, Doctor?” I ask impatiently.

“Talk to her,” she says reluctantly, as though she knows I won’t like the advice. “I know it’s not the most scientific

remedy, but I am one of those doctors who believe we gather strength from the people we love.”

I give her a curt nod of dismissal. She walks to the door, but pauses at the threshold. Her eyes linger on me as her hand winds itself around the handle.

“Now what?”

She shakes her head. “It’s just... it’s beautiful how you look after her. She’s a lucky woman.”

A lucky woman. I want to laugh at the twisted irony. I’ve hijacked Jessa’s life by dragging her into mine.

And still, I’m too selfish, too cruel a man to regret it even now.

When Dr. Mathers leaves, I lie down in the bed next to Jessa. Her head falls naturally against my shoulder. I pull her limp, sweaty frame closer against my chest, wondering if this is the last time I’ll ever get to do this.

I don’t know how long we stay like that. Mathers said she would be back in thirty minutes, but I could swear hours or years have passed since she left and I still haven’t moved. I won’t move. I’ll stay here for as long as it takes.

And the whole time I’m there, I whisper to her.

“Listen to me, Jessa. I’m not a praying man, but right now, I wish I was. It would be so easy to rely on a higher power. But the only higher power I’ve ever known is myself. If I wanted something, I made it happen. If I was tired of something, I ended it. The power was absolute. And it was mine. And yet here I am, completely unable to protect the only two things that have ever truly meant anything to me. I know it’s only a matter of time before you wake up. I believe that with every fiber of my being. But when you do, will you want anything to do with me? Or will you try to disappear again?”

I sigh and stroke back a sweat-dampened lock of hair from her forehead.

“I don’t want her to force this choice on you, but if I have to, I will. Because you matter too much to me to ever let anything happen to you. You’re mine—at least until Marina’s swollen,

purple corpse is dropped at my feet. You're safe. You're safe with me, for as long as you'll let me keep you that way."

I fall quiet. Just our breathing in sync. Our heartbeats in sync.

Our minds? Who the fuck knows about that.

I still don't move, even when the feeling in my hand goes to pins and needles and then disappears altogether.

I still don't move, even when the fear of losing my family is choking in my throat like poison.

I still don't move.

Then Jessa does.

Her lip twitches. Parts. Opens. And even though her eyes don't open, her words are clear.

"Anton," she whispers.

Is she really saying my name or am I just hearing what I want to hear? She must be able to read my thoughts, because she says it again.

"Anton."

"Jessa," I whisper.

Her fingers tighten around mine and her eyes open. "Anton."

JESSA

“Water?”

The woman looking down at me has feather-light hair that curls at the ends. Her eyes are a soft, warm brown and there are so many freckles on her face that I feel like I could play connect-the-dots with them.

I try to sit up, but my body feels heavy and I wince.

“Don’t move too fast,” the woman advises me. “Give yourself time.”

I can remember everything. It’s weird how clearly and quickly everything comes back to me. At the instant of consciousness, I remember the moment I realized Freya was not actually who she said she was.

Goosebumps prickle on my skin. You would think the fact that I can remember everything would make me calmer, but panic is still building inside of me. Like a ticking time bomb that needs only the faintest of tremors to be detonated.

I don’t see Marina in the room.

But I *feel* her.

Her blue eyes are latched onto me, waiting for the perfect moment to creep out of the shadows and finish what she started.

“Where are we?” I ask faintly as the nurse counts out a number of pills and separates them into the open vials arranged in front of her.

“The Four Seasons,” she says with a kind smile. “Nicest place I’ve ever worked in. And I’ve worked in some nice places.”

I blink. Is that supposed to be a joke? I can’t tell.

She looks so sweet. Her features are naturally maternal, and the way she’s looking at me is both sympathetic and patient.

But I can’t trust it. I can’t trust my instincts anymore.

“Why don’t you have some water?” she suggests when I wait too long to answer. “You’ll feel better.”

She holds the cup up to my lips without waiting for me to respond. I jerk away so fast that the cup spills down onto the front of my clothes.

“Oh, dear!” she gasps. “I’m so sorry.”

She looks pained as she tries to clean me up. For the first time, I realize I’m not wearing the same clothes I remember putting on this morning. All I have on is a large cotton t-shirt and a pair of panties. Is it even the same morning? I don’t know how long I’ve been out for.

“We should change your t-shirt,” the nurse remarks. “I don’t want you catching a chill on top of everything else.”

I blink again, feeling stupider and stupider with every passing second. What does that mean: “*on top of everything else*”?

She walks away to busy herself with something on the far side of the massive room. I take note of my surroundings warily. The bed I’m on is massive. I could Stop, Drop, and Roll in every direction and still not tumble off the end.

Beyond the bed, the whole room is carpeted in a luxurious, camel-colored rug that looks deep enough to swim in. Matching blinds are parted to either side of a huge window that offers a jaw-dropping view of the city of London.

It’s beautiful, no doubt about it. But all I can think when I look out at the skyscrapers is, *She’s out there somewhere. The woman who tried to kill my baby.*

The nurse walks through a door to the right of the bar and walks back out with another t-shirt similar to the one I’m

wearing.

“Here,” she says with a bright smile. “Let’s put this on.”

I shake my head and back away from her.

She frowns. “What’s the matter, dear?”

“W-where is she?” I manage to stutter.

“Who?”

“Freya. I mean... Marina.”

The nurse frowns and looks around the room as though she expects Marina to step out and reveal herself.

“Um, is that another nurse I’m not aware of?” she asks. “Because I thought only Carla and Ann were assigned to this job.”

“Please,” I whisper, looking around the room. “Please let me out of here.”

Her brow furrows. “Oh, dear...”

“I need to get out of here before she comes back. Please.”

“Dear,” the nurse says. “You must be a little disoriented. The only people here are the ones that have been taking care of you for the past two days.”

Two days. Now, that one has *got* to be a joke. Right?

Right?

“You’re lying.” I feel bad just saying it. This woman seems so legitimate. She says she’s a nurse and she certainly looks the part, but if I’ve learned anything in the last few months, it’s that I’m a shit judge of character.

It’s her turn to blink in confusion. “Why would I lie about that? Maybe I should go and get—”

“If you bring her in here, I’ll scream.”

“Honey,” the nurse says, reaching for my hand. I flinch back, and she looks at me with obvious pity. “You’ve really been through something, haven’t you?”

“Just let me go,” I whisper.

“I don’t think you’re being forced to stay, honey.”

I want to laugh out loud. If only that were true.

“Let’s just... let’s just get you out of that wet t-shirt, okay?” she tries again.

I shake my head and push myself into the farthest corner of the bed. The nurse looks at a loss for words. She’s spared from making a third attempt at helping me when the door opens and two people stride in.

The first is a man in a white coat and thick, round glasses with clear frames. The second is a woman with blonde hair.

Fear hits me so hard that I don’t even stop to look at her face. The scream leaves my throat instantly, and once I’ve started screaming, I’m not sure I can stop.

The room descends into chaos, everyone scurrying around. Through it all, the blonde nurse rushes towards me.

“Hold her down!” she barks in a commanding voice.

I’m so panicked that I can’t see. Can’t think. I’m convinced this blonde woman is Marina, and I refuse to let her anywhere near me.

“Don’t touch me!” I shriek when she tries to get closer. “Don’t fucking touch me!”

The woman steps out of range of my thrashing. “Take her arm. We might have to sedate her.”

“No!” I scream, tossing my arms and legs violently,

The blonde stumbles back, and it suddenly strikes me that she’s a lot bigger than Marina. Then I realize Marina’s hair isn’t even blonde right now. She dyed it so that she could transform into Freya.

But as true as those observations are, panic never really listens to reason, does it? I continue to kick and scream and fling pillows at the poor nurse. Because I won’t be sedated. I’m not going to lose control. Not the way I did back at Laurel Manor when I sat on that bench, incapacitated and helpless, fading off

into a black haze and wondering if my baby would be lost to the jagged cruelty of a broken woman.

“Mathers!”

I hear his voice a split second before I see him. His face blocks out the blonde woman’s. And suddenly, he’s the only one I can see.

Anton’s woodsy scent teases my nostrils as he leans in a little closer. I realize a moment later that I’ve stopped fighting. And when I look down, I understand why. Anton has both my hands locked down against my sides. His grip is firm but not angry.

“Jessa, stop,” he says softly. “There’s no need to fight anymore. You’re safe.”

I shake my head and try to get out from under him. But he tightens his grip on me. His eyes bore into mine. He doesn’t shift his gaze when he barks out an order to the staff. “Out. All of you.”

“I need to check—”

“Out.”

Without another word of protest, everyone files out of the room. Only when the door clicks shut do I feel like I can breathe again.

Still, Anton doesn’t release me. He keeps his hands over mine, though his touch grows gentler.

“Take a deep breath,” he instructs me.

I do.

“Another one.”

“Anton—”

“Just do it.”

I do.

He nods. “Do you want some water?”

“No.”

“Drink some anyway,” he says firmly, taking the glass of water that the nurse abandoned earlier. He brings it to my lips.

Leave it to Anton Stepanov to succeed where everyone else failed. I take a few tentative sips, keeping my eyes on him the whole time.

There’s a faint shadow of stubble along his jawline. I want to nuzzle against it. His gray eyes are dark and tired. He looks like he hasn’t slept in days. And yet despite that, he’s still the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.

“Your t-shirt is wet,” he says with a frown. “Lift your arms.”

“I can do it myself.”

“Okay then. Go ahead.”

“Now?” I ask, balking at him. “In front of you?”

I can tell he’s trying really hard not to roll his eyes. “I’ve seen you naked before, Jessa. In case you forgot.”

I sigh. I’m too weary for his usual games right now. “Fine. Help me.”

I expect a smug smile or a sly comment. But he gives me neither. Instead, he gently peels my shirt off. Only once it’s off am I aware of the fact that I’m not wearing a bra. My breasts hang free, and Anton’s eyes find them instantly.

I feel the urge to cross my arms over my chest, but I can’t deny that a part of me likes the fact that he’s watching me. That he’s *seeing* me in a way no one else ever has.

He scoops the fresh shirt up from where the nurse dropped it and returns to my bedside. As he moves closer to me, my skin heats up. He takes his time dressing me. His fingers graze my side and electricity jolts through me.

The same electricity that got me into this mess in the first place.

When I’m dressed, I shrink back in bed and pull the covers tight around me, hoping that it’ll act as a barrier between us, even while knowing that nothing has that kind of power.

“How did I get here?” I mumble.

“I brought you,” he says. “What do you remember?”

“Marina is alive.”

I’m not sure what I was expecting to see on his face, but it certainly was not resignation. “I know.”

“Where is she now?”

“She ran before I arrived.”

I can feel my breathing start to get erratic. “So you don’t... you don’t know where she is?”

His hand lands on mine, enveloping it. Any other person and I would have flinched away from their grasp. But with Anton, everything feels so natural.

“She’s not going to touch you again,” he insists.

“How do you know?”

“Because you’re under my protection,” he says. “And to get through you, she’ll have to get through me first.”

I want to ask him why he cares. Why he would bother. But I decide on a simpler question. Facts first, feelings later—or possibly never, I haven’t quite decided.

“How did you find me?”

“Chris.”

My eyes go wide. “Chris told you where I was?”

He pulls out Chris’s phone and holds it up for me. “No. You did, actually.”

“What did you do to him?” I demand instantly.

Anton looks annoyed as he tucks Chris’s phone away. “Why would I do anything to him?”

“So he’s not hurt or, like, lying in a ditch somewhere?”

“If he is, it isn’t because of anything I did.” Anton looks at me calmly, but I can tell he’s angry. His gray eyes can’t quite hide that level of intensity.

“But I’m guessing he didn’t just hand over his phone?”

“He didn’t even know I took it. He’s probably figured it out by now, though.”

“He called me earlier. I mean, when I was at the manor. He called from an unknown number, which I thought was odd.”

“You didn’t ask?”

“He was so panicked,” I explain. “He didn’t even mention you.”

“Because he knew I was not the real threat.”

My hands are resting on my stomach and the question that has been burning in the back of my mind since I woke up shifts to the forefront. I don’t want to ask, but I also have to know.

I lift my eyes to his, realizing that the only reason I can ask at all is because he’s here with me. Giving me strength with his mere presence.

“The baby,” I say quietly. “Did I lose the baby?”

His gray eyes soften.

I hold my breath and wait.

ANTON

“The baby is fine.”

Jessa exhales in a sob, relief and gratitude overwhelming her. “Oh, thank God,” she breathes.

“You can thank the doctors, too. They’ve been here giving you around-the-clock care.”

She glances towards the door tentatively. “Is that who I freaked out a second ago?”

I smile. “They’re the ones.”

“Great. I’m sure you’ve been just charming to them as well. Glad I could be the cherry on top.”

“I’m always charming. As for you, well... you’ve been through a lot in the last few days,” I say. “Don’t be too hard on yourself.”

She nods, but I can tell she isn’t convinced. She searches around the room as though she’s looking for shadows in every corner. “You brought me to a hotel? Why not a hospital?”

“Because I wasn’t letting the mother of my child rot in some fucking state-funded gurney. This is better.”

She opens her mouth like she wants to argue, but then thinks better of it and her lips fall closed again. Smart girl.

Something over my shoulder catches her eye. I turn to follow her line of sight out the window to the city beyond.

“We’ve got a nice view,” she remarks.

I stay silent. She's dancing around the point she wants to make. I hold my breath and let her get there on her own time. I'm prepared to wait for many minutes. Hours, even.

It doesn't take that long.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

I frown. "What?"

This time, when she meets my eyes, she doesn't look away. "I'm sorry," she repeats. "I'm sorry that I believed you killed her."

I let loose a sigh I've been holding for far longer than I realized. I didn't think I needed her to see the truth. Didn't think it mattered to me.

I was wrong.

"I don't blame you, Jessa."

She looks down and shakes her head. "Deep down, I knew you didn't do it."

"But you ran anyway."

"Because I felt like I couldn't trust my instincts," she says. "Which is still true enough. I can't trust them. I thought Freya was my friend—right up until she popped her eyes out."

I raise my brows. "Excuse me?"

"She wore dark contact lenses to try and disguise her bright blue eyes," she says. "I remember thinking sometimes that it was like her eyes couldn't decide what color they wanted to be, brown or blue. She dyed her hair, too. And yet I didn't once think that she might not be who she said she was."

"Why would you?"

She shrugs, but it's obvious she's torturing herself over this. She's got one hand draped over her stomach, her thumb drawing soothing circles.

She's fragile. But I need answers. Like it or not, I'll have to drag them out of her.

“What happened, Jessa?” I ask. “What happened after I left you in our bedroom? We talked and everything was fine, and then you were gone.”

“I got a message,” she says, looking around for her phone.

I pull it out of the bedside drawer and hand it to her. She opens a conversation thread from an unknown number. There are only two messages there.

The first is a video that I recognize instantly.

The second is a disappearing picture that timed out days ago.

“What picture were you sent?”

“You, lying over Marina’s dead body.”

I shake my head. “It wasn’t me.”

“Clearly. But it sure as hell looked a lot like you. I’ve spent enough time staring at you to know what you look like. Even from behind.”

She doesn’t realize what she’s saying as she’s saying it. The moment she does, however, her cheeks flush and she tries to avoid my eyes.

“We’ll circle back to that later,” I tell her with a smirk. “What else stood out to you about the picture?”

“I only saw it for ten seconds before it deleted itself,” she explains, her eyebrows knotting together as she tries to remember details. “All I saw was a lot of blonde hair and your back to the camera.”

“So it could have been anyone. A hired actor and actress. Marina playing pretend.”

“There was blood.” As soon as the words come out of her mouth, she flushes again, this time with embarrassment.

“Right. Stupid me. That’s easy enough to fake.” She sighs.

“I’m in way over my head here, Anton.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

Her eyes go wide with alarm. “Do I have to get used to this?”

I give her a small smile. “I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you don’t have to. How’s that?”

She looks up at me, and for the first time, the shadows in her eyes seem to lift. “Okay.”

I can’t really enjoy the moment, though. Not when I’m staring at a tape that was never meant to be seen by anyone other than myself and my closest confidantes. How it happened, I have no fucking clue.

But it’s a moot point now. The video is out.

All that matters is what happens next.

“That really happened, didn’t it?” Jessa asks, tipping her head towards the phone. Towards the video.

I wish I could lie, but I can’t. Not to her, not now. “Yes.”

“I might have blamed you for what happened in that video,” she says. “But now, I know Marina. I get it.” Jessa smiles, but it slips away quickly. “She was so damn convincing. Everything about her. We had such an easy friendship.”

“She conned you into giving her your trust.”

Jessa nods. “And she knew just how to do it.”

“How?”

She gives me a guilty half-smile. “She told me about her abusive ex. It was how we first bonded.”

I roll my eyes. “The woman does like to be dramatic.”

“I feel stupid,” Jessa admits in a quiet voice. “Now that I think about it, everything she told me was her version of the truth. Abusive partner. A miscarriage. Running away. It was all there. She just... got me.”

“She likes playing games, Jessa. It’s how she operates.”

“She came into my life the moment you did,” she continues. She pauses long enough to laugh derisively at herself. “I thought it was fate. Can you believe that?”

“Fate?”

“I’d just lost a friend and a fiancé. I was lonely and scared. She made me feel like myself again. Like the old me. A normal girl with a normal life. Damn it, Chris was right about me.”

She trails off, her face creased in shame and regret, and I realize that I would do anything to take these burdens from her. To stroke her face and wipe her pain away.

“Right about what?”

“I have terrible instincts about this kind of stuff. People, their character.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I have no choice but to,” she says. “I thought I could trust Dane, and he was cheating on me for most of our relationship. I thought I could trust Salma, and she lied to me for years on end. I thought I could trust Freya, and she nearly killed my baby.”

“Do you trust me?” I ask.

The question catches her off-guard. “I... I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. Answer the question.”

“Anton—”

“Just be honest, Jessa. With me, of course. But especially with yourself.”

“Yes, I trust you,” she whispers in a small voice. “But now, all I can think of is, what if I’m wrong to trust you? What if you try to hurt me the same way all the rest of them have?”

“Do you think that’s likely?”

“That’s the thing—it doesn’t matter what I think. I can’t trust myself,” she says, frustration growing in her voice.

“You’ve made some bad decisions. You’ve made mistakes. But I’d argue that choosing to trust me balances out the rest.”

“Figures you’d say that,” she drawls, though a smile plays at the corner of her lips. “You’re a little biased, though.” Then she changes the conversation. “Is Chris really okay?”

“I thought we just established that you trust me.”

She sighs. “I do trust you. That’s the problem.”

“It’s not a problem,” I tell her gently. “Chris is fine.”

She nods, relieved, and her hair falls around her face. I reach out and tuck it behind her ear. When my fingertip brushes across her skin, she freezes for a moment, as if deciding. Then she leans into the touch.

“Do you think Marina is bipolar?” Jessa asks. “Or, like, schizophrenic?”

“Marina is sick, yes, but not like that. She made her own choices, not some disease doing it on her behalf. The best explanation is that she is a spoiled Bratva princess. She had a father who doted on her. Gave her everything she wanted and more. She expected the same from me, and when she didn’t get exactly what she wanted, she threw tantrums. She made scenes and got violent. And in a few extreme circumstances, she got murderous.”

Jessa trembles a little at the last part. “Was she always like that?”

“Pretty much from the first moment we got married. She wanted to be an equal partner in my Bratva. She wanted a seat at the table.”

“And you refused her?”

“She couldn’t be trusted or counted on. She was erratic, temperamental. She nursed grudges like no other person I’ve ever met.”

Jessa’s frown deepens.

“We don’t have to talk about her if you don’t want,” I add.

“I want to know,” she says firmly. “The woman tried to kill me.”

“She tried to kill the baby.”

“You don’t think she wanted to kill me?”

“There’s no predicting what Marina was thinking. But I don’t think so,” I say.

“Why?”

“You want me to guess?”

She nods solemnly. “You know her better than I do.”

I’m not sure this conversation is suitable for Jessa in her weakened condition. But I don’t want to handle her with kid gloves, either. She’s seen and lived through more than most people in the last few months. She deserves more credit than that.

“She was going to use you to get to me.”

“For revenge?”

“More or less, yes.”

Jessa’s eyes are wary, but she pushes on. “Because she believes that you killed her child?”

“I did.”

Jessa flinches.

“I’m not going to lie to you, Jessa. You want the truth and you deserve it. The picture you were sent was a fake. Obviously. But the video... it actually happened. Every cursed second that you watched is exactly what happened.”

She swallows carefully. “Were you going to kill her?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes widen. There’s disappointment there, but it’s tempered by the reality of who Marina is. What she’s done.

What she might still do if I don’t stop her.

“But you held back.”

“Because she spat out that she was carrying my baby,” I explain. “I may not have wanted her, but I wanted that child. Neither of us got what we wanted. She miscarried a few days later.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” she blurts out. “You didn’t know she was pregnant.”

“I would have killed her if she hadn’t been pregnant.”

“I don’t want to make excuses for you,” she says softly. “But I’ve met Marina now. And she’s... she’s fucking terrifying.”

“She can be,” I admit. “And the fact that I subverted her plan means she’ll regroup and come back even harder. She’s like a cockroach that way.”

Jessa shivers. She looks pale all of the sudden, trembling in a way I don’t like.

“I’m going to get the doctor,” I say, standing up.

Her hand jerks out and grabs me firmly around the wrist. “Don’t leave me,” she begs.

“Jessa—”

“Please, Anton,” she says, her voice breaking just a little. “I... I see her everywhere...” She licks her lips and finds my eyes. “That first night at the manor... I had a nightmare. At least, I thought I did. I woke up and saw a ghost in the corner watching me. And I don’t know how, but I knew it was Marina. It was too dark to make out the color of her hair, but her eyes... they were so blue and so piercing. But it wasn’t a dream, Anton. It was real. She was right there in my bedroom, watching me sleep. She told me herself. She could have finished me off then and there.”

I run my thumb over her velvety cheek. “You’re here now,” I tell her gently. “You’re safe with me.”

Her smile is thin and unconvincing. She wants to give in to relief, but this struggle is far from over. These demons aren’t finished with her yet.

But we’ll beat them soon enough. Her and I—together.

I get onto the bed and raise my arm. She snuggles under it. Her head falls against my chest and I feel my cock stiffen instantly. I ignore my baser needs, and focus on the top of her silky blonde hair, on the way her scent dances in my nose like a floral temptation.

I wonder if she realizes what a masterpiece she is.

Her head gets heavier and heavier against my chest. Only when her hand in mine goes limp do I know that she's asleep again.

Carefully, slowly, I move myself out from underneath her and make sure she's lying in a comfortable position on the bed. Seeing her like this only reinforces the urge to protect her.

She's mine now. And if Marina tries to come at her again, she's going to regret ever coming back from the dead.

I stand breathlessly to wait until Jessa is sound asleep before slipping out of the room. I walk down the hall and pull out my phone to make a call.

Yulian picks up instantly. I have a feeling that he's been waiting desperately by his phone. Lev must have filled him in.

"Brother, listen to me—"

"Save your explanations for later," I snap. "For now, get on a plane and get your ass here. Bring Lev with you."

I can practically feel the tension rolling off of him. "I just want you to know that I know I fucked up."

"We'll discuss it when you get here."

"It was a mistake. I just—"

"Enough," I snap, reaching the end of my patience. "I told you we'd discuss this when you're here."

"Okay. Yeah. Alright." He sounds reluctant, but he has no choice but to nod along.

"I'll see you soon."

"And Yulian?"

"Yes?"

"Your explanation better be really fucking good."

JESSA

Marina is in front of me. White dress, stained with her blood.

No, wait, not her blood. Blood from the thing she's holding.

She turns to me, her eyes like blazing blue suns, promising all kinds of pain. Then she shows me what she is carrying...

My baby.

I wake up screaming.

The older nurse rushes into the room and holds me down until I stop thrashing. The second nurse is a little younger and much more cautious with me. Courtney, I think her name is.

“Water?” Courtney asks, offering me a glass.

My mouth is parched, so I accept and chug half of it down before wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. “Where’s Anton?”

He was here when I fell asleep. I was nestled against his chest. I fell asleep to the rhythm of his heartbeat.

“I’m not sure, dear,” Courtney says. “Would you like me to call him?”

“No,” I say quickly. “No, I was just wondering.”

“Alrighty then. Drink up, sweetheart,” the woman says with maternal tenderness. “You’ll feel better once you’re hydrated.”

I drink up, and when I’m finished, she takes the glass and offers me a damp towel for my forehead. I want to protest that

I don't need to be handled with kid gloves like this, but it just feels too good.

The door opens and the ruthlessly efficient doctor sweeps in. "Another nightmare?" she asks.

I nod and croak, "Yes."

"It sounded bad."

"I dreamed I was staring at my dead baby," I whisper, sparing them the goriest details.

Courtney looks horrified on my behalf, but Dr. Mathers barely reacts. I know it's not disinterest, though. She's just being calm and professional, same as she has been since I arrived.

"Your baby is fine, Jessa," she reminds me. "I'm monitoring the fetus closely and the heartbeat is strong. I think it's safe to pronounce your baby out of the woods."

"Does that mean I can walk around a little?" I ask hopefully. I frown at the expression on the doctor's face. "What is it?"

"Walking isn't going to hurt you at this point," she says reluctantly. "But Mr. Stepanov feels that you would benefit from a little more bedrest."

Well, that tracks.

"So the only reason I've been lying here all this time is because he's ordered it?" I demand.

"'Ordered' is a strong word." I cock my head to the side and give her an accusing look. She sighs and relents. "But in this case, it's an accurate one."

That settles it. I push the duvet cover aside and swing my legs down off the bed. The moment my toes hit the plush carpet on the floor, I feel a surge of adrenaline.

"Who knew the highlight of my day would be getting out of this bed?"

"Resting isn't the worst idea, Jessa," Dr. Mathers says.

I glance at her with a smile. "Are you saying you're scared of him?"

“Isn’t everyone?”

I laugh giddily as I struggle to get myself upright. It takes more effort than I expected, but I do feel more like myself when I’m on my feet.

“This feels... nice.”

Courtney offers me her elbow. “Wanna take a closer look at that view?”

“Yes, please.”

She helps me shuffle carefully to the window ledge on my weak Bambi legs. I’m wearing a pair of loose sweatpants and the softest t-shirt imaginable. It feels like I’m swaddled up in a cloud.

But as soon as I think that thought, I remember the bundle from my dream, and the joy goes right back out of me.

“London does look a little different from up here, doesn’t it?” Courtney remarks as we come to a rest at the windowsill.

“Are you from here?”

“Originally from Manchester,” she says. “But I’ve lived in London for almost three decades now. Both my kids were born here. They go to university here, too.”

“What are they studying?”

“Simon wants to get into advertising and Marianne’s in pastry school.”

“No way. I’m a chef.”

Her eyes light up a little. “Do you love it?”

I touch the back of her hand and grin. “So, so much.”

The woman sighs like she’s been desperate to hear someone say that. “That’s so nice, darling. I’ve been worried sick that it will be a difficult path for her.”

“It can be sometimes. But if she loves it enough, it’ll be worth it.”

“Maybe you should get back in bed, Jessa,” Dr. Mathers says, interrupting our conversation. I had forgotten she was still in

the room.

“I just got out of bed,” I argue. “And anyway, I feel much better.”

“Let’s not push it so soon, though.”

Sighing, I turn from the window with Courtney’s help. “Is he really so terrifying that I can’t stand up for a few minutes?”

“Have you seen the man?” Dr. Mathers deadpans.

I can feel Courtney trying to suppress her laughter as she gently pulls me back to the bed. “Wait,” I protest. “I want to see the rest of the suite.”

“This evening, perhaps,” Dr. Mathers says quickly. “Or tomorrow.”

“Do you need the don’s permission or something?”

She stands to the side so that Courtney can help me back into bed. Right back into the warm indent where I’ve spent the last I-can’t-even-remember-how-long.

“I’m just trying to make sure you’re okay, Jessa,” Dr. Mathers says in a long-suffering tone once I’m settled in again. “You and your baby both.”

She succeeds in making me feel guilty enough that I let my argument die on my lips. The moment she walks out of the room, however, I take a sharp breath and throw my head back against the pillows.

“Come now, love, it’s not that bad,” Courtney tells me sympathetically. “A few more days of rest and you won’t have to lie down unless you want to.”

“I’m going stir-crazy.”

“Just be patient.”

She turns and starts tidying up, which I’m pretty sure is not in her job description, but she just can’t help herself. A mother through and through.

“Does he terrify you, too?” I ask curiously.

She straightens up, but her expression is thoughtful. Finally, she answers, “No, not really.”

“How come?”

She shrugs. “I can’t quite say. I suppose he doesn’t strike me as the type of man who gets angry without cause.”

I don’t know what I expected her to say, but it wasn’t that.

“He didn’t leave your side, you know,” she adds.

“Sorry?”

“Mr. Stepanov,” Courtney clarifies. “The whole time you were unconscious, he sat vigil at your bedside. He didn’t eat. He barely slept. He just... watched you.”

I don’t even pretend not to be shocked. “Really?” Happiness glows in me for a moment before I tamp it down. “He was worried about the baby, I’m sure.”

“Yes,” Courtney confirms. “But I’m quite sure he was also concerned for your life.”

I shake my head. “We’re not together.”

“Oh,” she says politely. “Do you want to be?”

I bite my bottom lip, trying to find an answer that won’t be a lie. “I... don’t know. We are having this baby together.”

“A baby can complicate things,” she says. “But it’s not a reason to pursue a relationship with someone. Not unless you already have feelings for them.”

I sigh and pass a hand over my face. “I don’t really know what I want.”

“Maybe that’s what you could do while you’re resting,” she suggests. “Think about it.”

I grow quiet as I think about possible futures. Some include Anton. Some don’t. But in every one, I have a baby that’s half me and half him. An eternal tie between the two of us.

“He’s not the type of man who’ll commit to a woman long-term,” I say softly. “He was married before, and...”

I feel a surge of cold realization as I remember that he is, in fact, *still* married. I've been so used to thinking of him as a widower that I haven't yet made the amendment in my head.

His wife is still alive. Thus, he's married.

And here I am, pregnant with his child.

"The marriage didn't end well," I finish out loud. "In fact, it hasn't ended at all."

"Come again?"

"Never mind."

Courtney doesn't need me to fill in the details, though. She's perceptive. She sees what's happening. "Whoever this woman is who haunts your nightmares, don't give her the power to hurt you, Jessa," she advises softly.

"I don't have any control over—"

"That's the thing," she says, gripping my hand urgently. "That's just the thing, Jessa. You do have control. You can choose not to let your fear of her rule you. If you live in fear, then she wins."

"You haven't met this chick," I chuckle bitterly. "She's batshit crazy."

Courtney smiles. "I've met *chicks* like her in my time. My husband's ex-girlfriend stalked me for weeks when she found out that he was dating someone new."

"Stalking is pretty creepy," I say with a nod. "But it's not on the same level as a woman who takes on a different identity just to insert herself into your life and gain your trust."

Courtney's eyes go wide. "Goodness me. Perhaps not."

"Exactly. Batshit."

Her face relaxes into a sympathetic smile. "Still, I'm willing to bet you're stronger than this 'chick.'"

"How can you say that?"

"I work with sick people all the time. I see people at their most vulnerable. You learn to read them. You learn to observe what

they're trying to conceal.”

“What do you think I’m trying to conceal?” I can’t stop myself from asking.

“Well, in my experience, people don’t really want an honest answer to that question.”

“Hit me anyway.”

She frowns, but then gives a little sigh. “You’re trying to conceal how deeply you care for Mr. Stepanov.”

I wince. But who else can I blame but myself? She warned me that I wouldn’t like her answer. I can’t say I do.

But it’s honest.

“Thanks for talking to me, Courtney.”

She offers me a parting smile and heads for the door. “Get some rest, darling.”

“I’ll do my best.”

But the moment the door shuts behind her, I reach for my phone. I’ve spent the last twelve hours flitting in and out of sleep. And when I do fall deep into unconsciousness, my nightmares find me. I’m not interested in yet another power nap.

What I need is a conversation. With someone who understands me.

“Hello?”

“Chris,” I breathe, thankful to hear his voice.

“Jesus, Jessa!” he says, as though someone has just punched the lights out of him. “Are you okay?”

“Safe and sound,” I say. “Or at least, safe.”

“That’s not comforting at all.”

“It’s been a rough few days,” I admit.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know where to start.”

“How about we start with this: where’s Freya?”

“Gone,” I say. “I don’t know where. She disappeared right after she poisoned me.”

“*WHAT?!*”

Right. There’s a lot Chris doesn’t know. I take a deep breath and dive in.

“She actually tried to poison the baby, I guess. But it didn’t work. The baby is fine.”

“Well, fucking hell. Thank God for that.”

“Her name isn’t actually Freya either,” I tell him. “It’s Marina.”

“Why does that sound so familiar?”

“Marina,” I say. “As in Marina Stepanov.”

I can practically hear the sound of his jaw dropping. “No... no fucking way.”

“Way,” I say. “Big way.”

“Anton’s dead wife? But I thought she was, you know, *dead?*”

“So did I. So did he.”

“So... it was a ruse?” Chris asks. “She faked her own death?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I guess she wanted revenge,” I say. “And she wanted to be as dramatic about it as possible.”

He lets out a low whistle. “It’s like some fucked-up action movie. Shit... I can’t believe this.”

I nod in agreement. “I was in disbelief yesterday. Now, it feels almost... normal. Or at least, not quite so ridiculous.”

“There is no way in the world that anything about this is normal,” Chris argues fervently. “Where the hell are you?”

“Some fancy-pants hotel in London,” I tell him. “In ‘The King’s Suite,’ they call it.”

“Is that a joke?”

“As far as I can tell, it is not.”

“Can we rewind a little, please?” Chris asks, sounding like he’s got a headache coming on. “Start from the last time we talked.”

“Right. Yeah, of course. You called me while I was still at Laurel Manor with who I thought was Freya. I hung up and tried to get out of there like you told me to. But I’d already drunk the weird ‘tonic’ she gave me that morning that was supposed to help my morning sickness.”

“You *drank* it?”

“I didn’t know she was a full-on psychopath!” I say defensively. “At the time, I thought she was my friend. And yes, I trusted her.”

His silence is telling. I know exactly what he’s thinking.

“You wanna say ‘I told you so’ before I continue?”

“No,” he says grudgingly. “I don’t.”

“I started to feel really bad and then I started to lose consciousness. But not before she told me who she was.”

“That must have been terrifying.”

“Yes, but I was scared for my baby, not for me.”

“How did you get from there to ‘The King’s Suite’?”

“Anton,” I say simply. “He got there just in time. Freya—Marina—heard him coming and made a run for it. He found me and brought me here. He brought in a team of doctors, too. They pumped the toxins out of me and saved the baby.”

I can’t quite read the silence I get this time around. “Chris?” I say when I can’t bear it anymore.

“Quite the knight in shining armor, huh?” he mutters.

I frown. “Why do you sound disappointed by that?”

“Of course I’m not,” he says, affronted. “I’m so damn glad you’re safe. You and the baby.”

“But?”

“For God’s sake, there’s no ‘but,’ Jessa. I just... I’m reluctant to give him the credit for saving you when you wouldn’t even be in this mess if it weren’t for him. That’s all.”

“He didn’t know she was alive either, Chris.”

“I mean, who the fuck knows anything at this point?” he asks. “He’s clearly a master of deception. Just like his wife.”

I flinch at that one. It hurts deeply to hear Marina being called Anton’s wife. It hurts all the more because I know it’s true.

“He wanted to divorce her,” I say, as if that could possibly matter anymore. “That’s why she decided to—”

“Fake her own death?” Chris asks. “Gee, she sounds like a gem.”

“Which is why he wanted to divorce her.”

“Is he with you now?”

“Not right at this moment,” I say. “But he’s... around.”

“Okay.”

I sigh. “What, Chris? Whatever you want to say, just say it?”

“What’s the point?” he asks bitterly. “It’s not like you listen to me, anyway.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it? Every time I warn you off someone, it feels like you double down and dig your heels into the relationship.”

“When you warned me about Freya, I tried to listen. I tried to leave.”

“It was just too little, too late, wasn’t it?”

I bite back the retort on my tongue and try not to be goaded into a fight I don’t have the energy for. “You’re right. It was too late. I’m sorry.”

He’s clearly surprised by the acknowledgement because he shuts up right after.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Anton showing up at your house when you called me at the manor?” I ask. “Anton already had your phone by then, which is why you called on an unknown number.”

“I was just too focused on Freya,” he explains. “The way your landlord spoke, it gave me the creeps. I knew that was the most important information to relay to you. And honestly, Anton just came, he spoke to me, and when I didn’t give him the information he wanted, he left. I didn’t realize until later that he’d swiped my phone. And I wasn’t going to complain about my phone being taken while you could be in imminent danger.”

I feel my annoyance fade away. Chris always has my back. Of everyone on this planet, he’s the one I know I can trust.

“I’m sorry,” I say again. “I’m so, so sorry, Chris.”

“What are you apologizing for, exactly?”

“Not listening to you when I should have,” I say.

He sighs, long and weary. “I appreciate that,” he says. “Does that mean you’ll try to listen to me now?”

I hesitate for barely a fraction of a second. “I’ll do my best.”

I can almost hear him suppressing another sigh. “He’s not going to be able to give you the life you want, Jessa.”

My heart falls instantly, but I bite back the tears and the sadness. He’s not telling me anything I don’t already know.

“Think about your life in the last few months,” he continues. “That’s what you’re looking at for the rest of your life if you choose to stay with him.”

“I’m having his baby, Chris,” I say softly.

“So?” he asks. “People have babies all the time. That doesn’t mean they stay together.”

“Chris—”

“I love you, Jessa,” he says. “I only want what’s best for you. And for your child, too. You don’t need him.”

“I can’t raise this baby alone.”

“You won’t have to,” he says. “You and that kid will always have me.”

A tear slips down my cheek, and I know if this conversation continues I’m going to end up a blubbering mess.

“I love you, too, Chris,” I say, choking out the words before I completely lose it. “I have to go now.”

“Jessa—”

I hang up, hating myself for not seeing things Chris’s way. It’s so black-and-white to him. But to me, the world is more inscrutable than it’s ever been. I’m lost at sea, and there’s one scarred, tattooed hand reaching out to save me from the waves.

Anton’s.

Can I take it?

ANTON

I walk in to find Jessa with her face buried in her hands.

She's sobbing, tears spilling between her fingers, her body shaking. I move towards her, but she's so lost in her own grief she doesn't even notice me. When I reach out and touch her shoulder, she jerks away from me violently, her face twisting with dread.

When she sees that it's me, though, something comes across her eyes. A look I can't quite name, but it makes my chest throb with a not-quite-pain that feels strangely *right*, somehow. Her shoulders relax and she exhales with relief. No one has ever looked at me that way before her.

"Oh. It's you."

"Who did you think it was?"

She averts her eyes. "No one."

"Marina," I infer in a snarl that surprises even me with its venom.

"I'm fine," Jessa says, swallowing her sobs. "Really."

"Yeah, you look completely fine."

She throws me a glare, but the effect is lost because I can still see the tears shining on her cheeks. I put my fingers under her chin and force her gaze to mine. She trembles nervously at first, her body wired with tension.

Tenderly, I wipe away the remaining tears on her face. She shivers every time my hand brushes against her skin.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

“Can I get you anything?”

“You hired a full-time staff to take care of my every need, Anton,” she points out with a choked laugh. “They’ve been hovering over me all day. It’s making me claustrophobic.”

“Even with this view?”

“I’m not used to being waited on hand and foot. It’s weird.”

“It’s just a matter of getting used to it.”

She frowns. “What if I don’t want to get used to it? I like taking care of myself.”

“And you can—when you’re back on your feet.”

That familiar fire glows in her eyes. “I am back on my feet! Or at least I could be. Except that you’ve instructed the staff, including the doctors, that I’m not to be allowed off the damn bed.”

“I won’t bother to apologize. Especially for something I don’t feel the least bit sorry for. It’s important that you recover properly.”

She sighs. “I’m going crazy in this room all day. Cabin fever, like, bad. I want to get out and *do* something.”

“And we will,” I promise her. “Once you’ve fully recovered.”

She looks impatient, of course, but there’s something else to her expression, too. She looks *touched*. As if she’s not expecting care. As if she doesn’t know what the meaning of the word even is. As if no one in her entire life has shown her kindness when she needed it.

Or perhaps most of all, as if she never thought it could come from a man like me.

To be honest, I share the same sentiment. I didn’t know I was capable. Seems we’re both learning a lot about ourselves.

I reach out to push back the strand of hair that has fallen across her face. I let it linger so the backs of my fingers can brush against her cheek, soft like satin.

Jessa sighs and turns her face into my hand. She closes her eyes and I let myself stare at her. I wonder if she even realizes how strange and shocking this moment is.

I didn't think I was the kind of man who would stand by a woman's bedside just to watch her sleep.

I didn't think I was the kind of man who would be this fiercely protective, this unapologetically possessive over any woman.

But ultimately, this isn't about me at all.

It's about *her*.

And for this woman, I would do fucking anything.

Slowly, Jessa opens her eyes and looks up at me. Emotions are flickering across her face so quickly I can't get a read on them. Then she leans towards me, her eyelashes fluttering anxiously.

Her lips brush up against mine, soft and tentative. The kiss is a test of her bravery as much as a test of my reaction.

I let the kiss settle, desperate to deepen it. But instead, I count to five and then I pull back. Her expression twists into confusion and then flushes with shame, with rejection.

I take her hand and twine her fingers with my own. "It may not feel like it, Jessa, but you're still weak. I don't want to do anything to jeopardize you or the baby."

She doesn't seem appeased by that. "It was just a kiss."

"Once I start kissing you, I'm not sure if I'll be able to stop," I tell her with a half-smile. "I am only human, after all."

She lets that sink in for a moment. Then a shy smile splits her face. "Are you sure about that?"

I tuck her against me and marvel once again at how naturally she fits there.

It was never like this with Marina. I never touched her for the sheer sake of it, the sheer bliss of touching her. I never stroked her cheek or pushed back her hair. I never kissed her on the forehead. I never held her in my arms and appreciated the way she felt against me.

It's all different for me. Jessa is different for me.

I see now how much I needed it.

"What was it like growing up, knowing you were going to be the don one day?" she asks suddenly.

I look down at her, marveling at the proud arch of her nose, the swoop of her cheekbones. My answer is simple: "Hell."

Jessa blinks in surprise. "Is that an exaggeration?"

"Depends on the day." I shrug.

She raises her eyebrows thoughtfully. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" I ask, genuinely confused.

"For what you went through," she explains. "It can't have been easy to carry the burden of your father's legacy. As if growing up isn't hard enough."

"You say that like childhood is a battle that needs to be fought."

"Isn't it?" she asks. "I felt like it was sometimes."

"In what way?"

"In every way. The constant self-doubt and questioning. The way you change your clothes three times a day because you're scared the dress you're wearing is too worn, too old, too ugly. Sometimes when you're a kid, everything feels like it's the end of the world."

I raise my eyebrows. "We had very different childhoods."

She sighs. "I guess so. But there are some things that are relatable no matter where you come from or how you were raised."

"Hm. I suppose that's possible."

"You're lucky you had a brother to wade through life with," she adds.

"I never really thought about it."

"That's because you had a built-in best friend. A partner-in-crime," she says. "I used to hope and pray my parents would

have another kid when I was young.”

“He can be a pain in the ass. That’s more of the rule than the exception, actually.”

“But you have his back and he has yours.”

The statement makes me grimace. Once upon a time, I might’ve agreed. Now? I’m not so sure.

“Mostly,” I mutter.

Jessa wrinkles her nose. “What does that mean?”

“It means he can be an idiot sometimes.”

She stares at my face, trying to glean the secrets buried there. *Good fucking luck*, I think.

“You wanna tell me what you’re so pissed off with Yulian about? Does it have something to do with Marina?”

“He was the one who found her body,” I say grudgingly.

“But then... how is she alive?”

“He claimed she was maimed when he found her. Her face was unrecognizable. So he burned her body and we buried what remained.”

She shudders a little. I have to remind myself that Jessa isn’t used to this kind of blunt, detached talk about death.

“So he made a mistake.”

“A mistake that would never have happened if he thought first and acted later.”

“He was probably just trying to protect you.”

She’s right, but not for the reasons she thinks she is. I go quiet for a moment as the implications of why he was trying to protect me sink in: he thought I’d mutilated my own wife. He thought he was burning evidence.

Jessa exhales quietly and her hand tightens across my chest. “At least you know you have a brother who’s willing to do anything for you,” she suggests.

“It shows how little he knows me that he thinks I’d ever do something that savage. Even to her.”

“No one can know a person wholly like that,” she says. “You should cut him some slack.” I look away, but Jessa scoots closer to me. A moment later, I feel her hand against my jaw. “Not everyone can be as controlled and wise as you, you know?”

“Very true.”

She snorts and I bask in the warmth of the moment. The ease with which we can be together. It’s as if the last few minutes of our conversation have loosened up the knots that run through my body. I’m still pissed with Yulian, but the anger is more measured, more contained.

“What was your mother like?” She asks it abruptly, like it just occurred to her, but something tells me she’s been wondering about it for a while. Like there’s some story of my past that could explain me or explain us or explain everything.

“I never really knew her,” I tell her. “She was born in Russia. Always wanted to go back, but then she met my father and everything changed. Not for the better.”

“Were they ever happy?”

“Fuck if I know,” I scoff. “All I ever saw was ill-matched people who were ready to bite each other’s heads off. They divorced when I was very young and my mother set off to explore the rest of the world.”

“You mean she’s out there somewhere?”

“Probably sipping coconuts by the beach,” I mutter.

“Sounds like a nice life.”

“Nice if you have a lot of money and even more free time.”

“Does she have money?”

“She gets a monthly stipend. It was part of their divorce agreement.”

“And your father didn’t mind paying it every month?”

“He barely noticed. It was an easy price to pay to get rid of her. His words, not mine.”

“Hm. Well, it’s a better ending than I expected.”

I snort. “You expected that my father would kill her?”

“Well…”

“We don’t kill just for the sake of killing,” I tell her, trying to be as patient as possible. “We don’t kill for sport, either. At least, I don’t.”

“I believe that,” Jessa says in a small voice. Then she adds, “So… you don’t have any contact with her?”

“She calls me when she needs money or help with something,” I say. “That’s the extent of our relationship.”

She frowns. “That must be hard.”

“Why?”

“Because… well, because she’s your mother.”

I shrug. “I suppose. But we had very little to do with one another even when I was a child. She wasn’t interested in being a mother. My father wasn’t interested in keeping her around. Her leaving was a win for all of us.”

“He got bored?” she asks tentatively. “Or he met someone else?”

“Probably both. I never asked. More than anything, I’d say I think he realized marriage was not for him. He had two sons, an heir and a backup. He didn’t need anything else.”

She looks conflicted for a moment. “Is that how you feel, too? That marriage is not for you?”

“Considering how my first one went, that’s where I’m leaning.”

She hesitates for a second. “It’s not ‘went.’ It’s still going.” I raise my eyebrows, and she just gives me a helpless shrug. “I’m just saying. Your first marriage is not over.”

“It was over a long fucking time ago, Jessa.”

“But legally speaking, I’m saying.”

“Legally?” I scoff. “Doesn’t mean shit to me.”

“I guess it wouldn’t matter, anyway,” she mumbles. Then she adds something else that’s almost too inaudible for me to hear: “... if you didn’t want to remarry.”

I haven’t even thought about the possibility of remarrying. It seems... less crazy now than it once did.

“Why did you agree to marry Dane?” I ask.

She looks confused, as though she isn’t really even sure. Or maybe I’m just asking a question she’s spent months asking herself. “I guess because... I always wanted to get married.”

“So you just said yes to the first man who asked?”

She squirms uncomfortably. “It sounds horrible when you put it like that.”

“Should I try another way?”

“Don’t be an ass.”

I suppress a smile and wait for her to finish her explanation.

“We’d been dating for a while,” she says softly. “He was a good boyfriend. Honestly, he was. He was charming and funny. And there were times he could be sweet. I don’t know, at the time it seemed like a no-brainer. It was only later that I started seeing that maybe all the things I thought were positives may have just been distractions.”

“Have you spoken to him since the wedding?”

“I sent him this long email,” she divulges. “It was essentially a breakup letter. I wrote it more for my sake than his. I needed closure.”

“And did he write back?”

“Yes. Basically, he didn’t respond to anything in my letter. He just said we needed to meet face to face so that we could sort things out. I ignored it.”

“Nothing after that?”

“I blocked him on my phone. So, no.”

I nod. “Good choice. Strong.”

She smiles. “You think so?”

“In my experience, not many women can walk away with such finality. It takes courage.”

“I appreciate you saying that. My mom thinks I made a mistake by not forgiving him,” she admits. “My dad told me that he would support whatever decision I made. But I know him well enough to know that he wasn’t happy, either. Although that might just have been a reaction to the fact that he had blown a bunch of cash on a wedding that didn’t actually happen.”

“They don’t sound like they know you very well.”

“Maybe not,” she says with a disappointed little sigh. “We don’t have very much in common.” She glances up at me. “Did you ever feel that way in your family? Out of place, I mean. Like you didn’t really belong.”

“I’ve never thought about it before.”

“So that’s a no.”

I suppress a smirk. “This is what I was meant for, Jessa. My father felt the same. And even Yulian loves it.”

“You... love it?” she asks tentatively.

“What’s not to love?” I ask. “I call the shots. I create the life I want. Sure, there are a few... occupational hazards. But that comes with the territory.”

“I don’t know if I could ever have that mindset.”

“Trust me—if you live in the underworld long enough, you’ll find a way to deal with the devils.”

Her expression turns thoughtful. I can tell she’s juggling a dozen different thoughts in that pretty little head of hers. But she doesn’t let me in on what they are. Eventually, her eyelids start to get heavy, and I watch as she slowly fades to sleep.

“I didn’t love...” The murmur is soft but intelligible. Her eyes are closed, so I don’t know that she’s even aware of the fact that she’s talking.

“Hm?”

“I didn’t love Dane,” she mumbles. “And he still broke my heart a little. I don’t think I could take it... if you... if you...”

She yawns and I think I’m about to lose her to sleep, but she continues.

“... if you break my heart.”

“Are you scared of that?”

“Mhmm...”

“Why?”

“Because... because...” she murmurs, twisting her face into my chest. “I love you.”

I’m expecting it, I saw it coming from a mile away, and still, it floors me. By the time I recover from the revelation and look down at her, she’s deep asleep and breathing as easily as I’ve ever heard from her. Like she finally lifted an impossible weight off her shoulders.

I unravel her hands from my body and slip out from underneath her just in time to see the door open slightly.

It’s one of my guys.

“Don Stepanov,” he whispers. “Your brother and Lev have just arrived.”

ANTON

Yulian and Lev are both waiting for me in the sitting room, a wall of windows behind them showcasing the view. It's so clean that I almost feel like I could give someone the tiniest push and they'd go right through as if the glass didn't even exist.

When I look at my brother, I'm genuinely tempted.

Lev is looking out at the panorama, but Yulian is hunched in a chair staring at his feet. I walk in and they both turn to me.

"How was the flight?" I ask before either one of them can speak.

Lev is the first to answer. "Fine. The stewardess was a pleasant distraction."

On another day, I might have made some salacious comment. But I'm not in the mood today. "Did you enjoy the jet I paid for, Yulian?"

Annoyance flashes across his face. "Let's get right to it, then. Please remind me that you're the all-powerful brother and I'm just the screw-up."

"Took the words right out of my mouth, *sobrat*."

He sighs. "It was a mistake, okay? I know that. I fucking know that."

"You mistook a random woman's corpse for Marina's?" I press. "Pretty massive mistake, don't you think, brother?"

"I told you before, her face was completely obliterated."

“And?” I ask in a bored voice.

“And the body looked like hers! I mean, fuck—it had Marina’s clothes, Marina’s jewelry. You saw the signet ring she wore all the time. She never took that thing off. I gave it to you myself.”

“Almost as if Marina gave it to the corpse when she dressed it up.”

“Okay!” Yulian says, sounding frustrated with himself as well as me. “It feels obvious now. She clearly fucked up the corpse’s face to hide the fact that it wasn’t her.”

“You burned the body,” I growl.

“Yes, I burned the damn body. I was trying to protect you!” he says, raising his voice. “I knew that her death would be pinned on you. Bad marriage, dead wife, the husband is the first person people look at. I knew that Rodion would want to see her body if I didn’t dispose of it properly before he found out. So yeah, I made an executive decision and I burned the body. You’d spent the last few years of your life in hell because of that woman. I wanted to get rid of her as soon as possible.”

“Is that the real story?”

He exhales in frustration. “Why else would I have done it?”

I raise my eyebrows. “You tell me.”

“Anton—”

“Just say it, Yulian. It’s obvious to all of us. It clearly wasn’t suicide and you knew that because of the state of the body. So just fucking say it. It’s right there.”

“Then why do I have to fucking say it?” he asks angrily.

“Because I want to know that you understand exactly how and when you fucked up.”

He looks towards Lev helplessly. But I see the exact moment he admits defeat. I see the fight leave his eyes.

“Fine. I burned the body because I thought you killed her.”

“Even after I told you I didn’t?”

His jaw tightens and I know that I'm pushing him too hard. He never liked that, even as a child. Even when it was our father pushing him.

And he worshiped the man.

"I didn't believe you."

I nod. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

"What the hell do you expect from me, Anton?" he blurts. "You hated her! Things between you two got so violent, so fast. You fantasized about killing her all the time. So when she turned up dead right after that huge fight when she crashed your meeting... what the fuck was I supposed to think?"

"She sent the note," I point out. "The one that said to meet her at the hotel. Did you think I had something to do with that, too?"

He looks lost for words for a moment. "Well..."

"Jesus."

Yulian slumps forward. "I thought you wanted to make it look like a suicide so that you'd have an alibi to tell Rodion."

"Why wouldn't I tell you or Lev my plans?" I ask.

He glances at Lev, almost as though he's asking for help. But Lev is too smart to get in the middle of this.

And honestly, Yulian should know better than to expect or ask for help. But if I've learned anything in the last twenty-four hours, it's that my brother is not the caliber of Bratva man I once thought he was.

"I don't know what to say, Anton," he says quietly. But I can still hear the hint of defiance in his tone. He still feels that his lack of faith in me is justified.

"I am your brother," I remind him. "As well as your don."

"You don't need to remind me."

"Apparently, I do. Because my word was not good enough for you that day, and now, it's cost us. Cost me."

“What was I supposed to think?” he asks again, somewhat pleadingly.

“You were supposed to believe *me*,” I hiss. “You were supposed to trust *me*.”

He sighs. “I know. Fuck me, I know.”

“If you hadn’t acted without thinking, we wouldn’t be in this mess,” I say. “And Marina wouldn’t have come within a hair’s breadth of killing Jessa and my baby.”

“How is Jessa?” Lev cuts in.

Yulian looks at him gratefully. The change of topic couldn’t have come soon enough for him. Not that we’re remotely done with it.

“She’s resting,” I tell them. “She’s weak and paranoid. But who can blame her?”

“How did Marina get so close to her?” Yulian asks quietly.

“She posed as a neighbor who lived in the apartment below Jessa’s. She must have introduced herself days after Jessa and I met.”

“Which means she’s been watching you,” Lev points out. “Keeping close tabs on everything you’re doing.”

“I suppose that’s why faking her death appealed to her. She could become a ghost, observing everything without anyone else being any the wiser.”

“She really is a psychopath, isn’t she?” Lev spits with distaste.

Yulian flinches noticeably, looking as if her existence is his personal fault. I’m inclined to agree with that assessment.

“What do we do now?” Lev asks. “Rodion is dead.”

“Rodion is dead,” I repeat, turning my gaze towards Yulian.

Yulian bristles slightly and I can see the defiance return to his eyes. “I didn’t ask you to kill the man. In fact, I always advocated for maintaining that alliance.”

“Since when do I need your permission to do anything?” I demand. “You keep forgetting your place, Yulian. The position

of a Vor is to support his don implicitly.”

“That’s what I’ve been doing forever,” he protests. “It’s what I thought I was doing when I burned Marina’s body.”

“Which, as we established, was fucking stupid.”

“Arguing is not going to change anything,” Lev says, stepping in. “What’s done is done.”

“You sound like a fortune cookie,” Yulian snaps.

Lev’s eyes flash, but he doesn’t get pissed like I expect him to. He reins in his anger and turns to me.

“We can spin this,” he says. “This is all completely controllable. Especially if we can get out the word of Marina’s existence.”

I nod. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“She knows you’ll be looking for her, though,” Yulian reminds us reluctantly. I know he can’t stop himself from contributing. It’s in his nature to throw himself into the job. “She’ll just disappear.”

“It’s easy to disappear when no one is expecting it,” I say. “It’s a whole different thing to disappear when everyone’s looking for you. At this point, all she can do is run. But I’m going to make sure there’s no place for her to hide.”

“I’ll make inquiries,” Yulian says. “I’ll start the hunt.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You really think I’m going to put you in charge of the hunt for the woman you let slip through our fingers once?”

He stiffens instantly, face pale. “I am still your Vor, Anton. And your brother. And, more to the point since I know you don’t give a shit about sentimentality, I know I fucked up.” His shoulders slump forward and his voice drops to barely a whisper. “I should have never doubted you. If you said you didn’t kill her, then I should have believed that. I should have let you see the body first. I’m sorry, Anton.”

I nod but refuse to give him any more than that.

“So... where do we stand now?” he asks hopefully. He tries to sound nonchalant about it, but I can see the sweat forming on his brow.

“I’ll let you know when I figure it out,” I say. “You may go.”

The dismissal is abrupt. It’s also never really happened before. Not quite like this. Yulian’s eyes go wide and he stares at me as though he’s waiting for me to take it back.

“We have to think about a game plan,” he says. “We have to know how to proceed.”

“I will discuss that with Lev,” I say. “And I will inform you as needed.”

For a moment, he looks to me like the twelve-year-old boy he once was. A little bit lost, very embarrassed, deeply hurt.

“Very well,” he says, turning for the door and disappearing through it.

I turn to Lev, whose expression is pinched in discomfort. “Was that necessary?” he asks.

“You think I was too hard on him?”

“He’s right—he did fuck up. But I think his intentions were sincere.”

“I know they were. Doesn’t stop me from being pissed off. His mistake nearly cost me my child. And my—”

I stop short when I realize I don’t know how to finish that sentence. What is Jessa to me exactly? My girlfriend? My partner?

“My point is,” I continue, “there are some mistakes you can’t walk back from.”

“No one was hurt,” Lev reminds me.

“I’m surprised you’re speaking up,” I remark. “You’re not one to defend Yulian. Especially when he doesn’t deserve to be defended.”

“He hasn’t always made the best decisions. And his childish attitude can be annoying. But sometimes, I think you forget:

he worships the ground you walk on.”

I frown. “I think you’re confusing him with yourself.”

Lev snorts with laughter. “I’m serious. He’s always looked up to you.”

“Maybe so. But the only person he put on a pedestal was our father.”

Lev shakes his head. “You really don’t see it, do you?”

“See what?”

“You’re walking in his shoes now, Anton. You took your father’s place a long time ago. And to be honest, you’re a better don than he was. It’s not hard to understand why Yulian would shift that admiration from him to you.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“You’re too close to the situation to see it. But sometimes, I think you might benefit more from going a little easier on Yulian when he screws up. Because, chances are, he’s off somewhere beating himself up about this shit twice as hard as you ever would.”

I consider that for a moment, wondering if Lev has a point. I’ve never really seen that in my relationship with Yulian.

We’re brothers. So close in age that the idea that Yulian would replace our father with me seems strange.

“He just wants you to be happy,” Lev continues. “It’s why he got rid of her body in the first place. He didn’t want you to be implicated.”

“Yeah, that didn’t work out so well, did it?”

“Only because Marina was around to spread those rumors. She was obviously very active in death.”

I sneer, “Of course the bitch would find some way to rise from the ashes. Some people just aren’t smart enough to stay dead.”

“We can correct that,” Lev says dangerously.

I smile. “I like the way you think.”

“What *is* the plan?” Lev asks.

“With Yaromir in charge of the Ivanovs, their Bratva is practically under my control already. I can manipulate that runty bastard without even having to try.”

Lev strokes his chin thoughtfully. “But if Marina is alive, she’s going to set her sights on taking the throne. It’s her birthright, after all.”

I shake my head. “Unless she fucks every last soldier in the organization, I can’t see the Ivanov men choosing her to lead them.”

My lieutenant looks unconvinced. “Stranger things have happened. And men can be bought for a lot less than a good lay.”

I nod. “Correct. Which is why there is only one plan going forward: Locate Marina. Kill Marina. And this time, when we put her in the ground... I’m going to make sure she stays there.”

JESSA

Was I talking in my sleep last night?

The last thing I remember is falling asleep on Anton's chest, his deep voice a low rumble in my ear.

"What did I say?" I ask myself, straining to remember. "And what did Anton hear?"

"Talking to yourself, dear?"

I turn to the door just as Courtney walks in with a tray of water and a small bowl filled with vitamins.

"Just a little," I mumble. "Seeing as how there's no one else to talk to."

"So I'm no one? My goodness, that's cold."

I giggle. "You just showed up."

"Because I was busy talking to your doctor," she informs me, setting the pills on the bedside table next to my water. "And I have good news."

"Oh? Tell me."

"You're officially out of the woods. We've been monitoring you closely and your vitals are strong. So is the baby."

"Does that mean I'm off bedrest?"

A big smile splits her face. "It does indeed."

"Yes!" I crow, throwing the covers off me before I jump off the bed dramatically. Courtney looks both amused and nervous as I twirl on the spot with my arms raised.

I'm wearing a white strappy nightdress that came in for me yesterday along with a whole new wardrobe. It was pretty minimalist, but it had all the necessities. Jeans, t-shirts, sweaters, a coat or two. Everything is of the finest quality, but you wouldn't know until you ran your fingers over the luxurious fabrics or felt the intricate stitches.

I would have made a fuss about it, but then I thought, what is the point? Anton would get his way in the end like he always does. And if he's willing to spend on clothes for me, why shouldn't I accept them?

"Okay, but listen to me, darling," Courtney tells me urgently. "You're off bedrest, but that doesn't mean you should overdo it. You still need to rest up."

"And I will. But I can at least walk around, right? I can leave the suite for a drive or something?"

"That's up to Mr. Stepanov. But... I don't know why he would have a problem with it."

Unfortunately, I do.

He doesn't want me out and about on my own when Marina is still at large.

This is the first time I find myself agreeing with his way of thinking. I have no desire to ever come face to face with her again.

"Where is Anton?" I ask.

Courtney folds her hands together in front of her lap. "He left for the day."

I try to hide my disappointment. For some inexplicable reason, I expected him to be here when I woke up. In fact, I've come to expect it. Which is certainly not a good sign.

"Did he say where?"

"He didn't. Not to me, at least."

I exhale softly and turn towards the windows. In theory, I'm looking out at the view, but I'm not taking any of it in. I'm still

trying to remember what I said while I was half-conscious last night.

“Jessa?” Courtney asks.

“Hmm?”

“Did you hear me?”

“Huh?” I ask, turning to her.

Courtney purses her lips. “You can’t overdo it.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, I heard you.”

“No intense exertion.”

“Got it.”

She gives me a knowing look. “That means no, shall we call them, ‘adult activities.’” That gets my attention. I stop short and turn to her. She nods, a firm glint in her eye. “I know it will be hard but—”

“It’s not hard,” I say quickly, feeling my face flush. “I mean, I’m just... sex is not an issue. Anton and I are not—we’re not actually a couple. So there won’t be any sex taking place.”

I hate that I sound the way I feel: bitterly disappointed.

“But you are having his baby, aren’t you?” Courtney checks.

“I... well, yes. But it was more of a one night type of thing.”

Or two. But she doesn’t really need to know that.

“Ah. I see.”

“That was probably more information than you needed.”

She shrugs. “I did ask.” She gives me a generous smile and hands me my vitamins for the morning. I swallow the handful of colorful pills quickly with a gulp of water and then hand the glass back to her.

“I’m gonna explore the suite,” I say.

“Sure, but not too fast.”

I’m pretty sure she’s joking, but I roll my eyes as I walk away.

The suite is bigger than I imagined when I was confined to bed. My room opens into the sitting area, a lushly appointed room with leather and a TV that seems to melt right into the wall, like it was grown there instead of hung. Beyond that, I see a small study branching off and a neat kitchen decked out in gleaming white. But the show stealer is the massive sunroom. It's encased in glass, ceiling included, and every inch of the place glows.

I'm basking in the heat, wishing that Anton was here, when I hear heavy footsteps behind me. Hope flares in my chest, but when I turn around, I see that it's Yulian.

"Oh... hi."

He gives me a knowing smile. "Disappointed?"

"No."

He just laughs. "I've seen that expression enough times to be able to recognize it, Jessa," he says. "Trust me, I can always tell when a woman is hoping for Anton and gets me instead."

"That can't be true. You're a good-looking man."

"Why, thank you," he says in his easy manner, giving me a mocking half-bow. "But when you compare me with Anton, I look like the frog who's waiting to be turned into a prince. Hasn't happened yet."

I smile. "There's still hope."

I'm suddenly conscious of the fact that I'm standing here in my nightgown. The neckline falls low over my chest and the hemline brushes the tops of my thighs. It's soft as can be, but entirely too clingy and sheer to be worn in polite company.

I'm even more aware of my state of undress when Yulian's eyes dip to my breasts. To his credit, he forces them back up to my face almost immediately.

Anton and I aren't exactly a couple—I literally just said those words to Courtney—but still, I feel an uneasy sense of guilt. Like I've done something wrong.

"If you'll excuse me... I'm going to go change."

“Sure. How about a drive once you’re ready?” he asks.

I turn to him enthusiastically. “I’d love that!”

He laughs. “See you downstairs in fifteen?”

“I’ll be there in ten.”



As it turns out, I’m ready in nine. I take the fastest shower known to man and then I pick my outfit carefully.

I’ve been cooped up in bed for so long that I feel like looking pretty. To that end, I choose a romantic, off-white dress with a deep V neck and beige buttons that run down the front.

I comb out my hair, add a touch of blush, slip on my ankle-height brown leather boots, and whisk downstairs.

It’s the first time I’ve walked through the hotel, however—while conscious, at least—and I’m momentarily floored by how fancy it is. I try not to look intimidated as I make my way to the main entrance. *You belong here. You belong here.*

But that thought gets promptly undercut when I manage to get lost twice before the concierge takes pity and leads me to the gleaming double doors of the entrance.

When I step outside, Yulian is leaning against the side of his car waiting for me.

I meant what I said: he’s definitely an attractive man, but I can’t help comparing him to Anton. They’re very similar in build. Both tall and broad-shouldered, both dark-haired and stormy-eyed.

But there are subtle differences if you know where to look. Anton is broader at the shoulders and narrower in the waist. Yulian is a little blockier, a little rougher around the edges.

But he isn’t without his charms. He has a charming playboy vibe, the kind of man who flirts shamelessly with everything on two legs just for the sheer pleasure of seeing women blush, whereas Anton is more brooding detachment.

I already know which one is my type. Even if Yulian is the easier brother to strike up a conversation with.

“Did you get turned around?” he asks, tipping his head towards the concierge with a smirk.

“Shut up. This place is huge. And I wasn’t exactly conscious when I was first brought here.”

“Fair point,” he says in a quiet voice.

A catch in his tone snags my attention. “Something wrong?”

“No, I was just thinking... I’m glad you’re okay. And the baby, too.”

I smile at the unexpected sentiment. “Thank you, Yulian. I really appreciate that. Turns out my baby’s strong.”

“I’m not surprised. Anton’s his father.” He holds open the door and helps me into the passenger seat, then walks around and gets behind the wheel.

“Hey, I’m strong, too.” I say, glancing over as he pulls out of the hotel drive.

“I have no doubt. You put up with Anton.”

That makes me laugh. “Where are we going?”

“I have a place in mind,” he tells me. “But it’s a surprise.”

“Oh?”

He nods. “You’ll just have to be patient.”

“Does Anton know about this surprise?” I ask, wondering if he’ll be pissed to know that I left the hotel without his say-so.

Not that I need it or anything. But he has been there for me these past few days. I don’t want to seem ungrateful.

“It was his idea, as a matter of fact,” Yulian tells me.

“Really?” Now, I really am excited. My heartbeat picks up.

“So this place we’re heading... Anton is there?”

“Yup.”

“And you’re not going to give me any clues?”

He smiles. “Nope.”

I peer at him out of the corner of my eye. His side profile is a carbon copy of Anton’s. The same sharp jawline, the same rakish stubble.

“Comparing me to my brother?” he asks.

“No,” I answer—a little too quickly to be subtle about it.

He gives me that same all-knowing smile he did the first time he caught me gawking. “Tell me something, Jessa. Why him? Why Anton?”

I gulp and think for a moment. Why Anton, indeed? I’ve thought about it over and over again. Wondering what if, wondering why, wondering how. Wondering if I made the right choice when I took his hand to help me to my feet on that godforsaken beach.

And I’ve come to the same conclusion every time.

“He looked at me like... like he was really seeing me,” I whisper. It’s the first time I’ve said it aloud and it feels good at first. Then I actually hear myself and I flush with embarrassment. “Sorry. That came out really sappy.”

Yulian is quiet and contemplative for a long moment. “No, it’s cute,” he says at last. “Really pulls at the heartstrings.”

“Ass.” He laughs again, and I sigh. “He just seemed so different than the men I was used to. He was confident and in control. He seemed like the kind of guy who knew exactly what he wanted.”

“Well, you got that part right. Although I’m suddenly regretting starting this conversation.”

“A little sibling rivalry?” I tease.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “It’s not a rivalry if I never win,” he corrects. “It’s just the story of my life, you know? Anton has always been amazing at whatever he attempts. Even when it comes to women. I know I don’t stand a chance if they see him first.”

“Oh, c’mon, that can’t be true.”

“It is. Every woman I’ve ever wanted has wanted Anton instead.”

“Maybe you’re just choosing the wrong women,” I say. “Maybe you’re attracted to the women you know you can’t have.”

He blinks, like he’s never considered that before but it has the ring of truth. His glance at me is impressed. “You think?”

I shrug. “Hey, people are complicated. Maybe in some ways, you wish you were more like him.”

He snorts. “I’ve wished that since I was old enough to talk. He was always the favorite son. The son that made Papa proud.”

“I’m sure you did, too,” I say, even though I have no idea if that’s at all accurate.

“Nope,” he says firmly. “My father gave me attention, sometimes even affection. But he gave Anton praise. I’d have preferred his pride over his pity.”

“You’re saying that only because you didn’t get it,” I point out. “You might not have felt that way if you’d gotten Anton’s deal.”

He shrugs. “Maybe you’re right. Honestly, I got the better end of things in the big picture.”

“How so?”

“I get to be a part of the Bratva without shouldering all the responsibility. I have much more freedom.”

“And Anton doesn’t?” I ask tentatively.

“He has a Bratva to run, territories to protect, and children to raise.”

I frown. “Children to raise?”

“His future children, I mean,” Yulian amends hastily. “He will need sons to carry on the legacy he builds.”

“What if he has daughters?”

“Then he’ll either marry them to men who can take over for him or he’ll make sure his daughters are capable of running

the Bratva. It's unlikely, though."

"Why?"

"Because the Bratva is a man's world."

"Hate to break it to you," I snap, "but that's not a Bratva exclusive thing. The world in general is a man's world."

Yulian isn't fazed by my bitterness. "Once you've immersed yourself in the Bratva, you'll understand what I mean. Women don't command the same kind of respect here that men do." He glances at me. "Just to clarify, I'm all for women running Bratvas. Girl power and all that. In fact, I think they'd do a kickass job of it."

"Really?"

"Really," he says.

Weirdly enough, I actually believe him.

"I like you, Yulian."

He gives me a smile that might have made my heart skip a beat if I were another woman in another time, another place.

"I like you, too, Jessa. I just hope..." He trails off. "Never mind."

"Are you really going to leave me hanging?"

He smiles sadly. "I just hope this world doesn't chew you up and spit you out."

I frown. His warning is ominous, but I get the sense he was about to say something else before he changed his mind.

I'm on the verge of asking him what that was when his phone starts ringing. He glances at his screen and then answers it on speaker.

"Yeah?"

"Where the fuck are you?"

I feel a little jolt of excitement the moment I hear Anton's voice.

"Um—"

“Worthington Manor is out west. Why are you taking the east route?”

Yulian rolls his eyes. “I made a scenic detour, okay? Also, how the fuck do you know where we are?”

“Because I’m right behind you,” Anton says impatiently.

I turn around and see a black car trailing behind us on the road.

Yulian glances in the rearview to see what I’m seeing. “Oh, well, I’m heading to Worthington right now.”

“Step on it.”

He hangs up without saying goodbye. I feel the need to give Yulian an apologetic smile.

“Honestly, what do you see in him?” Yulian asks, but it’s obvious he’s just joking.

“Are you sure he wants to surprise me?” I ask. “He didn’t seem like he was in the mood.”

Yulian waves away my concern. “Trust me, he wants to do this for you. He’s just annoyed with me, that’s all.”

I already know why, so I’m not going to be a jerk and ask.

“Why did you take the scenic route?” I ask. It’s not like I’d paid much attention to the drive.

“Honestly?”

“Yes, please.”

“I wanted to talk to you,” he says simply. “I wanted to get a feel for the kind of person you are.”

“I didn’t realize this was a test.”

He chuckles. “Not sure if you’re aware, but his last relationship was kinda crazy.”

“So I heard,” I mutter dryly.

“I just want to make sure you’re right for him. That’s all. From what I can tell, you’re a good egg, though, so have no fear.”

I smile shyly. “You’re a good brother, Yulian.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“I do.”

“Great,” he says. “Put a word in for me with Anton, will ya?”

I laugh. “I’ll see what I can do.”

ANTON

She's a vision in white as she gets out of the car.

The dress is modest, but still sexy. I'm starting to realize that Jessa could make a potato sack look sexy.

She's kept her hair loose. It flows around her shoulders in beachy waves. Her eyes are wide and excited as she takes in the manor and the lush green grounds, just like I hoped they would be. There's no purpose in us being here other than to show her something beautiful. To see the world through her eyes.

But that's the only purpose I need.

The look on her face is almost enough to make me forget that I'm annoyed with Yulian for taking the so-called "scenic route."

He gives me a half-hearted wave from where he's lingering in Jessa's wake. I can tell he's still wary of me. Unsure if every simple word is going to turn into a fight.

But I'm not in the mood to fight today. I planned this day for Jessa. So I give him a nod and he gets back into the car and leaves without a word.

Jessa waves and then turns to me. "This is amazing. Where are we exactly?"

"It's called Worthington Manor," I explain. "They breed horses. Those are the stables just over there. Once we cross the fields, there's a huge farm. Tons of land. The owner and his

wife run the farm and their son and daughter-in-law run the manor.”

Only Worthington Manor’s stone chimney can be seen from here. Two pinnacles of gray stone rising above flawlessly manicured trees. The sky is scrubbed clean and blue, free of clouds, and the gravel driveway crunching under our feet is music. In the distance, a bubbling brook chatters to us.

“This place is... crazy,” she says, looking awed by it all.

“Want to meet the horses?”

She finds my eyes and smiles. “You read my mind.”

The branching pathway to the stables is flat and Jessa is wearing a pair of low-heeled boots. Still, I stick close in case she needs help. Every tiny falter has me reaching out towards her. Though maybe I’m just looking for an excuse to run my hands across her skin, bury them in the roots of her hair.

I force myself to shove them in my pockets instead.

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

“So much better,” she says. “But I think that has more to do with getting out of the hotel.”

“And here I splurged for luxury.”

She chuckles. “I’m not knocking it. I just needed a change of scenery. This will definitely do.”

I think about asking her what she and Yulian discussed on the drive over here, but I decide to leave that alone. If they discussed me, she’s certainly not going to cop to it. And I don’t want her to think I care.

Though the mere fact that I’m even thinking about it proves otherwise.

“How many horses do they have here?” Jessa asks as we step into the stables.

The smell of dirt and manure and fresh hay is thick in the air, but it’s still refreshing in a weird way. Maybe we both needed a change of pace.

“I’m told fourteen at the moment,” I tell her. “But two mares are pregnant, so that number will grow soon.”

“No way.” She looks around and points out a black horse. “That one there? Is she one of the pregnant ones?”

“I think that’s a stallion.”

“How can you tell?” she asks, turning to me with her nose wrinkled.

I snort. “I’m no expert, but the big swinging dick is a bit of a giveaway.”

She turns back to the stallion and finally sees what I’m seeing. Her face goes beet red. I can’t help chuckling at her reaction.

“Come on,” I say, gesturing to her to follow me down.

As we pass, the horses poke their noses out of their stalls and neigh with interest. Jessa rushes to each one and pets them in turn. She strokes their noses and whispers sweet nothings in their ears.

I have no idea what she’s saying, but it doesn’t really matter in the end. I just like watching her with them.

She’s a natural. Each horse seems as riveted with her as she seems to be with them. We get to the end of the stalls and Jessa’s eyes light up.

“This one,” she says with confidence. “She’s one of the pregnant mares.”

I check the name underneath the stall. “Satin Princess.”

“What?”

“Her name,” I say, pointing to the nameplate.

“That’s such a pretty name.” She turns to the horse, placing one hand under her head and the other on her nose. “A pretty name for a pretty girl.”

This time, I pay attention to what she’s saying to the creature.

“I hear you’re pregnant,” Jessa whispers. “Me, too. Feels a little strange, huh? But it’s nice. Like you’re special all of a sudden.”

That makes me frown. Is she implying that she wasn't special before?

"Want some hay, pretty girl?" she asks, grabbing a fistful from the bale next to Satin's stall. She holds it up, underneath the horse's mouth and the animal plucks it up between its teeth carefully.

"I can bring you back one day," I tell her. "When you're up to riding."

"Seriously?" she asks, turning to me.

"I don't see why not."

"That would be amazing!"

She looks like a little kid who's been told that Christmas has come early.

"But I could maybe try riding one of them today?" she asks cautiously. She knows before the words have even left her lips that I'll allow that over my cold, dead body.

I narrow my eyes. "No. There's more for you to see anyway. Come on, I'll introduce you to the owners."

She falls into step beside me as we exit the stables. Two figures are meandering across the lawn towards us. We meet them halfway across the expanse of green.

"Jessa, this is Mr. and Mrs. Sawyer," I say. "Our hosts."

Margaret's eyes sweep over Jessa the same way they swept over me when I first arrived here. As if they see everything that's there to be seen. She's a sharp one, no doubt about that.

"Hello, dear," she says, extending her hand out to shake. "Please call me Margaret. And this is my Thomas."

"Hello," Jessa says. "Your horses are wonderful."

"Aren't they?" Margaret gestures to her husband. "I have to give my husband the credit. He oversees the horses. I'm usually puttering about in my garden."

"What do you grow?"

“I like to dabble in a bit of everything,” Margaret says proudly. “When possible, anything that’s cooked here at the manor is plucked right from our own gardens.”

“That’s amazing. Is there a greenhouse for the cold season or do you dry and pickle things for the winter?”

“Are you a gardener, too?” Margaret asks.

“Well, I’m a chef,” Jessa explains.

“You don’t say,” Thomas says, looking impressed. “How wonderful.”

Their accents are thick and posh. Upper crust Brits if I ever heard them. Still, they’re simple people, instantly likable and trustworthy. Another reason I picked this place. After everything that’s happened, after all the lies and deceptions and hidden secrets, Jessa needs to see that some people and some places are exactly what they appear to be.

“Well, the pressure is on then! I hope we impress you at dinner tonight,” Margaret says. “We’re having a special meal prepared in your honor.”

“You are?”

“As requested by your husband,” she says, throwing me a fond smile.

Jessa gives a little start when Margaret refers to me as her husband. She seems to be waiting for me to dispute it, but I decide not to. It’s more interesting this way.

And to be completely honest, I like the way it sounds. That I’m Jessa’s husband. That she’s my wife.

After Marina, I didn’t think I cared about that type of thing anymore. But everything is different with Jessa.

Me most of all.

“Come on,” Thomas says, gesturing for us to follow him. “We can walk by the gardens on our way to the house. We’ll take the long route so you can really see everything.”

Jessa falls into step beside Margaret, but she keeps throwing little glances back my way while Thomas and I trail behind

them.

As Margaret and Jessa walk a little bit ahead of us, Thomas gives me an approving smile. “She is wonderful. A real beauty.”

“I’m inclined to agree.”

“Reminds me of my Margaret when we were first married. She had the same enthusiasm for new adventures. Of course, our adventure was building up this farm and turning it into a business. I’m sure yours will be just as rewarding.”

I refrain from saying that our adventure will probably be the child that Jessa’s carrying. That’s need-to-know information.

When we arrive at the garden, Jessa’s jaw drops.

“This is a farm,” she gasps. “A proper farm. I pictured raised beds and watering cans. But you have the whole spread. It’s... incredible.”

“Feel free to wander and see what we have to offer,” Margaret says, still grinning proudly at Jessa’s effusive praise.

Jessa wanders up and down the rows, pointing out different things and running her fingers over the greenery like it’s fine silk.

The whole time, I’m content to simply watch her rejoice in beauty.

We spend almost an entire hour walking around the garden before Margaret suggests we head up to the house for some tea and biscuits. Jessa’s face actually falls.

“Don’t worry,” Margaret tells her, noticing the same thing. “We can come out here again later. But I think your handsome husband is bored.”

Jessa rolls her eyes. “Attention span of a gnat, that one.”

The women titter with sneaky glances back at us. Thomas and Margaret link arms and set off for the manor.

I walk up beside Jessa and loop my arm around her waist. Her warmth and her smell hit me simultaneously. My chest throbs and my dick hardens.

“You okay?” I ask, ignoring the fact that she stiffens self-consciously under my touch.

“Of course. This place is amazing. And Margaret and Thomas are the sweetest. But... did you tell them we’re married?” she asks, lowering her voice.

“No.”

“Then why do they—”

“I imagine they just assumed.”

“You didn’t correct them,” she points out.

“Neither did you.”

She frowns. “I... just... I was taken off-guard. You should have corrected them.”

“Scared to be my wife for the day?”

Her expression becomes guarded. “You already have a wife, remember?”

Before I can respond, she quickens her pace and catches up with Margaret and Thomas. Margaret, ever perceptive, starts talking right away to cover over the awkward vibes, pointing out at a patch of emerald green in the distance. I follow behind and listen, brooding.

“... You know that Tom and I were married on that very field? The one just over the hill. Can you see that ash tree over there? We had our first kiss as man and wife right underneath it.”

“Oh, wow,” Jessa gasps. “That is amazing. Like, storybook perfect. How long ago was that?”

“Going on forty-five years now,” she says. “I was nineteen.”

“Nineteen,” Jessa whispers. “That’s really young.”

“When you know, you know,” she says with a little shrug. “The first moment I laid eyes on Thomas, I knew I would marry him.”

“Was it the same for you, Thomas?” Jessa asks, throwing a glance over her shoulder.

“Oh yes,” he says fondly. “She was the prettiest girl in the neighborhood. She was also the loudest. I couldn’t help but fall in love with her. Mostly because she never gave me a choice. But if I’d have known I’d be toiling in manure all day long, I might’ve gone searching elsewhere...”

“Oh, hush,” Margaret laughs, smacking him playfully on the shoulder. “Ignore him. This land has been in my family for five generations. It was actually supposed to go to my older brother, Marius. But he decided to forsake all worldly possessions and become a priest. So the land came to me instead.”

“Lucky you,” Jessa sighs dreamily.

“I always wanted to do something special with it. Build something that was mine. Ours. We got married here. And then five years later, we moved from the city with our children to give this life a proper go.”

“Did they enjoy it here?”

“It took some adjustment from city life,” Margaret admits. “But the children loved it. And eventually, Thomas and I fell in love with country living, too. Neither one of us could ever move back to the city now.”

“You know, I always dreamed of doing something similar myself,” Jessa says with the air of someone confiding a foolish secret. “Not as big as yours—I don’t have the chops for that like you do—just a little garden big enough that I could cook from it. Taste the earth in the stuff I make.”

“You’ll need a nice big house with a nice big yard, then,” Thomas says. “I’m sure your husband will be able to take care of that for you.”

“Oh,” Jessa says, looking suddenly flustered. “I wouldn’t expect him to...”

“Nonsense,” Margaret says, cutting her off. “You must always expect everything from your partner. That’s what marriage is all about.”

Jessa can’t keep her eyes from mine any longer. She glances at me and then quickly away, her face flushing. Fortunately for

her, we round a hedge just then and the manor comes into sight.

“Wow,” she breathes. “This place is amazing. I know I sound like a broken record, but it really is.”

“We’ve had quite a few renovations done throughout the years,” Margaret admits. “We added two wings to accommodate more guests. And the kitchen was expanded, too.”

“It takes a lot of work and money to maintain a stodgy old building like this,” Thomas adds grumpily, though all of us can tell that he’s obviously in love with the work. “There were moments when we wondered if it was worth it.”

“Oh, it was worth it,” Jessa says immediately.

I’m inclined to agree with that as well. Looming before us is a sprawling, gray-bricked home with moss and ivy growing over the facade. Peaked roofs glisten in the sunlight and stained glass windows look out from the upstairs guest rooms. It’s magnificent.

Margaret leads us through the main entrance and into one of the formal sitting rooms that overlooks the back gardens. The flower beds closest to the house are devoted to every imaginable variety of blossom. It’s a riot of color everywhere I look.

“You really live here?” Jessa asks, her eyes wide with admiration. Like she’s wondering if this is all some strange sort of dream.

“Well, yes and no. Thomas and I stay in one of the two annexes connected to the main structure,” Margaret explains. “Our son and daughter-in-law occupy the second annex. You would have met them today, but they’re in London attending to business. Now, come, let me show you around.”

We’re given a short tour of the manor itself. It’s as grand as you’d expect from the outside, all mahogany and marble and quaint metalwork details. The whole place is pristine, but it’s not an off-putting kind of thing where you’re too awed to touch the objects. It’s welcoming. Cozy, even.

When we return to the beginning of our loop, the table by the window has been arranged with a sprawling assortment of pastries, scones, and biscuits.

“Please help yourself,” Margaret says, taking a floral plate and handing it to Jessa.

She looks overwhelmed as she accepts the plate and reaches for a biscuit. I can also tell her energy is starting to flag.

“Jessa, why don’t you sit and rest for a bit?” I say coolly.

“I’m fine,” she says.

My hand comes down on the small of her back and I force her into a seat. “Let me rephrase: sit,” I say firmly. “You need to take it easy.”

“I *have* been taking it easy for days now,” she whispers.

I give her a look that ends the argument as quickly as it began. Margaret and Thomas are both observing us with politely amused smiles on their faces.

“I remember when you were that protective of me,” Margaret stage-whispers to her husband.

“Her first trimester hasn’t been easy,” I say by way of explanation.

“Oh!” Margaret says, clapping her hands together. “You’re pregnant?”

Jessa blushes. “I am.”

“How wonderful!”

“Very good,” Thomas adds in a laughing rumble. “Very good.”

While the two of them are fawning over her, I back out of the room and pull out my phone. I stand a few feet from the threshold so that I can still keep an eye on Jessa while I dial Yulian’s number.

He answers immediately. “I’ve been looking,” he says instead of a greeting. “But there’s no sign of her anywhere.”

“She’s got to be somewhere.”

“I agree. I’m just saying, ‘somewhere’ might not be England. Not anymore, at least.”

I grit my teeth together and glance towards Jessa. The coppery English sun is filtering in through the arched windows and illuminating the notes of gold in her hair. Somehow, it puts things in perspective for me.

“Then expand the search,” I tell my brother. “I want to find her now.”

I don’t say it aloud, but I make a promise to myself while I look at Jessa.

I want Marina dead and buried before my child is born.

JESSA

Thomas and Margaret excuse themselves after the tour is over, leaving Anton and me alone to enjoy their gorgeous view of the garden.

He's sitting opposite me, looking out at the pink and white azaleas lining the pathway, but I can tell he's not really seeing them. He's lost in his own thoughts. And from the looks of it, they're not good ones.

"Anton?"

"Hm?"

"Thanks for bringing me here," I say.

He turns to me, his eyes coming back into focus. "I thought you might like it."

"Like it? I love it. This is exactly my kind of world. I used to dream about a version of this. Obviously, I wasn't thinking about England in particular. But I did dream about a big house somewhere far-flung where I could have a garden big enough to feed my family."

"Have you always wanted a family?"

"Always," I say without missing a beat.

He doesn't say anything to that, though I wish he would. He just sinks back in his chair, face half cast in shadow and half in sun.

He looks like he belongs here. Like aristocracy is in his blood. This life, this place—it suits him the same way everything else

does.

I wish I looked half as good.

“So... they book out rooms here?” I ask, mostly just to break the silence. “I haven’t seen any other people.”

“No. You won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I booked out the whole place while we’re here,” he says. “It’s ours for as long as we want it.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

“Am I ever not?”

“Anton...” I stammer. “That really wasn’t necessary. I’m okay with sharing.”

“I’m not,” he says with whiplash finality.

I chew on my bottom lip, real life creeping into the fantasy world the manor has created. “You seem on edge.”

“I’m fine.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You’re worried about Marina.”

“Why should I be worried about a walking corpse?” he snarls.

I feel goosebumps on my skin instantly. “Anton... you’re not going to do anything crazy, right?”

“Define ‘crazy.’”

Before I can figure out how to respond to that, Thomas sticks his head in the door. “Any final preferences for dinner tonight, Jessa? Margaret is in the kitchen right now setting the menu.”

“Actually, can I come with you? I’d love to see the kitchen.”

“Of course, my dear. Follow me.”

I glance at Anton and he gives me a curt nod. I follow Thomas out of the sitting room and towards the kitchen.”

It’s just as charming as the rest of the manor. Suave country chic if I ever saw it. The room is all buttery timber and pale blue tile. There’s a deep farmhouse sink and a butcher block

island with a gorgeous patina. Pocket doors open onto pantries, larders, a refrigerator hidden behind tasteful paneling.

It's enough to make me swoon on my feet.

Margaret is standing by the windows with three men and two women, all of whom are dressed in chef's whites. Something akin to jealousy rises up in me. I've been out of my whites for far too long.

"Ah, Jessa, there you are! You wanted to see the kitchens?"

"You've got her, darling?" Thomas asks.

"Of course," Margaret says, waving me in. "You can go see to the chickens, Thomas. Come and meet my staff, Jessa."

She does a quick rundown of everyone, including a designated pastry chef, who I compliment for the amazing tea and desserts. They welcome me politely and then scatter, each to their own tasks. The sound of knives chopping and pans sizzling is music to my ears. It fills a part of my soul I didn't know was missing.

"This is pretty jaw-dropping," I say. "You, this place, all of it. I think the kitchen might be my favorite part, though."

"I don't blame you. I love cooking myself," Margaret tells me with a wink like we're lifelong friends. "So even though we have a full staff, I come in here once in a while to get my hands dirty. I was just about to wash and dice some potatoes."

"Need some help?" I ask eagerly.

"Oh, I couldn't say yes to that! You're our guest."

"Really, I'd like to. It's been a while since I've seen the inside of a kitchen. Especially one as lovely as this. Please don't send me away."

Margaret laughs. "I can't ask you to help."

"You're not asking. I'm volunteering. In fact, I'm begging."

She raises her eyebrows with amusement, but then gives me a nod. "Alright then. It'll be nice to have some company."

“Yay,” I celebrate as I wash my hands in the cold stone sink next to the counter. “This reminds me of the kind of kitchen that Beatrix Potter might draw in one of her stories.”

“High praise,” Margaret laughs. “I used to read *Peter Rabbit* to my kids when they were growing up.”

I smile, wishing I had a sweet story like that to tell about my own childhood. But my parents didn’t bother with bedtime stories. One of the rotating nannies they hired sometimes read to me, but neither of the people who gave birth to me stuck around very often for the bedtime routine.

It will be different for my child, I tell myself as I start peeling the potatoes. My child will get bedtime stories every night. My child will get a kiss on their head and they’ll never have to guess if they’re loved.

They’ll *know*.

Margaret gives me a soft smile. “It’s the best of times, you know? Those years when you first start a family. When you become a parent.”

“What was it like for you?”

“A little scary, of course. I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t. But very exciting and a whole lot of fun.”

I smile. “Yeah. I’m scared, that’s for sure.”

“But you know the deciding factor?” Margaret asks.

“Tell me.”

“It all depends on the partner you have,” she says. “If you have the right one, then you’re invincible. Happiness comes easily then.”

My hands tremble on the second potato, but I manage to tamp it down. This would be the moment to correct her. *Anton is not my husband*.

But somehow, I can’t bring myself to say those words. Because if I do, maybe she’ll ask me why he isn’t my husband. And then I’ll have to explain Marina and the fact that I was a one-night-stand, nothing more.

“You okay, dear?” Margaret asks, looking at me with concern.

“Are you cold?”

“Maybe a little.”

She sighs. “This English weather. It’s tough when you’re not used to it. Let me get you a sweater.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary—”

But she’s already gone to get one. She walks down to the end of the kitchen and opens a coat closet next to the back door, then pulls out a gray knit cardigan.

“Here you go,” she says. “I knitted this myself about a decade ago.”

I take it from her. “Wow, it’s so soft.”

“It might be a little big for you, but it should do the trick against the damp.”

She helps me put the cardigan on and I sigh. “That feels good. Thank you.”

Margaret resumes her position beside me and we continue peeling potatoes. I glance at her from time to time, marveling at how content she seems to be in her life.

“Just for the record, you have a good one,” Margaret says after a long stretch of silence.

“A good what?” I ask stupidly.

She smiles. “A good man.”

“Oh,” I say, flushing with color. “Right.”

She gives me an amused little side-eye. “Ahh, the flush of new love. I recognize it well. You and your husband haven’t been together very long, have you?”

He’s not my husband. He’s someone else’s husband.

Still, I can’t say it.

“No, not very long at all.”

She nods. “See? When you know, you know. Tom and I were engaged three months after we first started dating. My parents

thought it was too fast, but I always knew he was right for me.”

“And you were right.”

She laughs. “Forty-five years, two children, and five grandchildren later, here we are.”

“Did your parents come around in the end?”

“They did,” Margaret says. “It took nearly a decade, but they did.”

“Ten years?” I exclaim, gawking at her. “That long?”

“They had a hard time admitting they were wrong. But they did bequeath this place to me. Maybe that was their way of making amends.”

I smile. “Well, you’re doing the land proud.”

“Thank you, dear. That means more than you realize.”

A part of me wishes I could have this kind of conversation with my own mother. But I already know it’ll never happen. Our conversations have always been stilted and formal. Like two strangers fumbling around to find common ground but hitting a brick wall instead.

“What was it like becoming a mother for the first time?”

Margaret’s face turns dreamy. “Oh, honey, it’s the best thing in the world.”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t want to make it seem like a fairytale,” she adds quickly. “But I find myself thinking about it like that now. All the hard parts fade away over the years. I haven’t needed to be an active parent in a long, long time.”

“I’m sure your kids still come to you.”

“They’d never admit it as such, but they certainly do,” she laughs. “But the relationship changes a little as they get older. I went from being their mother to being their friend. Which is a different kind of gift. But there’s nothing like the first couple

of years when they're small and they need you. You're the center of their universe."

I take a deep breath. "Sounds like a lot of pressure. And responsibility."

"It is that," she agrees. "It's that and more. But it's also worth it."

I smile. "I guess I always knew that. I'm just a little scared."

"I know, honey. And it's normal to be scared with your first baby. But like I said, you have a wonderful man who takes care of you. It's so obvious how precious you are to him."

I bite the inside of my cheek until it bleeds as nameless emotions squiggle through me. "You really think so?"

"It's hard to mistake a man in love."

I feel my heart twist a little because I'm really not sure that her observation is at all accurate. Anton in love?

No way.

Anton in love with me?

That makes even less sense.

And even if he does have some semblance of feeling for me, how long will it last? Until I have his baby? Five years? Ten?

I feel as though I can't count on this... whatever this is. And any time I feel even the slightest bit confident that maybe I actually can, I remember how badly I've misjudged both people and situations in the past.

Some wounds never scar up. They just bleed and bleed forever.



I spend almost two blissful hours in the kitchen with Margaret before Thomas appears to tell me that Anton is looking for me.

I find him in the dining area. It's a splendid room framed on either side by glass bay windows with cushioned seats. The

wall around the windows holds inlaid bookshelves loaded with endless leatherbound tomes.

Anton is standing by the windows with his back to me. He turns slowly to face me as I enter.

“Hi,” I say. “You were asking for me?”

“Have you been on your feet this whole time?” he asks, frowning.

I’m both annoyed that he’s treating me like some fragile object and touched that he seems to care so much. But the voice in the back of my head is telling me not to read into it too much. *He’s just worried about his baby. You are only important insofar as you’re carrying it. A means to an end.*

“I decided to help Margaret in the kitchen,” I say. “I didn’t even feel the time pass.”

“You should sit down.”

I roll my eyes and make my way to where he’s standing. “You’re fussing over nothing, Anton.”

“You almost died,” he points out.

“But I didn’t,” I say. “I’m not being irresponsible. If I thought I was doing anything that would put strain on the baby, I would stop. You don’t have to worry.”

He looks at me sharply. “Is that the only reason you think I care?”

Before I can answer, Thomas walks into the living room. He’s followed by two members of the kitchen staff carrying silver trays.

The first one has a roast chicken that’s charred to perfection and dripping in a delicious-looking golden sauce. The second platter is filled with roasted vegetables.

“Are you two ready for dinner?” Thomas asks.

“Please tell me you’ll be joining us,” I say. “I would so love it.”

Thomas looks uncertain. “Oh, well... I’m not sure...”

“Please,” I say again, hands clasped in front of my face. “I begged Margaret to let me chop potatoes, and now, I’m begging you to eat them with us.”

He flushes happily. “I suppose we can make that happen. Margaret and I would be thrilled. Let me just go tell her now.”

He ducks out of the room and I turn to Anton. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Why would I mind?”

The answer that springs to my lips is, *I have no freaking clue what you want and why you want it. I don’t know anything that goes on behind your eyes. You’ve been sweet and you’ve been angry, you’ve been tender and you’ve been cruel. I’m lost in you and I’m drowning in you and I just need you to give me something. Some little thing to cling to. That’s all. I’m not asking for much.*

Instead, all I say is, “I don’t know.”

His brood deepens, if that’s even a thing. “You look tired,” he says.

“I’m fine. Like I told you.”

“Still,” he says, wrinkling his nose, “just to be safe, we’ll go to bed after dinner.”

“Oh,” I stutter. “Uh, okay. Just, are we…”

“Yes?”

“Are we getting two rooms or one?”

It seems like an innocent enough question in my head. But the moment I ask it, I realize how loaded it really is.

“Well, it would be odd to ask for two rooms now that they think we’re a married couple, don’t you agree?”

“Oh. Right. Duh.”

My blush must give me away, because he asks, “Something bothering you, Jessa?”

I open my mouth. Now would be the time to just come right out and ask him what our plan is. How I factor into his life

now that Marina is alive.

But once again, the words I ought to say just won't come.

"Maybe I am a little tired," I say.

"Don't worry. We'll have an early dinner and then we can go to bed."

We can go to bed. I feel like an idiot for being so damn affected by those words. By how normal they sound. How domestic.

So I bury those thoughts in the same dark place I bury all the other ones like them.

But even as I do, I know there's no way around it.

I want Anton.

I love Anton.

And I'm terrified to the very core of me that I won't get to keep him.

ANTON

“This trifle is delicious,” Jessa says, holding up her spoon so that she can see all the individual layers. She’s gazing at it like it’s a work of art, inspecting each element, tearing it apart to taste everything individually and together.

It’s hilarious how into food this girl is. But passion for something so simple, so mundane, turns it into anything but that. It becomes magical in her eyes.

And what’s magic in her eyes becomes magic in mine.

“Is that jam?” she asks, turning to Margaret.

“A thin layer, yes,” Margaret says. “And just underneath it is my home-made custard. It’s a family recipe, actually.”

“It tastes like manna from heaven. I have to be honest, I’m not usually a fan of trifle. But this one is converting me.”

“I could show you the recipe, if you like.”

Jessa’s eyes widen in unabashed hope. “Really? Do you mean it? I’d love that!”

Margaret winks. “Thomas and I are heading to the farmer’s market in the morning, but when we get back, class is in session.”

“Farmer’s market?” Jessa asks, perking up like a meerkat.

Margaret’s grin widens. “Would you like to join us?”

Jessa turns to me, as though she needs my permission. Once upon a time, that kind of subservience was exactly what I

wanted from her. *Just follow fucking orders, for once in your goddamn life.*

But now? Now, it troubles me in a way I can't explain.

"That sounds like a good idea," I say.

"We leave pretty early," Margaret says, looking doubtful.

"I'll be up before the sun!" Jessa promises.

Margaret and Thomas both laugh. "Six o'clock will be good enough," he says with a fond smile.

I'm not surprised to see that she's won them over already. With that smile and the sparkle in her eyes, it's hard to see how anyone can resist her.

"This dinner was an unexpected pleasure," Thomas sighs as the waiters come in to clear away our plates. "I'm going to sleep like a baby tonight."

"Me, too," Jessa concurs. "So tell me, does this market have..."

Jessa is still talking a mile a minute about the farmer's market tomorrow when my phone starts to ring. I excuse myself and leave the dining room. There's a small annex that leads to the gardens and I head that way to take the call.

"What is it, Yulian?"

"Just checking in," he says.

"Any news for me?"

"Nothing as of yet. But I've got eyes everywhere. We're bound to stumble across a lead soon."

"Stumble?" I repeat. "Do better than 'stumble,' Yulian."

"What I mean is—"

"I need you to take this seriously. So far, I'm not impressed."

He's silent for only a second or two, but it's a heavy silence. An anxious one. "I am taking this seriously, Anton. I always have."

I know I'm being hard on him, but I can't help it. His mistakes have big consequences. The kind that can't be undone. The kind that bleed.

"What I meant was, we're bound to find a lead any day now. I've got all my men on it."

"You mean you have all *my* men on it," I remind him.

"Yes, Anton, that's what I mean."

I sigh. "I don't want this search letting up until we have her."

"Got it, boss."

"Good. Keep me posted. I want daily updates."

"I'll do that." But he lingers on the phone, breathing nervously.

"Anything else?" I ask.

"How's Jessa?"

I frown. "She's fine."

"She overdoes it sometimes. You might want to make sure she gets some rest," he continues.

"I know how to handle my business, Yulian," I say through gritted teeth.

"She's not exactly business, though, is she, brother?"

Is he goading me right now? Or maybe there's nothing there and I'm just reading into it, just angling for a fight with my brother.

Maybe I've been gunning down this path since I found out just how badly he fucked up with ensuring Marina's story was ended with finality.

"She is whatever I say she is."

"She's carrying your child."

"I realize she's carrying my child, Yulian," I hiss. "Why do you think I'm fucking invested? Why do you think I'm doing all this shit?"

I hear an intake of breath and turn around just in time to see Jessa's skirts as she disappears up the darkened path that leads back to the house.

Fuck. How long was she standing there?

Long enough, it seems. Another thing I can thank my brother for. Add it to the goddamn list. He's still rambling on the other end, oblivious to the chaos he's causing. I hang up on him mid-sentence.

The fight has drained out of me. Ironic, considering it looks like I'm going to get one tonight anyway.

Just not the one I saw coming.

I head back into the house to find Margaret waiting for me by the staircase.

"I can show you up to the room we prepared for you," she says. "Thomas already took Jessa up. She seemed... tired."

I follow her up the carpeted stairs. The blue carpet is worn and the stairs creak as we navigate up them.

"We had them redone shortly after we moved into the manor," Margaret tells me. "But that was almost forty years ago. We might have to do some more work on them."

"Things don't have to be perfect to be worth keeping," I mutter. I'm not sure where that comes from or even what it means. And as soon as I've said it, I wish I hadn't.

She throws me a touched smile. "You make a beautiful couple," she says as we reach the end of the staircase.

"That's nice of you to say."

"I'm not trying to flatter you," she says. "I mean it."

"I know."

She chuckles a little and I notice that she has a slight limp in her right leg. She notices my gaze.

"Twenty-five years ago, I fell off one of the horses when I was out riding with Thomas," she tells me. "Broke my leg and fractured my foot. It took two surgeries, weeks of bedrest, and

months of physical therapy before I could walk properly again. But I could never get rid of the limp.”

“Did you get back on another horse again?”

Her eyes twinkle. “Of course. Funnily enough, when I think back to that time, I think of it fondly.”

“Is that so?”

She nods. “Mostly because of Thomas. He took such good care of me. I think that was the moment I realized just how much he loved me.” She chuckles. “We’d been married almost twenty years by then, already had the kids and the farm and a whole life we’d built. But when you realize that nothing on earth can change how you feel about a person, that’s when you know you’ve got the real deal. And that’s when it hit me. That’s when I knew.”

I’m silent as her words sink in.

“Anyhow! Enough rambling from a batty old lady. The room we’ve given you is the Austen Suite,” Margaret informs. “It has a breathtaking view. You’ll see once the sun’s up. Have a wonderful rest, Anton. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Margaret.”

She whisks down the hall, singing softly to herself. I slide through the bedroom door on silent feet.

She wasn’t lying—the room is spectacular. Like stepping back in time with how beautifully it’s been preserved and restored. The fire in the corner crackles happily inside of a red brick hearth. The hardwood floors are refinished and glossy enough to see my own reflection.

Just in front of the fireplace is a cushy sofa. A grand, four-poster bed reclines in the back corner. Silks hang from all four sides, draped romantically around the mattress.

The only thing missing is... Jessa.

Then the bathroom door to the right opens and she walks out. She’s still fully dressed, but her eyes are puffy enough for me to realize the obvious: she’s been crying.

“Jessa—”

“I think you should go and ask for your own room,” she says flatly.

I raise my eyebrows. “Do you think that’s something I’m likely to do?”

“Fine,” she snaps. “Then I’ll go ask for another room.”

She tries to walk past me, but I grab her arm and pull her gently against me. Her chest hits mine and she pulls away almost immediately.

“Don’t touch me.”

I ignore her. “What you heard out there... You don’t have the context to understand it.”

“Please,” she scoffs. “How stupid do you think I am? You clearly meant what you said. Don’t you always?”

“You have no idea what I meant.”

She tosses her head and huffs. She’s not coming down from this horse anytime soon. So I stand there calmly and wait for her to rage and storm and drain all the excess adrenaline out of her body.

“I don’t want to share a room with you,” she spits.

“Too damn bad.”

“Fine,” she hisses again. “Then you can sleep on the couch.”

“Like hell I will.”

“For God’s sake, you can’t even give me that?”

“No, because there’s no reason to be dramatic.”

Jessa stamps her foot. “I heard you out there, Anton!”

“I was pissed at my brother. It wasn’t about you.”

“Then who was it about? Is there another woman having your baby?” she demands, crossing her arms across her chest.

“Hm?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then tell me!”

“Would you believe me if I explained?”

“Honestly, right now, anything you say will just sound like an excuse to me.”

“Exactly,” I say. “So why bother?”

Her eyes go wide. I can see the hurt in them, written clear as day. “You’re an asshole. Why did you even bring me here, Anton? Was it just to screw with my head and make me think that I was important to you?”

“No.”

“Then why?” she demands again.

“Because I thought you’d enjoy it. Simple as that.”

She doesn’t quite know how to process that. She turns from me and stares out the window. “I have no idea what we’re doing...” she murmurs.

“We’re having a baby,” I say. “That’s what we’re doing.”

I know she wants more from me. I know she wants some kind of declaration of my feelings for her. It’s not even that I don’t know what to say.

It’s more about bringing myself to *say* them.

I’m just not that kind of man.

I had hoped that bringing her here would demonstrate where we stood. But of course, fucking Yulian had to mess that up, too.

“You know what?” Jessa says. “I’m tired. I’m just gonna go to bed. If you don’t want to sleep on the couch, that’s fine. I’ll take it.”

“You’re not taking the couch,” I growl.

“I’m not sleeping in that bed with you.”

“Yes, you are.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Well, tough. We all do things we don’t want to sometimes.”

She looks at me incredulously. “Since when have you ever done anything you didn’t want to do?”

“I married Marina, didn’t I?”

Her eyes soften a little. But only for a second. “Maybe you two should try couples counseling,” she suggests with biting sarcasm. “First session can be devoted to dealing with your spouse after they’ve returned from the grave.”

“I wouldn’t quit your day job,” I tell her. “Comedy is not really your strong suit.”

She rolls her eyes and turns back into the bathroom. She slams the door on me and I can’t help but smirk. Getting her angry is a different kind of turn-on. My cock is already half-hard in my pants, and it’s threatening to turn into a full-on erection at the slightest provocation.

I get exactly that when Jessa walks out of the bathroom wearing a slinky blush slip that I packed for her in the overnight bag. The straps are so thin that they’re almost invisible and the material is clingy. She’s kept her long blonde hair loose and it flows down her back like a golden river.

“Excuse me,” she snaps through gritted teeth when I block her way to the sofa. My eyes flit to her nipples and she stiffens when she sees where my gaze lands.

“Get in bed,” I tell her in a low rumble.

“No.”

“Jessa. You’re going to need a good night of sleep. Now, get in bed.”

“Make me.”

The words fall out of her mouth naturally, but I know she regrets them as soon as I give her a wolfish smile. “If you say so.”

Then I scoop her into my arms and carry her to the bed.

“No!” she yells, struggling hard against me. I pull my arms in, bringing her closer to my body so that she has less room to move. “Anton, stop it! Let me go!”

“Are you going to promise to behave?” I taunt.

“I’m not a fucking child!”

“Could have fooled me.”

“Let. Me. Down.”

For the second time tonight, I listen. I drop her onto the bed and she kind of bounces. The jostling shifts her nightgown around and she accidentally flashes her left breast.

Her cheeks flush with color as she tries to straighten herself and tuck her nipple away. But I’ve already gotten an eyeful and my cock is giving her a standing ovation.

Goddamn, she was made for me. She might not like it, she might not accept it, but it’s true.

She’s mine.

Looking embarrassed, she slams her hand against my chest. Her eyes go wide when she realizes just how unforgiving my muscles are.

“If you want to touch, all you have to do is ask,” I chuckle. “You didn’t have to go to all this trouble.”

“Fuck you.” She glares at me and pulls herself up on her knees. She’s barely upright before I grab her by the shoulders and throw her down against the bed, then jump on top of her and blanket her body with mine.

To my surprise, she stops struggling. Her chest rises and falls. It’s all I can do not to lean down, rip that slip off her with my teeth, and suck her taut nipple into my mouth.

“It was not my intention to hurt you,” I tell her quietly.

“You don’t have the power to hurt me,” she fires back.

“No? I beg to differ. I think that’s what you like most about me.”

I stare down at her and slowly, I can see her resolve start to break. Her eyes turn milky with lust and then she sighs. Her entire body relaxes with that exhale.

I take advantage of the moment and bend down. My lips brush hers. Just a tease at first, a temptation, then more and more until she has no choice but to give it back.

Her mouth is soft and warm against mine. I bite down on her lower lip and she gives a little yelp of pleasure that sends jolts right into my aching dick.

When I pull back, her eyes are dark with desire and her legs are wrapped around my waist. I bend my head down again and pepper kisses on her neck all the way down to her breasts.

I push the flimsy material of her nightgown aside and run my tongue along her nipple. She shudders beneath me, her body inviting me in closer and closer.

I bring my head up long enough to lay another kiss on her lips. Then I pull away. “Not tonight.”

“I’m fine,” she argues.

“You need rest.”

When I pull back, she sits up slightly, her eyes falling to my crotch. “You want this, too.”

She sounds surprised. Like she can’t believe I could possibly want her. It’s not an explanation for the phone call, but it’s something. It’s a start.

“I’m not denying it.”

“Then why can’t—”

“You forget, Jessa: I speak to your doctors every day. Sex is off the table for a little while.”

She reaches out and places her hand on the buttons of my shirt. Her fingers skirt through the fabric and find my abs, grazing lightly. “I didn’t think you were the type to listen to authority.”

“Not usually. But I do when it matters.”

She sighs. “Guess we’re sleeping then.”

I smile, even as I try to ignore the ache in my groin. I pull off my shirt, reveling in the way her eyes lap me up hungrily.

Then I pull her to me and we settle into the heart of the bed together. My cock is against her ass and she giggles softly.

“I’m not going to be able to sleep with you stabbing me like that.”

“Get used to it,” I growl, nipping at her ear. “You’ve got a lifetime of this to go.”

JESSA

I wake up with Anton's arms wrapped around me.

It's a heady sensation. To feel his warmth against my back, his breathing low and even, his presence like a wall between me and the world.

Slowly, I turn in his arms. I stare at his face, marveling at just how beautiful a man he is. His nose, his chin, his cheekbones. He's perfectly symmetrical, perfectly proportioned.

When I get a little bolder, I reach up and trace my fingers over the ridge of his nose and then down to his lips.

His jawline sports a light layer of stubble now, but it suits him perfectly. My center tingles as I continue to stare at him. I went to sleep extremely frustrated last night, sexually and otherwise.

And apparently, it's the kind of feeling that can pick up right where it left off.

We're so close that I have to be careful not to move too much and wake him up. But I'm sorely tempted to slip my hand down between my legs so that I can touch myself while looking at him. The only thing that stops me is the thought of him waking up and catching me.

Then again, the thought of what he might do if he did is tempting in its own right.

I hear my phone vibrate on the ornate bedside table, and I disentangle myself from Anton and slip out of bed. I see a bunch of texts from Chris.

Hey, how's it going?

Didn't hear from you yesterday and I started to worry.

Text me when you get these, okay?

I just want to know that you're okay.

I want to ignore them, if only to spend a little more time in bed with Anton. But I already feel bad about the way I've treated Chris. I don't want to give him another reason to hate me.

So I grab my phone and slink into the bathroom so that I won't disturb Anton. I give him a call and he picks up in next to no time.

"Hey! Are you okay?" he exclaims.

"Of course I am. Were you really that worried?"

"Can you blame me?" He sighs. "You do have a talent for getting into trouble lately."

"I'm not going to argue with you there."

"That's a first," he drawls. Then he adds, "How are you?" in a much more serious voice.

I think about last night. Maybe our little spat wasn't quite "resolved" per se, and the words Anton said on the phone to Yulian still sting like barbs hooked in my skin. But it felt—and maybe I'm just crazy, maybe I'm just deluding myself and imagining this—but it felt like Anton was trying to say things with his body and his presence that he can't bring himself to say with his words. That's the thought that has me feeling all warm and fuzzy this morning.

Matter of fact, I can actually feel the warmth spread through me. It's like a hug from the inside. I think about saying that to him, and I can almost imagine the look of disgust I'd get in return. The thought brings a burst of laughter to my lips.

"Guess things are going well then?" Chris says.

I realize how badly I want Chris's blessing. My parents aren't in the picture, so his opinion is the only one that really matters to me.

“He treats me well.”

“Men always do—at first.”

I sigh. “Do you have to be all doom and gloom?”

“I’m just looking out for you, Jess. In case you forgot, he’s still hitched to his ex, who—in case you also forgot—is a murderous bitch with violent jealousy issues.”

I frown. “I haven’t actually thought about her much.”

“I’m waiting for the punchline,” he snaps sarcastically.

“I mean, I’ve actively tried not to think about her,” I clarify. “It was freaking me out a little. I was having nightmares.”

“Are they going away?”

I remember the way Anton’s arm was curled around me for most of the night. The way his comfortable weight pressed into the mattress and pulled me even closer against him. The steady rhythms of his breathing and his heartbeat, twin metronomes lulling me to a deep and dreamless sleep.

“... Jessa?”

“Oh,” I mumble, realizing that I haven’t answered his question. “Uh, no. I mean, yeah, no nightmares last night. Like I said, not thinking about her helps.”

That, or Anton’s presence. I don’t bother clarifying.

“Are you coming back to the States?”

“I’m... not sure.”

“Shouldn’t you know?” Chris asks. “Or is he the one calling all the shots?”

I recognize this tone. It’s the same one he used to use when he was talking about Dane. I don’t want history to repeat itself, but I can’t help but get defensive.

“He’s not Dane, Chris,” I say softly.

“You’re right—he’s worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“This guy is a Bratva don, Jessa,” he says. “And it’s kinda fuckin’ ridiculous that I need to remind you of that over and over again.”

“Okay, so he’s not an upstanding citizen. But he’s... he’s not going to hurt me.”

“He’s not going to hurt you now that you’re carrying his baby,” Chris corrects harshly. “What happens after you have the kid?”

“Please don’t do this.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Pick a fight with me. I’m tired and I’m pregnant and I’m far from home. And I really need you to be on my side, Chris. I know you don’t like him, and I don’t expect you to. But he will make sure I’m protected from her.”

He falls silent at that. Then he exhales. “I am on your side, too, you know.”

“I know that. Even when we’re butting heads, I do know that. But I’m gonna go now, okay?” I say. “I’ll text you later.”

He sighs bitterly. “Be safe.”

I say goodbye and hang up. Then I check the time. Thomas said six o’clock wakeup, and it is already five past.

I grab clothes and throw them on. When I walk back out of the bathroom, Anton is standing by the bed, fully clothed, looking effortlessly handsome.

“Forgot about your little farmer’s market date?”

“Chris called. I lost track of time.”

I can’t quite read his expression when I mention Chris. Some strained mix of a storm and a shrug.

He takes his turn in the bathroom for a few minutes while I put on a light jacket and grab a satchel. Then we head downstairs together to the front stoop, where Margaret and Thomas are waiting for us.

“I’m so sorry!” I exclaim the moment I see them. “I overslept.”

“Oh, darling, no stress. It won’t matter if we get there a little later than usual. Best we hurry now, though.”

We follow them down the drive. It rained briefly last night, so the world is fresh with dew. The car looks like a shiny beetle studded with diamonds.

I expect Anton to get into the passenger’s seat next to Thomas, but he slides into the back of the vehicle with me. I give him a puzzled expression and he raises his eyebrows.

“What?” he asks in a low voice while Margaret and Thomas discuss the best route to take to the market.

“You look strange sitting back here.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’ve been in the backseat of a car before.”

“But never one like this,” I say in amusement. My eyes flicker to his legs, which are kind of cramped in the limited space of the backseat.

He rolls his eyes again. “I’ll manage.”

It takes us about fifteen minutes to get to the market. And as soon as the first stall appears on the horizon, I feel like I’ve entered my own personal version of Disney World.

“Oh my God. This is awesome.”

The market is set up in the middle of a huge field and it seems to go on for miles. There must be hundreds of stalls set up along the freshly mowed grass. Cattle and goats hem and haw in their enclosures. The bright pops of color from fruit and vegetables dangling from the tent awnings look like fireworks.

Anton falls into step beside me as Margaret and Thomas head towards their usual stalls.

“Feel free to walk around, dear,” Margaret says to me over her shoulder. “I’ll give you two a call when we’re ready to leave.”

They disappear into the crowd and Anton turns to me. “Well? Where do you wanna start?”

“How about the cheese stall?”

Anton chuckles and spreads his arms. “I count four in this area alone. Pick one.”

I press the back of my hand to my forehead like I’m an old school Hollywood dame about to faint. “Dear God, I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

Laughing, Anton puts a hand on my lower back and steers me possessively to the nearest tent. I’m standing at the cheese stall, sampling a particularly flavorful piece of camembert, when I notice a familiar face in the crowd.

I elbow Anton. “Hey, is that Lev?”

Anton doesn’t even bother to glance his way. “Mhmm.”

“Does he like farmer’s markets, too?”

He shakes his head. “No, we need the security.”

“By ‘we,’ you mean me?”

“I haven’t needed security since I was ten years old. So yes, safe to say I mean you.”

I stop chewing for a moment. “Anyone else here that I should know about?”

“Just Yulian.”

“Your two righthand men. Joy.”

“There’s no one else I’d trust with your security.”

It’s harder to keep the smile from my face as we continue on to the next stall. The market may be huge, but it attracts an equally large crowd. Within the hour, the place is packed with families and older farmers.

When I see a honey stand, I zip straight for it without bothering to see if Anton follows. The owner is a sweet, cherub-faced beekeeper who wears her hair in two long braids the same color as her product. We end up having a ten-minute conversation about the varieties of honey she offers. I buy two bottles and I’m tucking them into my satchel when suddenly, I’m ripped around in place by an iron grip on my upper arm.

It's Anton, and he looks furious. "Jessa!"

"Yeah? What's wrong?"

"You can't just run off like that," he snarls.

"I was getting honey," I say, holding up both bottles. "I'm sorry, I didn't even realize I didn't tell you where I was going. But it was honey, Anton! I had to make a *beeline* towards it. Get it? Do ya get it?"

He stares at me for a moment, and I can tell he's trying really hard to contain the smile that's breaking through the annoyance.

"Not funny," he says at last, grabbing my arm and steering me down a different path.

"Pretty sure it was hilarious."

He rolls his eyes, but his fight with that grin is a losing affair. One corner of his lips is starting to twitch upward.

I'll take it.

Satisfied with my handiwork there, I look around for Lev and Yulian, but I can't spot either one. "You know, Lev and Yulian could just walk with us."

"This is not an outing for the whole group, Jessa," he says impatiently. "This is an outing for you. The rest of us are here to protect you."

I frown. "So you're not enjoying this even a little?"

He shrugs. "I'm working."

"Then you're missing out," I inform him. "Oh my God, look over there! Fresh fruit. Let's go. I bet it's berry, berry good."

As I dart that direction and Anton trudges along behind me, I'm pretty sure I hear him mutter under his breath, "Jesus fucking Christ."



I'm good with my purchases for the time being, so we continue walking around while I snack on the fruit I bought.

"Berry?" I ask, offering him a large, juicy blackberry. "They're super sweet."

I expect him to hold out his hand, but instead, he opens his mouth. Feeling a little ripple of unexpected pleasure, I pop the fruit into his mouth.

"Delicious, huh?"

He gives me a slanted smile. "It's good."

"You're having fun, aren't you?" I prod suspiciously.

His smile gets a little wider and a little more secretive. "I'm tolerating it." Then his gaze flits over my shoulder and that smile curdles into his usual frown.

"What?" I ask, twisting in place to see what he's seeing. "What is it?"

"Stay here," he growls instead of answering my question. "I'll be right back. Don't move. I mean it."

He storms off. I see Lev materialize from the crowd to join him, then the two of them melt right back into it. It's honestly miraculous how someone as big and imposing as Anton can blend in with normal rank-and-file citizens, but he makes it work somehow.

But as the minutes tick past and he doesn't return, I start to get antsy. I snap pictures of a nearby floral display and send it to Chris with the caption, *Flower 'ya doin', buttercup?* I'm in a punny mood, apparently.

He texts back with an eyerolling GIF, and that of course just encourages me. I'm off to the races, sending a picture of a pumpkin—*Oh my gourd, would ya look at that?*—and a pony—*Relax, I'm just horsin' around*—cackling to myself all the while.

But then something catches my attention. More of a feeling than a sight, although I'm pretty sure it was something in the crowd that I noticed. I wait and see as a cold-fingered dread strokes down my spine.

Just when I'm starting to relax—*maybe Anton's right; I should rest more, I'm starting to hallucinate*—I see it again.

A pair of icy blue eyes.

Marina.

They're gone as soon as they appear. Just a swish of blonde hair disappearing into the crowd.

And my heartbeat pounding like a drum as one thought goes through my head again and again.

She's here.

She's here.

She's here.

And I'm all alone...

I turn on the spot. The throngs of people that surround me are doing nothing to calm my nerves. I want one person, and he's nowhere to be found.

I take in a big breath to calm my nerves, but it doesn't seem to fill my lungs. I try again, and instead, I end up choking on nothing at all.

When I straighten up again, I notice a few people throwing me looks. A blonde woman asks me if I'm okay, and I jerk back from her so violently that she backs off with a scared expression on her face.

I'm panicking now, full-on melting down. I start roving between the stalls, desperately trying to locate a familiar face. It's all strangers as far as the eye can see, no one familiar, no one friendly—

And then I see Margaret's profile.

"Oh thank God," I utter breathlessly.

I'm walking towards her when a blonde approaches Margaret. I can't see the woman's face, but another fear grips me. What if Margaret is working for Marina? What if this is all a trap to lure me to the market so that Marina could finish me and my baby off? I don't know them, I can't trust them, I can't—

I suck in air, but it only seems to cut off my circulation. *Oh God...*

I realize belatedly that I'm hyperventilating. My vision is going foggy and there's pain in my lower abdomen that I haven't felt in days.

"Oh God... no..." I whisper to no one in particular. "Please no..."

My knees buckle, and suddenly, I can feel the damp grass underneath my fingertips. Someone calls out. More gasps and yells.

Then I see Margaret turning towards me, recognizing me.

I almost expect her to smile in sinister fashion, but apparently, my paranoia has gotten the better of me, because instead of the evil smirk I'm expecting, she starts moving fast toward me. Her limp is more pronounced when she trots, but her expression is all concern.

"Honey," she gasps, falling to her knees in front of me. "Honey, what's happening?"

I shake my head even as my eyes dart around the crowd. I see Marina's face again. She's staring at me from two stalls down. But the spots in front of my eyes are blurring my vision. I can't even tell if I'm really seeing her or not.

"Where's Anton?" I whisper. "It hurts so bad..."

The look of alarm on Margaret's face is what alerts me to the fact that something is deeply wrong. I follow her gaze down.

That's when I realize that there's blood on the front of my white dress.

"Don't worry, dear," Margaret whispers to me. "You're going to be okay."

"No... no, I don't think I am, Margaret," I sob. "I think I'm losing my baby."

ANTON

“What do you mean you saw her?” I demand. “Where? Fucking *where*?”

My thoughts are racing. Marina is here. She’s here, and Jessa is... Where the hell is Jessa?

“On the eastern perimeter of the market,” Yulian insists. “I’m sure it was her.”

“A brunette or a blonde?”

“She’s blonde again.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure, Anton,” Yulian growls. “I know what Marina looks like.”

“You didn’t the first time around, and that’s why all this shit is happening,” I snap viciously. He recoils in obvious hurt, but I don’t give a shit. His feelings don’t matter anymore. Only Jessa’s safety does. “Why didn’t you go after her?”

“Don’t you think that’s exactly what I did?” he exclaims. “She’s not here alone. She’s got people. I followed her and lost her in the crowd. Or would you have preferred if I opened fire on a bunch of civilians?”

“Anton!” Lev calls, breaking up our burgeoning fight as he maneuvers between a family and a couple to get to us. “We gotta move.”

“You spotted her?” Yulian asks.

“No,” Lev says, his face grim. “It’s Jessa.”

My hands ball into fists immediately. “Jessa? Is she hurt? What the fuck happened?”

Lev looks like he has no idea what to say. “She... she fell.”

But I can see it in his eyes: it wasn’t a fall. With Marina around, nothing is a coincidence.

I shove my way through the crowd. Lev leads me to a stall with a striped awning overhead. I see only Jessa’s feet sticking out from between the crowd, looking so pale and forlorn that I want to fall to my knees at the sight of them. Margaret and Thomas are kneeling beside her, both grim.

I drop to a lunge in the grass. “Jessa?”

Her eyes are hazy and panicked when they find mine. “Anton,” she says breathlessly. “The baby. I can feel...”

That’s when I look down and see the blood staining the front of her dress. It’s only a smattering, barely enough to stain the gauzy fabric, but it makes my blood run cold.

Margaret moves aside as I hurry forward and scoop Jessa up in my arms. She’s weightless, limp. She lolls against my chest as though the effort of holding her own head up is too much.

“We’re going home,” I growl.

I can feel her tears soak through the front of my shirt. “Just make sure the baby’s okay,” she whispers.

“I’m going to make sure you’re both okay.”

“Will she be alright?” Margaret asks, looking at Jessa. She looks like she’s close to tears.

“I’m taking her back to our hotel,” I say. “I’ll be in touch.”

She just nods as I veer back into the crowd with Jessa in my arms. I keep a lookout, trying to spot the bitch whose fingerprints are all over this fucking nightmare.

Lev pulls the jeep up as I approach and Yulian holds the door open for me. I get in the back seat, still cradling Jessa in my arms. I could set her down beside me, but I refuse to let her go.

My eyes keep flitting to the bloody spatter on the front of her dress.

“Inform the nursing staff at the hotel,” I say. “Tell them we’re on our way.”

“Isn’t a hospital a better option?” Yulian asks. “They’ll have access to more equipment.”

“Are you questioning me again, brother?”

He falls silent and I look down at Jessa. Her eyes are wide open and she’s looking up at me as though I can save the baby.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, clutching the front of my shirt. “I didn’t know where you went and I, I, I...”

“What happened?”

“I saw her...”

Both Lev and Yulian look at me when they hear that. Confirmation. So she was definitely there at the market today.

Stalking us.

“You saw her?” I ask. “Are you sure?”

“I don’t know,” Jessa admits. “I see her everywhere sometimes. I’m not sure if I can trust my own eyes at this point. But I tried to find you, but then I got... I just panicked. That’s when I felt the pain in my stomach.”

“You’re going to be okay,” I reassure her. “You’re going to be fine.”

“But what about the baby?”

I don’t say anything. How can I? Even I don’t have the power to save this baby if she miscarries. Money and influence can only do so much. Sheer willpower can only do so much.

We drive in silence for a long time, uncertainty and tension thick in the air. I can taste it on my tongue, acrid and foul.

“We’re here,” Lev says, screeching to a halt in front of the hotel.

He’s parked at the back entrance of the hotel so we can get in with as little fuss as possible. There’s a separate private

elevator that leads up to the King's Suite.

When we arrive at the elevator, two members of my medical staff are standing outside the silver doors waiting for us, including Mathers.

"What happened?" she asks.

"My baby," Jessa says before I can answer, trying to twist her neck a little to look at Dr. Mathers. "Is the baby going to be okay?"

"Take a deep breath, Jessa. I'll have to examine you first."

We pile into the elevator, leaving only Yulian and Lev behind. The ride up takes about twenty seconds, which is twenty seconds too long, in my opinion.

I plow straight for the suite where the bed has been made up for Jessa. I place her down on the edge of it and reluctantly step aside so that Dr. Mathers can take over.

Jessa's eyes follow me. She's clearly rattled. Clearly terrified. My chest aches again. I'm starting to really fucking hate this feeling.

"Anton?"

"Yes?"

"Don't leave me."

Those three little words are probably the most vulnerable ones I've ever heard her utter. Consciously, at least. I wonder if she can sense how much it means to me, that she trusts me enough to be afraid. That she needs me enough to want me close.

My whole life, I've dealt in pain. Given it and received it plenty.

She makes me want to try love instead.

I nod. "I won't."

She cringes as Mathers examines her. When the doctor uses her fingers to push into Jessa's belly, Jessa whimpers.

"Gentle," I growl, "or I'll cut those fingers off myself."

Mathers turns to me, her expression clipped and politely professional. She has yet to show so much as a shred of fear at my intimidations. “If you want me to do my job, Anton, you’re going to need to give me space.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Then I’m going to need you to trust me.”

I take a few steps back, but I make sure to stay in Jessa’s line of sight.

The doctor nods, satisfied. “Get her hooked up to an IV,” Mathers orders the nurses. “And roll in the sonogram machine.”

Both nurses buzz around in a flurry of activity while Jessa watches. She looks weak and dazed, like some lost lamb searching for safety.

When the sonogram machine is rolled in, one of the nurses brings Mathers a tube of gel. “It’s going to be cold,” she warns as she squirts some of it onto Jessa’s belly.

I inch forward as the machine blips to life. Jessa has her eyes trained on the screen. It doesn’t even look like she’s breathing. Mathers works the wand—slowly, slowly, slowly.

For a few long moments, there’s nothing. No sign of life. Just the strange palpitations of an empty womb.

Then...

A soft *thud, thud, thud*.

I grip the edge of a nearby table to stop from sinking to my knees. My teeth are clenched so hard that they might shatter as a tide of emotion swallows me whole.

Jessa merely whimpers. No words, just a single soft note of pure relief. Her head falls back against the pillow and her eyes flutter closed. “Oh, thank God.”

Dr. Mathers smiles. “As you can see, the baby is fine. See that blob over there?”

Jessa pulls her head back up and stares at the screen in awe. “That’s our baby?”

“That’s your baby,” Dr. Mathers confirms. “The heartbeat is strong.”

“What about the blood?”

Dr. Mathers starts wiping the gel off Jessa’s belly. “Spotting is normal in the early stages of pregnancy. Especially when there’s stress or trauma. You were distressed when this happened?”

Jessa nods.

“Well, then it might have triggered a reaction from your body. You need to try and keep yourself out of stressful situations, Jessa. But for right now, your baby is strong and healthy.”

“Thank you,” she whispers. “Thank you so much.”

Mathers gives Jessa a smile, gives me a respectful nod, and then heads out of the room. The nurses follow behind her to give us some privacy.

Jessa hides her face in her hands and takes a deep breath. “I was so scared,” she says without looking up at me.

I stay where I am, still not trusting my own two feet quite yet. The relief hit me like a sledgehammer. I need to regain my bearings. “I know.”

“I really thought I’d lost the baby.”

“But you didn’t.”

She nods. “Anton?”

Sighing, I release my death grip on the table and go sit down next to her. “Yes?”

“Was it really her? Was it Marina?”

“I think so, yes.”

She shudders. “So she was following us?”

“Yes.”

“She’s not going to stop, is she?”

“Stopping has never really been her strong suit.”

“She wants to kill my baby.”

“She wants to kill *my* baby,” I say. “You’re innocent in all this. This is about me, Jessa. She wants revenge.”

“She can’t have it,” Jessa says fiercely, her hands falling across her still-flat belly.

“I agree.”

Jessa’s face falls a little as she tries to rein in her emotions. “But I don’t know if I can do this, Anton.”

“Do what?”

“Live like this, always having to look over my shoulder. Wondering when she’s going to jump out at me next. It’s too much. For my body and for my sanity and... and for my heart, too.”

“She’s not going to be a problem for much longer,” I assure her.

She blinks up at me for a moment, trying to process what that means. She’s no fool, though. She knows this can only end one of two ways: either we die, or Marina does.

Her throat rides with a hard swallow. “What if you can’t find her?”

“I will. She’s making it easy, in any case. Her obsession with you means she can’t seem to stay away for too long.”

“Anton...”

“Yes?”

“She may want revenge, but I don’t think it’s for what you think it’s for.”

I frown. Unease seeps into my gut. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, the miscarriage is not why she’s trying to get back to you.”

“That’s only one of the reasons,” I say. “She wants to get back at me for our entire farce of a marriage.”

Jessa tilts her head like she sees some hidden code in my face that I haven’t figured out yet. “You don’t see it, do you?”

I shake my head. “No, and I don’t care to. I stopped caring about Marina’s reasons a long time ago, Jessa, and I suggest you do the same. She’s not worth it. We just have to make sure our family is protected.”

Her eyes go wide as she gnaws nervously at her lower lip.

Our family. God, that feels so right on my tongue. Jessa is the family I never knew I needed. Never knew I wanted. And this baby is the second chance I’ve been avoiding since Marina’s death.

I’m not prepared to let either one slip through my fingers.

“Come on, let’s get you into some clean clothes so that you can rest.”

“You don’t have to. I can manage on my own.”

I ignore that and carry her off the bed.

“Anton,” she protests halfheartedly. “I can walk.”

Again, I ignore her. I take her into the bathroom and sit her down on the closed toilet seat. Then I start unbuttoning the front of her dress.

She’s wearing a nude colored lace bra that barely covers her nipples. Her breasts have gotten slightly bigger. It’s the only real evidence that she’s pregnant.

She stands shakily, and I push the dress down her hips. Her panties are nude and lacy to match, though the front is stained with blood.

When I reach for them, she backs away from my hands.

“Anton, you really don’t need to do this.”

“I want to.”

“You can send in one of the nurses,” she suggests. “Or I can do it myself.”

“Jessa, will you stop being childish? I’ve seen blood before.”

“This is different.”

“No, it’s not.”

I bend down and peel the panties off her. I don't even flinch at the sight of the blood staining her smooth skin. When she's naked, I fill the tub with water while she cleans herself with a wet cloth.

"Are you feeling any pain?"

"No," she says softly.

"Discomfort?"

"No."

She turns to me, everything on full display, nothing between us. She looks like a dream. Venus reincarnated, coming out of the ocean pure and perfect.

My cock wants her, despite her delicate situation. But it's easier this time to suppress my baser urges. She needs my tenderness right now, not my strength.

Jessa walks towards me, blushing under my gaze. I hold out a hand to help her into the tub, and she sinks into it, her eyes rolling back with pleasure.

"This feels amazing." She cracks open one eye and looks over. "Want to join me?"

I'm not expecting that. But it's an invitation I can't refuse. I strip down, not bothering with modesty because there's no way I can hide this raging erection. I'm harder than I've ever been in my whole damn life.

Her eyes go straight to it, though I can't exactly fault her for looking after the way I eye-fucked her only moments ago.

Then I submerge my body below the sudsy surface and the crackling tension dissipates, at least for now.

"What are you going to do when you find her?" Jessa asks reluctantly as the quiet *plink* of water droplets falling from her hair echoes around the room.

"Do you really care?"

She weighs that. "I do... kinda."

"Then you shouldn't. She's not worth it."

“You can put her in jail,” she suggests.

“But I won’t.”

“Anton—”

“This is the Bratva, Jessa,” I remind her. “We handle our disputes differently.”

“She’s still a person. Someone who’s suffered.”

She doesn’t put the blame on me, but it’s still there between us. The fighting, the violence, the anger, the miscarriage. One is a mirror image of the other. She sees herself in Marina—and in me, she sees the possibility of violence that cannot be taken back once it’s dealt.

“She brought on her own suffering,” I growl.

“I don’t want her to die.”

“You don’t want Freya to die,” I point out. “You don’t even know Marina.”

She sighs. “Maybe I just—”

“Freya doesn’t exist, Jessa. Marina needs to be stopped.”

“What can she really do?”

“She has support, that much is clear. When you were at Laurel Manor, was there staff on the grounds?”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“I don’t know... a butler, a cook, a gardener, a few maids?”

“People who are loyal to her,” I say. “I may have hated the woman, but I never underestimated her. She can be persuasive, even charming when she wants to be.”

“She fooled me.”

I nod. “Exactly. “She’s talented at manipulation. And that makes her dangerous.”

“Her father is Bratva?” Jessa asks.

“He was. It’s under the control of her cousin now,” I say. “He has the lion’s share of Rodion’s men, the ones who stuck around, which means she’ll have to go to him at some point.”

“But you’re planning on beating her to the punch, aren’t you?”

I smile. “You have a knack for this.”

She looks flattered, but then her expression turns pained. “I don’t want you to get hurt, Anton.”

“What makes you think I will?”

“She’s dangerous.”

I give her a cocky smile that I hope will reassure her. “And who do you think she learned it from?”

JESSA

Two days since the farmer's market. But it feels more like a week. A month. A century. My life has turned stagnant. I move around the suite, a ghost searching for a purpose.

Anton is gone for hours at a time. I know he's planning something with Lev and Yulian. I know it has to do with Rodion's nephew, Marina's cousin. I don't know any details, and frankly, I don't really want to.

I just want all this to be over so that I can enjoy my pregnancy and sleep without nightmares.

The medical staff disappeared right after clearing me. Now, a butler comes up twice a day to check if I need anything, and a maid comes in the mornings to clean. Four armed guards stand outside the suite at all hours. I can't tell them apart to save my life, so either Anton has an army of clones or this lifestyle just shapes men to look a certain way. Hard in the eyes, scarred, tattooed, with a merciless clench to the jaw.

It's supposed to keep me safe. But it just makes me feel isolated. The only times my loneliness ever recedes is when Anton walks through the door.

I try cooking, but for the first time in my life, it fails to ease my mind. Maybe that's why, in the thick of desperation, I decide to call my mother.

She answers but doesn't say anything right away. I swallow and break the silence. "Mom?"

“Jessa?” She actually says my name like a legitimate question. Like it could be someone else calling. Because there are so many people out there who refer to her as “Mom.”

“Hi, Mom. It’s been a while.”

“Yes, I suppose it has.” Her voice is clipped.

“How are you?”

“Fine, dear.”

“And Dad?”

“He’s fine, too.”

It seems we’ve already reached the end of the conversation, but I’m so desperate that I refuse to take the hint.

“You want to ask me how I am?” I ask.

“I assumed you were about to tell me.”

I bite back my annoyance, reminding myself that this conversation is not meant to be confrontational. It was supposed to be an olive branch. A *détente*.

“Okay, I, uh, I guess I’ll tell you then. Um... is Dad there?”

“He’s outside doing some gardening.”

“Do you think you could get him on with you?”

There’s a moment’s pause. “I suppose.”

I hear her set down the phone, then the muffled sound of her calling his name. She picks the phone up again and her breathing seems a little heavier.

“Should we be worried?” she asks.

Probably, I think. Out loud, I say, “No, this is good news. But it might come as somewhat of a shock.”

“Oh, dear. I’ll get him on the extension.”

Her tone is both tired and exasperated, and I immediately wonder if I’ve made a mistake calling to tell them about my pregnancy. But Dr. Mathers told me I’m three months along. I’ll start showing soon.

And they are still my parents. Even if sometimes it feels like they belong to a totally different species.

There's a click and a "Hello?" as Dad's raspy voice comes on the extension.

"Hi, Dad. It's Jessa."

"He knows who it is, dear," Mom chimes in. "I already told him."

I suppress a sigh. "How are you, Dad?"

"Oh, you know, same old."

"Jessa has something she wanted to tell the both of us," Mom says, cutting to the chase.

"You and Dane patched things up?" my father asks immediately.

My stomach drops with disappointment at the sound of the hope in his voice. I expected it from Mom, but this feels like a betrayal.

"No, of course not," I say. "He cheated on me. He cheated on me with my best friend."

"Everyone makes mistakes, honey," Mom lectures.

"If it had been one time, I might have been able to wrap my head around it. Maybe. But it wasn't just a one night thing. They were having an affair."

"Jessa—"

"They were sleeping together behind my back for months. Including the day he was supposed to be marrying me."

"Men are wired differently, dear."

"Mom!" I say, raising my voice just enough to shut her up. "I'm not calling to discuss Dane."

Angry silence. One beat of it. Two. Three.

Then: "You have news," Dad prompts.

I look around the palatial suite that's become my temporary home in the last few days. I wonder if this would be enough to

impress them.

“Right. I have news,” I say. “That’s why I called.”

I open my mouth, but I feel the words shrivel on my tongue. The sad truth is, despite the fact that we’re not close, I do still crave their approval. I do still care what they think. There’s this deep-seated need to be validated by them, and I know instinctively that no matter how cheery I sound when I say it aloud, I’m not going to be able to spin this as a good thing.

“Jessa, dear?” Mom asks. “Are you going to tell us what this is about? Because I have Bible study in half an hour.”

Bible study. Great. That should make for a nice, smooth segue.

“Okay, well... the news is...” I decide to just rip the Band-Aid. “... I’m pregnant.”

I hear someone suck in their breath. I’m pretty sure it’s my mother. But neither one of them says anything for the longest time.

Neither do I.

“You’re pregnant?” Dad asks finally. His voice sounds steady, but I can still hear the disappointment in it. Like this will be the thing that breaks him at last.

“Yes,” I croak. “Almost... almost three months.”

“Three months?” he repeats.

I’m painfully aware of the fact that Mom hasn’t said a word since I made the reveal. “Yes.”

“Three months ago...” he growls, “you were about to walk down the aisle.”

“Darling,” Mom jumps in, her tone rife with a strange combination of desperation and hope, “don’t you see? This was meant to be.”

“What?” I yell.

“What?” my dad yells.

“You and Dane. You’re clearly meant to be together. Why else would God have blessed you with a child?” she says as if the

answer is self-evident. “It’s important that you get married. Does he know? I’m sure if he knew he would insist that you get married. Darling, he was so devastated when you ran out on the wedding. I understand he did the wrong thing, but men are—well, they can be—”

“Stop!”

She falls silent immediately, and I feel a surge of satisfaction. It was something like Anton’s voice that came out of my mouth, powerful, automatically expecting compliance and fealty. “Mom, Dad... Dane is not the father of my baby.”

More silence. This one is worse than the last, leaking dread like motor oil.

“I... I don’t understand,” Mom says shakily.

“I’m having another man’s baby,” I say. “His name is Anton. He’s a successful... businessman. He’s the father.”

“When did you meet him?” Dad asks in that quiet voice he uses when he can’t quite process what’s happening.

“Um... shortly after the almost-wedding.”

“How shortly after?”

“Later that night.”

I don’t know why I’m telling them the truth. It just seems easier that way. Less messy.

“You... you left your wedding to your fiancé and met a strange man and slept with him shortly after?” Mom asks with growing horror.

I feel my whole body flood with anger. “You two realize that Dane was the one who fucked up, right? Why are you making me feel guilty for moving on?”

“Language, Jessa,” Dad says sternly.

“‘Language’ can get fucked right now, Dad!” I cry out. “You’re seriously worried about my *language*?!”

“We’re worried about you!” my mother corrects, her tone rising a few octaves to a shrill teapot whistle. “I don’t know

what's going on with you, Jessa. But you need help. We did not raise you to be this way."

A cold anger sweeps over my skin. "Excuse me?"

"Your behavior is becoming more and more reckless. Your father told me we should just give you some space. That eventually you would come around and see sense. But I see now that that was a mistake."

"Your mother's right," Dad says in the same stern tone. "Who is this man whose baby you're having? What do you know about him?"

"A hell of a lot more than I did about Dane, apparently."

"Dane was a respectable young man," Mom says. "He was a flawed human being. So are we all."

"So everyone else's flaws are fine, but I fucked up and I should fix things? I should take the hit? No. Screw that. All I hear is the two of you making excuses for Dane, but none for me."

"Jessa, we thought you were smarter than this," Mom says as if she hasn't even heard me. "To get pregnant by some, some... *stranger*, it's... it's..." She trails off like the words to describe this horror haven't been invented yet.

"Does it even matter to you that I love him?"

The words burst from my lips and it strikes me what I've just said only after I've said it. I'm glad my parents aren't here to see just how flaming red my cheeks are.

Actually, strike that. I'd be happy to let them see just how embarrassed I am right now—so long as Anton never knows.

"You... love this man?" Mom asks tremulously.

"Yes, I do."

"Honey, it's been three months. You don't even know him."

"You don't always have to know someone to love them," I say, wondering if that even makes sense, and knowing that it does. "I know the things that matter."

“Jessa,” Dad says. His voice is clipped and somewhat detached. “You’re pregnant.”

“I’m aware. I just told you that.”

“Are you calling to tell us that you’re marrying this man you’ve only known for three months?”

“I... no, that’s not what—”

“You’re not marrying the father of your child?!” Mom exclaims dramatically. She starts wailing and drops the phone. I can picture her, distraught like a movie starlet, fat tears rolling down her cheeks one after the next.

“You just told me that I can’t possibly know this man. Now, you want me to marry him?”

“You’re the one that claims to love him,” Dad says. It’s strange to see him and Mom on the same page for once. They’ve been at someone’s throat their whole lives—either each other’s, or mine. “If that’s the case, then why not marry him?”

I bite my lip, frustrated with the way this conversation has flipped. “I just wanted to tell you that I was having a baby.”

“Out of wedlock. A sin.”

“Mom!” I snap. “This is the twenty-first century, not the Scarlet goddamn Letter.”

“I don’t care what century it is,” she snaps. “Rules are rules.”

“I don’t subscribe to your rules or your beliefs.”

“I knew moving to the city was a bad idea,” Mom cries. “Look at you. Only a few months ago, you had the whole world at your feet. Now? Well, now—”

“The whole world at my—Honestly, what are you smoking, Mom?”

“Don’t you take that tone with your mother!” my father roars.

“I’m trying to have a conversation with the two of you!” I yell back. “I’m not a child.”

“No?” Dad asks. “Because this sounds like the kind of thing a bratty, rebellious teenager would do. If you’re going to have premarital relations, then you should have at least had the forethought to get him to wear a condom.”

“Oh my God,” I gasp as my skin crawls. “This cannot be happening.”

“Your father is right,” Mom says sniffily. “You should have been more responsible, Jessa.”

“Well, I wasn’t, okay? And now, I’m going to have a baby.”

She sniffles again. “Does he know?”

“Of course he knows.”

“And he wants to be a part of the child’s life?” Dad asks.

“Yes. We’re going to raise this baby together.”

“But he hasn’t proposed.”

“He doesn’t subscribe to the same archaic beliefs that you two do,” I say. “We’re alike that way.”

“If he respects you at all, he’ll propose.”

“Did you respect Mom when you cheated on her?” I snap.

I’m so angry that I don’t even regret my words. I get the expected silence from the other line. Then I hear the click of a receiver.

Someone’s hung up on me.

“Dad?” I ask tentatively.

“That was your mother,” he says in a defeated whisper.

“I’m not going to apologize,” I say, knowing that I sound like a petulant little kid. “It’s the truth. You have no right to lecture me about relationships.”

“Who told you about the affair?” he asks. He says it like it’s a dirty word. I suppose it is.

I close my eyes. “I overheard you and Mom fighting about it one day.”

I can practically hear him nodding somberly. “It was one time and it was a mistake. The worst mistake of my life.”

“Because you loved Mom? Or because you got caught?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“The right one,” I say. “I know you, Dad. You and Mom. The two of you live your lives by this rulebook that doesn’t always make sense. Tell me, do you love Mom?”

He doesn’t answer.

I nod frantically. “You see?” I continue. “I want to do things because they feel right to me. Not because I feel morally obligated to. I don’t see the point in making decisions like that.”

“Sometimes, Jessa... I don’t understand you.”

That cuts deeper than I thought it would. “Listen, Dad, I didn’t mean for this to become a big fight. I just wanted to let you know you were going to be grandparents. I thought you’d be happy.”

“We’ll be happy to have you home one day. With your child. And your husband.”

He makes sure to emphasize the last word.

“Is that the only way I’ll be welcomed back?”

“Jessa...”

That’s enough of an answer. I don’t need to hear any more.

“Goodbye, Dad.”

I hang up and then immediately burst into tears. I feel stupid. Stupid for calling, stupid for caring, stupid for thinking they’d be happy about my news.

I consider cooking and decide against it. I consider walking and decide against it. In the end, I just wander aimlessly around the room, picking things up and putting them down with no purpose in mind.

The truth is, I know the only thing that will make me feel better right now is seeing Anton. But the suite remains eerily

quiet. His smell is everywhere, but he is nowhere.

I find a half-baked brownie from yesterday's aborted cooking and sit in the living room to eat it while watching the sunset. But when I'm done, I feel emptier and lonelier than before.

So I head to my bedroom and put on one of the nightgowns Anton brought for me. I climb into bed, but it's only nine o'clock. There's no way I'll be able to sleep. Not with all this pent-up frustration raging inside of me.

I need an outlet.

I need Anton.

And somehow, the two needs spark a desire inside me that I can't seem to get rid of. My center throbs, making me aware of how long it's been since he last touched me.

I lie flat on the bed and slowly slide the hem of my nightgown up my thighs. I palm my center and then drag my fingers over my slit. I'm already wet.

My eyes flutter closed, and I imagine Anton standing above me. Those pale gray eyes running over my body with appreciation. I sink into the fantasy and my skin tingles with the excitement of it.

He was hard when he got into the tub with me the other day. He's hard around me more often than not.

And still, he never touches me. At least, he doesn't touch me in a way that will lead to anything. I haven't initiated out of pure self-preservation. I don't think I can take another rejection, whether it's for my benefit or not.

So instead of agonizing over what I can't have in real life, I picture it. I imagine Anton undressing for me, wrapping his hand around his cock as he watches me.

I run my fingers up and down my slit, sliding them in to the first knuckle.

I picture Anton crawling over my body, his naked skin pressed against mine.

My mind is so wired and my body is craving him so much that I keep jumping between fantasies. I picture him behind me, ramming his hips against my ass. Then I picture his cock in my mouth. Him eating me out on a plane, him railing me on the edge of a cliff with the wind in our hair.

I moan as my fingers probe deeper and deeper. With my right hand, I touch my breasts, imagining it's Anton's hand squeezing my nipple. I run my fingers over my clit and my eyes flutter open.

That's when I see the shadow.

I pull my hand back, but his voice cuts through the near silence. Deep and commanding.

"Don't stop."

Anton steps forward, the lamp light illuminating his face. He looks like some brooding angel who decided to clip his wings.

"Keep going."

But the self-consciousness has seeped into my bones. I fidget on the bed, a doe caught in the hunter's spotlight. "Anton..."

"Say my name again," he growls. "Say it while you come for me."

He's so authoritative that I find myself listening. It's strange at first, but the way he looks at me slowly dissolves all my shyness. I don't have to fantasize anymore. I don't have to concentrate hard to make it real.

His gray eyes are exactly how I imagined them.

"I want to see you touch yourself, too," I beg softly, knowing that he'll hear me.

He pulls off his shirt and my pussy throbs hungrily. His abs are absolutely spectacular.

He saunters closer to me before he unbuttons his pants and pulls them down along with his boxers. His cock jumps free and my mouth waters.

His hand wraps around his large shaft and he starts fisting his cock slowly. His eyes stay on me the entire time.

“Anton...” I whisper his name while my own fingers move deep inside me. Just like he asked.

He doesn't smile, but I can see his eyes flare with desire.

I don't know what's going to happen between us. Will this fraught, tenuous relationship last? Will we end up raising this child together? Will he disappear from my life when he gets bored of me?

Tomorrow might bring answers, or maybe it won't. All I know is this: for the next hour, for as long as it takes to come undone together, the answers don't matter. Neither do the questions.

All that matters is us.

ANTON

If I could construct a single fantasy of my perfect woman, it would be the angel lying on the bed in front of me right now.

Her darkened eyes are fixed on me. Her blonde hair is fanned across the pillow, a few silky strands fluttering over her face. The nude slip she's wearing is thin enough that I can see the contours of her body. She has pulled the hemline up and the neckline down, exposing her breasts and her pussy. She probes herself with her fingers, exposing just how wet she is.

I palm my cock. My body craves hers so deeply that it's all I can do not to explode at the slightest touch. I wonder what it would feel like to see her beautiful face covered in my cum.

Just then, her tongue flickers across her thick bottom lip.

"Take off your clothes," I order.

She sits up immediately, eagerly, and pulls the slip off. Then she falls back into the mattress and strokes herself with even more urgency.

A little moan escapes her lips as she twirls her fingers around her clit. I match her pace as I masturbate to her bouncing tits.

Her eyes roam from my face to my abs to my cock. I can tell she wants to touch me. I can tell she wants to be touched. But there's something incredibly intense about this heightened moment that comes from denying ourselves and each other. The knowledge that our individual pleasure is twined together, each made even better by the other person getting off.

She lets out another moan. This one is deeper, more dangerous. I grit my teeth and push back the urge to orgasm. I want to drag this moment out long enough to watch her come.

Then I'll fill her up just like I filled her with my baby.

She slides her fingers out of herself and sits up. "Anton, I want you to touch me."

Well, so much for resisting temptation. How can I fucking resist that?

I climb into bed with her, my knees sinking into the soft mattress. Before I push her down and devour her like I want to, she leans in, grabs my shaft, and sucks me into her warm mouth.

Her cheeks hollow as she sucks and her hands work the base of my cock as she licks my head. Then she slides my length into her mouth, taking me deep.

She gives me head like she wants to leave her mark for eternity. She holds the moment, her throat tightening around me before she pulls back, breathless and gasping.

I cup the sides of her face and force her to look up at me while my cock rests on her parted lips. I want to frame this image in my head. Put it in the goddamn Louvre.

"What do you want?" I ask her in a low rasp.

"I want you to fuck me," she murmurs. "I don't care how."

I don't care how. I nearly laugh out loud. Jesus, this woman still doesn't know what she's doing to me.

Or, more to the point, what I'm capable of doing to her.

I push her down onto the bed and twist her around. She gasps as I force her onto all fours in front of me. I study her round ass, running my hand over it before I give her a light slap. She jerks forward, but the moan she releases is undeniable.

I grab her hips and bend forward. When I slide my tongue against her slit, she screams.

It's clear that no man has ever gone down on her this way, because she tenses instantly, growing self-conscious.

“Anton...”

“Relax,” I tell her before going back down again.

I take it slow, ignoring the urgent strain of my cock as I play with her pussy. I slide my tongue down her lips before pushing between them.

She goes nuts as I start eating her out. Whimpers and twitches and moans until it all turns into helpless screams, helpless thrashing, helpless coming.

Her head hits the mattress, her body collapsing from the force of the pleasure, but I don't let up. I grip her hips and bear down on her clit with manic intensity.

The orgasm ripples through her as she screams. Her wetness seeps onto my chin and she grabs fistfuls of sheet while her body shakes uncontrollably.

Slowly, the storm passes. When I pull back, she collapses onto her side, looking over at me with heavily-lidded eyes.

Still, sated and spent as she is, she reaches for me. I grab a hold of her and twist her around so that this time, she's facing me.

I lock eyes with her and push her legs apart. The head of my cock presses against her pussy and she bites her bottom lip. I inch into her, and she gasps.

The sound is too perfect to only hear once, so I back out and do it again, and then a third time, a fourth, a fifth, teasing her entrance until she's writhing underneath me, frothing at the mouth with how bad she needs to be filled.

I only push completely inside of her when I know I can't take it any longer. But once my cock is ensconced in her wet warmth, I don't take it slow like I planned to. I go instantly caveman.

Her tits bounce as I fuck her hard and ruthlessly. She moans and screams underneath me, getting faster and more violent, until suddenly, she goes rigid and her mouth forms into a perfect, shocked O. Frozen right at the peak.

Then she breaks.

Her hips roll against me as a second orgasm rips right through her like a wildfire. Her eyes flutter closed, and her body clamps down around me in rhythmic pulses. Each one brings another musical moan with it.

I only last another minute before I explode inside her. When I empty, it feels like I give away all of me.

I give her my heart.

I give her my loyalty.

I give her everything.

“Fuck,” I groan when it’s over, resting my forehead against her shoulder. I kiss her warm skin and roll off of her.

Instantly, Jessa curls into my side and lays her head on my chest. It’s like she can’t stand any distance between our bodies. Like every inch of the gap is a personal insult.

“I needed that,” she whispers to me.

“Me, too.”

I mean that. Today was a mess of false leads and dead ends. I’m not quite sure what to make of it. Marina was never an idiot, but she was never this savvy. Something has changed, and I still don’t know what that something is.

“I’m glad you’re back,” Jessa says. “I had a rough day.”

I glance at her with alarm. “What happened? Did you have any pain?”

“No, no,” she says quickly. “It wasn’t the baby. I just had a hard day in general. It’s a little lonely around here now that the medical staff has cleared out.”

“You want me to get them back for you?”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Very funny.”

“I’ll take you out soon,” I promise her. “I’m just not willing to take the chance yet.”

“I know. And it’s okay,” she says. “I don’t actually want to go out myself. Not after what happened the last time. I guess I...” She trails off.

“Tell me.”

“I guess I just... missed you,” she admits. She doesn’t make eye contact with me when she says it. I can feel the vulnerability rolling off her in waves. “I called my parents, by the way.”

I blink. That’s not what I was expecting her to fill the silence with. “How was that?”

“Stupid.”

“Stupid for calling?”

“No, the stupid part was telling them that I’m pregnant.”

I prop myself up on an elbow. “You did?”

She nods. “They didn’t take it well.”

“Which part did they object to, exactly?”

“The fact that I’m pregnant with another man’s baby so soon after ending my engagement. Also because we’re not married and this child will be born out of wedlock. They’re old school.”

I study her face, wondering just how deep these cracks in her heart run. “Are you okay?”

She sighs. “I’m better now that you’re here. But I do wish they were happier about this. They’re my parents, you know? I want them to be as excited about this baby as I am.” She places her hand over her nonexistent bump without even realizing she’s doing it.

“For the record,” I say, “I’m excited about this baby, too.”

She smiles, shy and warm. “Yeah?”

I nod. “I’ve always known I was going to be a father, whether I got married or not.”

Her expression falls ever so slightly. “I always knew I would be a mother, too. I just... didn’t think it would happen this way. Obviously. I assumed I would be married and settled, living in a nice house just outside the city. Like Margaret and Thomas.”

“Is that what you still want?”

She hesitates. “I... I haven’t thought about it recently.”

But I sense the lie. She settles back down against my shoulder, but she’s not as relaxed as she was a few minutes ago.

I stroke the hair away from her forehead. “Get some rest, Jessa.”

We fall into silence and, a few minutes later, her weight sinks into my chest more heavily and her breathing smooths out. I free myself from underneath her and cover her with the duvet.

She looks peaceful in sleep. The fear is gone, that telltale tension in her cheeks. I let myself watch her for a few minutes before I force myself out of the bedroom and into the living room.

I grab my phone off the coffee table and check to see if Lev or Yulian has called with an update. There’s a missed call and text from each of them.

Lev’s text is short and frustrated. *No sign of her anywhere.*

Yulian’s text is more optimistic. *Nothing yet, but I’m going to fucking find her, okay? We barely started this search. There’s still lots of stones left to turn. You just take it easy and take care of your woman.*

A part of me is starting to feel guilty for how hard I’m being on him. I must be going too far, if even Lev can point it out.

I scroll through my contact list absentmindedly, and do a double take when I come across Marina’s name. I linger there. A part of me still wonders if she’ll pick up if I call.

We have another plan in motion. A plan to lure her out into the open. I have no idea if it’ll even work at this point, but I’m running out of patience.

Taking care of Jessa is now my number one priority. Because Yulian is right—she is my woman. And I will do whatever I need to do to make sure she’s safe from that fucking bitch.

I press Marina’s name. And, surprises stacking on top of surprises, it starts to ring.

And ring.

And ring.

For ten or twenty long rings, like yelling into an echoing canyon, I wonder if I'm only talking to myself. Then there's a click and an automated voice invites me to leave a message after the beep.

"I hope wherever you are, you hear this message," I growl into the staticky silence. "I'm coming for you, Marina. And this time, I promise to kill you myself."

JESSA

Anton has been making intermittent moaning noises since I put the omelet down in front of them. None of them have risen to the level of anything I'd call detectable human speech, but I'm taking it as a good sign anyway.

Besides, I'm a little distracted by his lack of a shirt. He's sitting on a barstool at the kitchen counter, his chiseled chest drawing my eyes away from the view of London behind him. I don't mind—I much prefer my vantage point.

“Good?” I tease.

He grunts. I'm pretty sure it's an affirmative. Then he looks up at me, swallows the absurdly big bite he's got in his mouth, and mumbles, “How?”

“How what?”

He jabs his fork at the plate. “*How?*”

I grin. “There's a little crème fraiche, three different kinds of cheese, a secret blend of herbs and spices, and an even more secretive technique I've perfected through blood, sweat, and tears. I'd tell you, but then I'd have to kill you.”

He shovels in another gargantuan bite. “I want it every meal for the rest of my life.”

I bask in his praise. I also congratulate myself on getting my mojo back. Apparently, there's a direct correlation to how happy I am and how well I cook.

This whole scene is giving me the goosebumps. Me, in my element in front of a stove while Anton sits close by eating my food. It's the very picture of domesticity. And for a moment, I allow myself to live the fantasy. To picture kids and dogs underfoot, sunshine through the windows, music on the stereo...

"Are you going out today?" I ask tentatively, hoping I won't sound too needy.

"For a little while, yes," Anton says. "But I got you some company while I'm away."

"Great," I mutter. "Can't wait to hang out with that ray of sunshine you call a righthand man."

"Be nice to Lev," he chuckles. "Anyway, it's not him. Margaret and Thomas called yesterday to ask about you. I told them we'd be leaving the country soon so if they wanted to stop by and visit, they could. They should be here any minute."

I brighten up. "That's great news! I should go and change."

I slip past him and head to the bedroom. I'm still wearing the nude slip from the night before. It's got his scent on it now, so I'm not sure if I'll ever wash it.

I swap it for jeans and a soft woolen sweater. When I come out of the bathroom, Anton is standing by the bed putting on a shirt. I try not to look too disappointed as his abs are covered up.

"Got a call from the receptionist downstairs," he says. "Margaret and Thomas are on their way up."

"You don't have to find babysitters for me, you know," I scold, even though I'm excited to see the couple again.

"Don't I?" He smiles. "Try and relax. I'll be back in a few hours."

For a second, we stand opposite one another. I have no idea of the correct protocol here. A couple would kiss and see each other off. But we aren't that. At least, I don't think so.

As mindblowing as the sex was last night, it didn't exactly clear things up for me. Seeing my hesitation, Anton moves forward and presses his lips to mine. It's brief, lasting only two seconds.

But damn—it means everything.

Then he pulls away and heads for the door. I follow him out to the main living area just in time to see him open it for Margaret and Thomas. He greets them both politely and then points them into the suite. Their eyes go wide as they take in the luxury.

“Wow,” Thomas breathes. “Look at that view.”

I rush over to Margaret and give her a tight hug. “Sorry I didn't get to say a proper goodbye at the farmer's market.”

“Oh, honey, don't be silly. We're just glad you're okay.”

“So glad,” Thomas adds. “You're still feeling fine?”

“I appreciate that. And I'm doing well, thank you.”

“The baby?” Margaret asks delicately.

“Healthy as could be.”

“Oh, what a relief!” Margaret sighs. “You've been in my prayers the last few days.” She gives me a warm smile, and I usher them towards the sitting area. It feels a little strange to play hostess in a place that doesn't feel like home. But I'm quickly becoming used to strange situations and circumstances.

“Your man really has done well for himself, hasn't he?” Thomas says, looking around appreciatively.

I like the way that Thomas refers to Anton. *Your man*. It has a certain ring to it. And despite the fact that I can't truly claim him or his success, I am proud of him.

“He has.”

“Did he say he was in business?” Thomas asks.

“Um, yes,” I say uncertainly, unclear as to what Anton has told them. “Real estate.”

“Ah, no wonder. Folks in that line of work are making a killing these days.”

Margaret doesn't care at all about the business talk. She rifles through a massive blue bag she brought with her. “I brought you a present, Jessa.” She pulls out a hand-knit baby blanket in a soft green.

Thomas looks fondly at his wife. “She's been working like a dog on that for the last few days.”

“Oh, Margaret,” I say, genuinely touched. “You made this yourself? Thank you so much.”

“I wasn't sure I would be able to give it to you,” Margaret says. “So I was glad to hear that you and Anton were planning on staying a few more days in England. I've always loved knitting, so it was a pleasure to do. Hope you like green.”

I stroke my fingertips over the material. The blanket is soft as butter and just the right size for a newborn baby.

“Thank you so much, Margaret. I couldn't have asked for a better gift.”

“Like I said, it was my pleasure.” But she has the same smile on her face that I have when someone compliments my cooking. She likes making people happy, too.

“You don't know the sex of the baby yet, do you?” Thomas asks.

“Thomas, hush.” Margaret elbows him.

“What?” he protests.

“That's private!”

I laugh at their affectionate spat. “If I knew, I would tell you guys. But I don't think I'm far enough along to tell.”

“No matter,” Marjorie says. “All that matters is that they're healthy.”

“But just for the sake of conversation, what do you think it'll be?” Thomas asks.

Margaret rolls her eyes. “He loves guessing baby genders,” she says. “He even places bets on it sometimes. Boys, I swear.”

I giggle. “Care to make a wager on mine?”

“Don’t encourage him,” Margaret scoffs, but I can tell she’s amused.

Thomas ignores her as he closes his eyes, extends his hands towards me, and wiggles his fingertips like he’s about to do a magic trick. “I’m gonna say... you’re having a baby girl.”

“A girl,” I repeat softly. It has the ring of truth to it. “That would be nice.”

I wonder what she’d look like. If she’d have my nose or Anton’s eyes. Whether she’d enjoy cooking or reading. If she’d be funny or creative, introverted or the life of the party.

“I remember the day our baby girl was born,” Thomas sighs. “She was such a happy baby.”

“Except when she spent most of the night crying,” Margaret says with a chuckle. Then she looks at me and shakes her head. “Fathers and daughters. It’s a special kind of relationship.”

“Especially awful, in my experience,” I mutter. Margaret and Thomas exchange a glance and I immediately regret killing the mood. “Sorry, that kinda slipped out.”

“You can talk about it if you like, honey,” Margaret says. “We’re happy to lend a shoulder and an ear.”

Thomas leans towards me and puts his hand on my shoulder. “We’ve raised two children, you know. We’re good at the meaningful chats. Like therapists without the degrees... or the hourly rate.”

“Point is, if you don’t want to talk about it, dear, you don’t have to,” Margaret finishes gently. “But if you want to, you can.”

I sigh. The two of them are looking at me, open and expectant and patient. Their kindness radiates from them like warmth I can feel and smell. God, I need that.

“Well... I told my parents yesterday that I’m pregnant,” I admit. “They didn’t take it well.”

“Oh, honey.” Margaret looks devastated for me.

Thomas frowns. “Why did they take it badly?”

Suddenly, I remember that Anton and I pretended to be a married couple for the entirety of our stay at their manor, and I turn pale as a ghost.

I could spin the story. Make it seem like they didn’t approve of me marrying Anton and have been distant ever since. But I don’t really want to lie to Margaret and Thomas. Not when they’ve been so sweet to me.

I take a deep breath. “First, I have a confession to make. Anton and I are not actually married.”

“Oh?”

“We probably should have corrected your assumption, but—”

“Sometimes, it’s nice to imagine what it might be like,” Margaret interjects. She doesn’t seem upset in the slightest.

“Exactly,” I say with a nod. “I guess it felt good, and I didn’t want to correct you.”

“Neither did he,” Thomas points out with a knowing look and a waggle of the eyebrows.

“The truth is, we only met three months ago. I got pregnant right away.”

I look at the old couple, wondering if I’ve lost them. They’re sweet, but I know from experience that not everyone is tolerant of certain life choices, especially the older generations.

“Our daughter is almost forty-three years old,” Margaret says. “She got married three years ago to the man she’d been with for fifteen years. Their three children were the bridal party.”

I smile. “That’s adorable.”

Margaret nods. “And our son? He has a child with a woman he’s no longer with. They never married. And that child is

every bit as adorable to us. Everyone is entitled to their own decisions, Jessa. Whether or not they're mistakes is their cross to bear. It's certainly no business of mine."

I wonder if Margaret can possibly know how good her words feel to soothe my anxiety. "Unfortunately, my parents don't see it that way."

"They'll come around," Margaret tells me confidently. "One look at their grandchild and they'll fall in love."

I sigh. "Somehow, I doubt it."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Thomas says. "I didn't think I'd love my grandkids more than my kids. But it turns out, I do."

"Thomas!" Margaret scolds. "We love all our family equally."

He turns to me again, holds a hand in front of his mouth, and pretend-whispers, "She's a rotten liar."

Laughing, Margaret turns to me. "You're a smart, capable young woman, Jessa. Do you know what you want?"

"I... I think so."

"Then go out and get it, and don't let anyone else make you feel ashamed. Even the ones closest to you."

"Why couldn't the two of you have been my parents?" I chuckle.

"For one, we're British," Thomas says. "Intercontinental parenting isn't the easiest, I'd imagine."

Thomas and Margaret end up spending most of the morning with me. I cook all three of us a delicious chorizo carbonara and send them off at the end of the visit with smiles on their faces.

After they leave, I take my new green baby blanket and head to the bedroom. It's the first tangible thing I've gotten for the baby and it makes everything seem that much more real.

I take a picture of the blanket and send it to Chris. *Slowly building my nursery. They say start with one good piece and build from there, right?*

He messages back almost immediately. *Where is this nursery?*

I expected him to comment on the blanket or be excited for me, but I can't read the vibe of his message. Either I've caught him in a bad mood or he can't even pretend to support me anymore. In any case, I play dumb.

ME: *What do you mean?*

CHRIS: *I mean, in what building will this nursery be situated?*

ME: *Anton's house, of course.*

CHRIS: *Does that mean you're going to try and make things work with him?*

ME: *I'm not sure what's going to happen.*

CHRIS: *How can you not be sure?*

ME: *I'm still processing everything.*

CHRIS: *Exactly. So maybe you should hold off all important life decisions until after you've processed.*

Maybe I shouldn't have texted him at all. It seems like it takes no time at all for us to end up right back at each other's throats, even when I texted him with the best of intentions. I take a deep breath and try to act adult about it. Maybe there's something going on that I'm not aware of.

ME: *Where is this coming from?*

CHRIS: *From a place I've been suppressing for quite some time now. I didn't want to give you a reason to cut me out again like you did with Dane.*

That one stings. *Below the belt, Chris.*

CHRIS: *It's the truth. I thought we put it behind us, but you seem insistent on repeating the same mistakes over and over again.*

ME: *Chris, please. Let's not do this now.*

CHRIS: *Fine. Let me know when you're ready to "do this."*

I drop my phone on the mattress and groan. "Fuck."

“Something wrong?”

I shriek and sit up, my heart already thundering in my chest before I realize it’s just Anton.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” he chuckles.

“It’s okay, I was just... I didn’t hear you come in,” I say.

“Texting someone?”

I nod. “Chris.”

“Ah.”

When I don’t volunteer anything else, he walks over and sits down next to me. “He doesn’t approve of us, does he?”

“Apparently, it’s a trend.”

“Is that a problem for you?” Anton asks.

I look up at him. “I wish I could be the kind of person who doesn’t care.”

“But you do.” It’s a statement, not a question. “Your parents will come around.”

“Margaret and Thomas said the same thing,” I tell him.

“They’re right. And as for Chris, there might be another reason he’s against our situation.”

“Which is?”

“He’s in love with you.”

I frown. “Freya—I mean, Marina—said the same thing to me once.”

“This might be the one and only time she is right.”

“I just... I don’t know. Chris and I have been friends for so long.” He raises his eyebrows at me, and I give a defeated little sigh. “Shit, I don’t know. I can’t think about that right now. For the record, I think you’re both wrong. We’re just friends.”

He shrugs, as though it doesn’t matter to him either way. I search for some hint of jealousy on his face, but I can’t find any. I wonder if that’s a good sign or a bad one.

“Time to pack your bags,” Anton tells me. “We’re going home.”

“Back to the mansion? That’s home?”

He turns to me, forehead creased. “Of course, it is. It’s your home as much as it’s mine.”

A smile I can’t contain spreads across my face. “Okay. I’ll pack up.”

ANTON

On any other day, Yulian would be getting the flight attendant's name and laying the groundwork for a mid-flight hookup. But today, he doesn't even look at her as she hands him his cocktail with a flirty smile on her face.

"What's his problem?" I ask Lev.

Lev glances towards Yulian and shrugs. "Probably still got his panties in a wad because you refuse to absolve him."

I roll my eyes. "Like he needs my absolution."

"You underestimate how much that little shit idolizes you."

Jessa sits to my right, opposite Lev. She's wearing one of my sweatshirts. I asked the flight crew to turn down the internal air conditioning, but she was still cold. My sweatshirt practically swallows her whole, and *fuck* did my cock jump at the sight.

"What's going on with you and Yulian?" Jessa asks.

"Nothing is going on. We're brothers."

"Right, 'cause that explains everything," Jessa snarks. "He's a good guy, you know?"

I frown. "I like to think I know him pretty well, thanks."

"Then why are you being so hard on him?"

I turn to her, actually tuning into this conversation for the first time. "What makes you think I'm being hard on him?"

She narrows her eyes at me. “Because the Earth is turning and the sky is blue. It’s who you are.”

Lev snorts with laughter, and Yulian looks up from his seat on the other side of the airplane.

“I’m just saying,” Jessa continues quickly. “He has a massive inferiority complex where you’re concerned.”

“How do you know?”

She raises her eyebrows like she’s happy she’s got a secret that I don’t know about. “We talk.”

“You and my brother?”

“Don’t act so surprised,” she says. “I’m a likable person. And you may not want to hear this right now, but so is he.”

“Yeah well, historically, you’re not the best judge of character, are you?”

She glares at me. “Ass.”

“I second that,” Lev says, raising his hand like a damn schoolboy. “You’re a huge ass.”

He and Jessa start laughing. I pretend to scowl, but in reality, I’m basking in the general harmony in the jet. Apart from my sour-faced brother, of course.

“Do you know how many times I prayed for a baby brother or sister growing up?” Jessa asks.

“You want mine?”

She smiles. “You’d miss him if he was gone.”

“Let’s find out, shall we?”

“Men and their egos. Honestly, you’re all a bunch of babies.” She rolls her eyes and stands up. “Yulian, you okay over there?”

He looks up. “Um, sure?”

“Wanna join us? It looks kinda lonely on your end of the plane.”

“Uh, okay. Sure.”

She sits back down and gives me a cheesy smile. “See? Wasn’t that easy?”

“Everyone was fine with the previous seating arrangements.”

“I wasn’t.” She gives me another smile and reaches for the gingersnap cookie the flight attendant gave her.

“Be nice,” she warns me as Yulian slips into the vacant seat next to Lev.

“So how’d you enjoy London, Yulian?” Jessa asks.

“Loved it.” He gives her an amused grin. “I mean, it had everything. Intrigue, mystery... romance.”

That last one is definitely aimed at Jessa and me. His smile turns mischievous. I wonder if my brother has an off button when it comes to beautiful women.

“Romance, huh?” Jessa asks, taking it in stride. “Is there something you want to tell us, Yulian? Did you meet a special lady in London?”

Lev snorts. “Yulian doesn’t really discriminate between special and not so special. As long as she has a functioning pussy, she’s game.”

“Charming,” Jessa drawls.

“Sorry,” Lev replies, though he doesn’t look apologetic whatsoever. “Crude but true. That’s good enough for Yulian.”

“Are you calling me a manwhore behind my back, Lev?” Yulian asks in his mock-hurt voice.

“No, I’m calling you one to your face.”

All three of them laugh, and I realize that there’s a tentative sense of comfort between my two closest Vors and the woman who’s carrying my child. It’s not something I’ve ever experienced before.

Marina wasn’t exactly the easiest woman to get along with. Lev avoided her, and Yulian was his usual immature self around her, though he never paid her any special attention.

But Jessa softens them. They banter and smile with her. She seems to know how to engage each of them in unique ways, drawing them out.

I can't help but wonder if she's done the same thing to me.

At some point, Yulian drifts off to sleep, Lev takes his headphones and laptop out, and Jessa slumps lower in her seat.

She sighs deeply. "I want a thousand more of those cookies."

I hand her my silver plate. "Here's two to start with. The other nine hundred and ninety eight will take a bit longer to arrange."

"I can be patient," she teases.

"Are your cravings kicking in?"

She shrugs. "Maybe. But really, it's just nice to have an excuse to eat."

I raise my eyebrows. "Have you needed one in the past?"

"No. But people look at you weird when a hundred-twenty pound female finishes a whole T-bone steak by herself."

"That's a sight I'd like to see," I laugh.

She looks over at me, eyes narrowed and thoughtful. "You know something? You're not as scary as I once thought you were."

"We're back to insulting each other?"

"It's a good thing," she chuckles softly. A yawn cracks her face in two. "Do you mind if I take a quick nap? I'm feeling a little tired."

"My shoulder is available."

Her smile grows wider and she leans against me. Within seconds, she's sleeping soundly, her hand wrapped around my arm.

Lev removes his headphones once she's out. "I've never seen you like this," he remarks.

"Like what?"

“I don’t know... calm.”

“I’m always calm.”

“Not like this. You’re at peace. Serene. Fuckin’ Dalai Lama over there.”

I know what he means, but the stakes are too high for me to admit as much out loud. Also, I’m not entirely convinced that Yulian is fast asleep.

Somehow, I’m not ready to forgive my brother enough to allow him into the inner circle of my thoughts. Especially as it pertains to Jessa.

“You ready for fatherhood?” Lev asks.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I say. “But I want Marina taken care of before the baby is born.”

“We’re both working on it,” Lev says, glancing at Yulian. “We’re checking every dark corner, every possible hideout, and keeping men stationed in plain sight, too. She won’t get past us.”

“Have you contacted Yaromir yet?”

“Yes. He’s open to meeting.”

“Any idea if Marina has made contact with him?”

“None at all. I figured it would be best to scope things out with him at the meeting. We can get a better sense if he’s lying or not.”

I nod. “You’ll accompany me to the meeting.”

“I expected to,” Lev says before glancing at Yulian. “What about him?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“When are you going to stop punishing him?” he whispers.

“When I feel like he’s taking this seriously.”

I watch Yulian’s fingers twitch slightly, but he certainly looks like he’s sleeping. It isn’t lost on me how little I trust him now. How suspicious I am of every little thing he does. Is that twitch a betrayal? Is that sigh a lie?

I don't know. I just don't know.



As the jet's wheels hit the tarmac, Jessa wakes up with a gasp.

"It's okay," I say, rubbing her arm. "We landed."

"Already?"

"You slept the entire flight."

"Oh..." she mumbles, looking dazed and adorable. "I'm gonna go splash some water on my face before we get off."

She heads to the restroom while Lev, Yulian, and I gather our things. When Jessa reemerges, she looks fresh-faced and much more awake.

She removes my sweatshirt and folds it over her arm. Underneath, she's wearing a short, floaty blouse that reveals the slimmest sliver of her belly. The neckline is a deep V that highlights her breasts.

"You're staring, Anton," she reprimands playfully as she approaches me.

"If you want me to stop, you're going to have to change."

She laughs again, a musical sound that zaps straight to my dick, and we disembark together. We're walking through the lobby of the airport to the front, where a car should be waiting for us, when Jessa makes an audible gasp and clutches my arm.

"What?" I growl. "Is it Marina? Did you see her anywhere?"

Lev and Yulian tighten around us instantly, drawing close and staying alert.

"For God's sake, it's not Marina," Jessa says, looking supremely self-conscious all of a sudden.

"What's going on?" I ask as Lev and Yulian relax a little.

She glances past me, but averts her eyes almost immediately.

"It's Dane and Salma."

“Fuck,” Yulian whistles.

“Let’s just walk fast,” Jessa suggests. “Maybe they won’t see ___”

“Jessa?”

“Fuck me,” she curses under her breath.

Lev and Yulian exchange an amused glance. I gesture for the both of them to head to the car and wait for us. They disappear into the crowd, and Jessa turns in the direction of her scumbag ex and his scumbag girlfriend.

The son of a bitch is reasonably tall and reasonably good-looking. His tight-ass jeans look more appropriate for a man in his early twenties. Even his hair has been styled to look like he belongs to some aging boy band.

The woman next to him is several inches shorter. She’s petite and pretty, but her look is all superficial. Tons of makeup and an outfit meant to earn attention. Leggings with thigh cutouts and a hot pink crop top leave little to the imagination. A studded piercing decorates her belly button.

“Really?” I mutter in a low voice. “*He* cheated on *you* with *her*?”

Before she can answer, the demented Barbie and Ken are in front of us.

“Jessa,” the she-devil croons in a cheerful voice. “It’s so, so good to see you.”

She greets Jessa, but her eyes are on me. So are Dane’s. He’s sizing me up like he’s preparing for a fight. I wish the motherfucker would.

“Is it?” Jessa asks, awkward as ever.

“Of course. Dane and I have been thinking of you since the... well, you know.” She glances over to me as curiosity gets the better of her. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Anton,” Jessa says, keeping it short and simple. But I know it’s also because she has no idea how to introduce me.

“I’m Jessa’s boyfriend,” I say, wrapping my arm around her waist and pulling her against me.

The girl’s eyes go wide as she takes in the two of us together. “Well, you two certainly make a... striking couple.”

“Thanks, Salma,” Jessa says. “You know what? So do you and Dane. The two of you deserve each other.”

Salma’s smile falls just a bit before she manages to pick it back up again. But Dane doesn’t pretend to be happy about all this.

“How are you?” Dane asks her, giving me a quick annoyed glance in the corner of his eye.

He looks like he’s trying his best not to acknowledge my presence at all, but he’s as curious as the perky little brunette by his side.

Jessa glances up at me with the biggest smile on her face. “I’ve been really good, actually. Really good.”

“You look good,” Dane says with the grudging tone of a man who’s disappointed that his ex hasn’t fallen to pieces without him.

“She does look good, doesn’t she?” I say, inserting myself into the conversation. “Almost as though she has a glow about her.”

Of course, the brunette’s eyes go even wider as she picks up on the little hint I’d just dropped. “Glowing, like... ? Oh my God, Jessa. Are you pregnant?”

Jessa nods. “We are.”

The ex’s jaw drops instantly. “You... you’re pregnant?”

“Did she stutter?” I growl.

“But... we... the wedding was only a few months ago.”

Jessa’s smile turns stony. “As you might recall, Dane, the wedding didn’t end up happening at all. I left the yacht club and ran into Anton on the beach that evening.”

“The... the *same* day?” he exclaims, gawking at her.

I stay silent. Jessa is handling this remarkably well. She doesn't need me to intervene—yet.

“Yes, the same day,” Jessa says without any shame. “You can't exactly fault me for my timing when yours was so bad, can you, Dane?”

The brunette is looking at her stolen man with new concern in her eyes. I can practically see the thoughts flitting through her mind.

Why is he so concerned that she's moved on? Does he actually think she looks good? Is he jealous? Does he still have feelings for her? Was he hoping to get back together with her at some point? Do I mean anything to him?

“I called and texted and wrote to you like a million times,” Dane says, as though Jessa is the one who has something to apologize for.

“I know,” I say, answering before Jessa can. “They were interesting to read, if a little bit pitiful. She doesn't need that simpering shit in her life, though.”

“Maybe you should let her speak for herself,” Dane hisses.

“He's speaking for me because he knows what I would say,” Jessa snaps. “And since you want me to speak for myself, I will. Goodbye, Dane. Goodbye, Salma. If we run into each other again, feel free to pretend we don't know each other.”

Then she grabs my arm and we stride away together.

She's got the biggest smile on her face as we exit the airport. “You okay?” I ask as Yulian drives the car up.

“Never been better actually,” she says. “That was the closure I never knew I needed.”

“Felt good, did it?”

“Good?” she repeats. “It felt fucking great. Did you see the way Salma was salivating over you?”

“Actually, I was more focused on that tool next to her. He was salivating over you.”

Jessa snorts. “Please. He was just upset that I had the audacity to move on so fast. He was probably hoping I was a broken mess without him.” She grins up at me. “Thanks for having my back.”

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“I do, though. You’ve been really great to me, Anton. These past few weeks... I’ve never had anyone take such good care of me. I didn’t know that was something I needed.”

“It’s my pleasure, *kotyonok*.”

The craziest thing of all is... that I really mean that.

JESSA

I get out of the jeep and pull my trench coat on. It's a dark khaki that goes well with my light sweater and jeans.

Everything I'm wearing is new. I spent most of last evening delving through the new wardrobe Anton had delivered for me while we were in England. I was so busy having a fashion show that I didn't have time to panic about my lunch with Chris. But now that I'm walking towards the restaurant, my heart is pounding.

I'm halfway to the door when I notice Lev and three personal bodyguards clamber out of the jeep. I stop and turn to face them.

"Um, what's happening?" I ask.

Lev gives me a puzzled expression. "We're coming in with you, of course."

"What?"

"Did you think we were just gonna wait in the car?"

"Um, yes," I admit. "I can't walk in there with all four of you."

"Why not?"

"Because it's just not... not cool."

The bodyguards turn away, trying to hide their smiles. Lev, of course, looks completely unmoved. "Our orders were clear."

I roll my eyes. "Forget Anton. He's not here."

“If you think he doesn’t follow up on whether his orders were carried out, you’re more naïve than I suspected.”

I narrow my eyes at his jab. “Then lie.”

Lev looks over his shoulder at the three men standing behind him. “Any of you boys willing to lie to the don?”

All three shake their heads “no” in unison like a row of bobbleheads.

“Seriously?” I ask. “None of you can stand up to him?”

“Stand up to him?” Lev asks incredulously. “We took an oath to do exactly the opposite.”

“Jesus,” I grumble. “Fine. Can you at least keep your distance?”

“Two tables down,” Lev negotiates. “That’s the best we can do.”

Rolling my eyes again, I head into the restaurant, feeling extremely self-conscious all of a sudden. I’ve known Chris a long time. He’s going to notice the changes in me.

He’s there already, of course. Probably showed up half an hour early to play that goofy castle game he loves on his phone while he waited. Sure enough, I see him tuck it away when he catches sight of me.

“Hey, J,” he says, standing up to give me an awkward hug.

I was expecting as much, considering the last time we spoke. Or texted, rather. Still, we hug each other and sit down in the booth.

He looks a little concerned as he slides back into his seat. “Are you aware that there are four huge guys who keep looking over here?”

I sigh. “Um, yeah. It’s nothing.”

Chris’s expression changes immediately. “Nothing?”

“They’re my... security.”

“You need security now?”

“Well, there is a murderous woman on the loose who has it out for me and my unborn child. So, yeah, I need security.”

“Or Anton is just very controlling,” he mutters.

“If that were the case, he’d have never agreed to let me out of the house to meet with you in the first place.”

“I wonder what excuse you would have made for him if that had happened.”

I frown. “Is this going to end in another fight, Chris? Because I don’t have the energy for it.”

He looks like he wants to say something snarky in return, but he bites back the retort and leans back in his seat. He gazes out across the restaurant for a second and then takes a deep breath and refocuses on me. “You look nice.”

“Thanks.”

“New clothes?”

“A few, yeah.”

“Doesn’t really seem like your style.”

“Only because I was too poor to afford anything I’m currently wearing,” I snap back defensively.

“And that’s changed now?” Chris asks shrewdly. “Despite the fact that you don’t have a job?”

“They were gifts.”

“From him?”

I grit my teeth and try to be patient. “I know you don’t like him, Chris—”

“I’m glad you’re back,” he says abruptly, changing the subject. I can tell he’s trying hard to suppress all the not-so-polite things he wants to say to me.

“Me, too. England was a rollercoaster. And guess who we ran into when we touched down in the States?”

“Beats me. Tom Cruise?”

“Dane and Salma.”

His eyes widen and he leans forward. It reminds me of far too many gossip sessions we've had in the past. For a moment, it's like old times. "No fucking way."

I nod. "It was crazy to see them both again. Dane looked good, maybe even a little more Ken doll than usual. And Salma was showing off her belly ring."

Chris rolls his eyes. "God, the woman is always crying out for attention."

"That's true. I used to think it was confidence."

"Please," Chris scoffs. "It was narcissism."

"Yeah, I already know I'm a terrible judge of character. You don't need to remind me."

"Did you speak to them or run in the other direction?"

"I was about to run when Salma spotted me," I explain. "She's the one who chose to come up to me and start a conversation."

"Girl has always been thick-skinned. By which I mean stupid."

"Apparently."

"And Dane?" Chris asks, spitting his name out like a bad word. "He could actually look you in the eye?"

I nod. "He asked me how I was doing and everything."

"Good Lord. The two of them deserve each other."

"That's what I said!"

"Verbatim?"

I laugh. "Exact same words. I wanted to make sure they both got the message loud and clear. Then again, it was hard not to with Anton standing right next to me."

The smile twists on Chris's face, curdling into something not as warm. "He was with you?"

"Yeah. It was in the airport. We flew back together." I can't exactly contain my amusement as I relive the little encounter in my head. "God, Salma was beside herself. She couldn't stop looking at Anton."

“She can’t stop looking at most guys.”

I frown. “Anton is a lot of things, but he sure as hell isn’t ‘most guys.’”

“True. Most guys aren’t murderers.”

I stop short and glare at my best friend. “Come on.”

“It’s the truth.”

“It was uncalled for.”

“Why? Because you’ve decided to forgive his sins and look the other way?” he asks. “Is he really that damn good-looking?”

“You’ve seen him,” I snap. “You tell me.”

Apparently, three minutes is as long as we can go without fighting these days. Chris is tense, his shoulders tight and lifted around his shoulders like a wall.

He wants me to see things his way, and I want him to see them mine. Every time we fail to break through to the other, the tension grows.

“Have you ordered yet?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

“I had a coffee just before you came,” he says. “But I’ve lost my appetite.”

I throw my menu down. “That makes two of us.”

I lean back and place my hand over my stomach. I don’t have much of a bump yet, but it’s become a habit.

Of course, Chris notices right away. “How’s the baby?”

“Fine. I had a scare while I was in London, but everything is okay. Thanks to Anton.”

“Is that a fact?” Chris asks, sounding extremely unimpressed.

“I thought I was losing the baby, Chris. I was terrified.”

He looks sorry for a moment before the expression is replaced with something else.

“What?” I press. “What are you not saying?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter,” I retort. “You’re my best friend. Your opinion matters to me.”

“You’re not gonna like my opinion,” he says frankly. “So I’m trying not to say it.”

“Chris...”

“Do you really want to be tied to him for the rest of your life, Jessa?” he blurts out. “Because having his child is a life sentence.”

“Meaning what?” I demand, anger flooding my body. I can’t quite believe what I’m hearing. “You think it would have been a blessing in disguise had I lost the baby?”

“He’s a fucking Bratva don,” he hisses. “As I keep reminding you.”

“And you’re supposed to be on my side!”

“I am on your side. Why do you think I want him out of your life so bad? Jess, you’re not going to have a life if you stay with him.” He gestures to the men sitting two tables away. “Look at them over there. Four fucking bodyguards following you and your child through life. Is that really what you want?”

“It’s temporary.”

“You really think so?” he snorts.

“I know so,” I spit at him. “This is because Marina is still out there and she’s not likely to give up easily. After she’s not a problem anymore, then—”

“Do you even hear yourself?”

I stop short. “What do you mean?”

““After she’s not a problem anymore,”” he repeats. “That’s what you just said.”

“So?”

“You realize what that means, right? You realize how she ceases to become a problem?” He leans in and whispers, “He kills her. That’s what it means.”

“She tried to kill me!” I point out.

“So go to the police! Put up wanted posters. Send the fucking law after her,” he argues. “You can’t take it into your own hands. You’re the daughter of a police officer, Jessa. You know this.”

I grit my teeth. “I also know that sometimes the law doesn’t always serve justice.”

“And Anton does?”

“He’s trying to protect me.”

“You wouldn’t need protecting if you’d never met him in the first place. Let’s face it, the only reason you’re even on Marina’s radar is because Anton expressed interest in you.”

His logic is ironclad, but I still find myself railing against it. “It’s not like he could see this coming. He thought she was dead.”

“I can’t believe you’re sitting here and defending him.”

“What do you expect me to do?” I demand. “I love him.”

I don’t mean to say the last part, but it slips out all the same. Chris stops short, his breathing growing more erratic.

“Chris...”

He shakes his head at me. “You’re doing it again. You’re making the same fucking mistake over again. Except this time, it’s going to be so much worse.”

“Dane cheated on me. He treated me like shit.”

“Dane was an asshole,” he agrees. “But Anton is dangerous. What if one day you decide you want a different kind of life? What if one day you want to leave? Do you really think a man like him is going to let you go?”

“I think he would. If it’s really what I wanted.”

“Then you’re a fool.”

“I know him, Chris.”

He scoffs. “You’re the one who said you’re a bad judge of character. Guess this proves it.”

That one hurts, but I decide I deserve it. I look down at my hands. They're trembling.

"You know what I think?" Chris asks.

"I think you've made your thoughts pretty damn clear, actually."

He ignores that. "I think you're getting involved with this guy because you're scared. You're scared to be alone. You're scared to raise this baby alone. So you're tying yourself to him, even if that tie is a noose around your neck."

"That's not the reason, Chris," I say in a quiet voice.

"You've known him a few months, Jessa. How can you possibly love him?"

"I don't think love necessarily has a timeline. Or logic. It just happens."

"That's beautiful. Really fucking poetic," he says bitterly.

"Chris—"

"You're being an idiot," he interrupts.

I feel the sting of tears in the back of my eyes. "Fine. Do you wanna know what I think?"

"Hit me," Chris says with a defeated sigh.

"I think that Anton might be right about you."

That gets his attention. "Right about what?"

I should stop, but I can't. We've come too far, laid too much bare. It's time to purge all the secrets between us.

"Anton thinks that you have feelings for me."

I expect his refusal to come immediately. But as the seconds tick by and he makes no rebuttal, my heart sinks.

Even as I said it, I never actually considered it was true. I didn't really believe Anton or Marina could be so right. I didn't believe that I could be so wrong.

"Chris?" I ask finally when the silence has stretched on long past discomfort.

“It’s funny,” Chris says with a pained laugh. “Anton met me once and he was able to see it. You’ve known me for a decade and you never suspected the truth.”

My jaw drops and I search his face for the punchline. “Chris...”

“You didn’t think it was true, did you?” He looks up at me.

“Is it true?”

“Jesus, how can someone so smart be so blind?” Chris says with a tired sigh. “Of course I have feelings for you, Jessa. I’ve had feelings for you for years.”

“You never said anything...”

“Because by the time I worked up the courage to say something, you started dating Dane. And the moment you were free of that fucker, you went and found yourself another asshole to take his place.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No?” Chris asks, his expression hard. “Being a murderer isn’t enough to make someone an asshole now? You simply must give me your newly revised rulebook to being a good person.”

I don’t like this Chris. The hard-faced, steely-toned man whose mouth turns down at the ends. I barely recognize him like this.

“We’ve been best friends for forever, Chris,” I say softly. “I never suspected that you wanted more.”

“And now?”

“Now?” I ask, truly baffled by the question.

“You know how I feel now,” he says. “What do you have to say about it?”

“Chris,” I say as carefully as I can, “you realize that I’m carrying another man’s baby, right?”

“I told you once before and I’ll say it again: I will help you raise the baby. And I’ll treat the child as if he or she were my own.”

I believe him. I really do.

But it doesn't make a difference.

"I know you would, Chris. But I... I love Anton. I know you don't want to hear that, but it's how I feel. It's the truth."

"The truth can change," he says quickly.

"This one won't."

"How can you be sure?" he asks.

"Because... I've never felt this way before, Chris. I thought I loved Dane. But it wasn't anything like what I feel for Anton. It wasn't as strong or as fierce."

He cringes. I know this can't be easy for him to hear, and that breaks my heart.

"Chris," I say gently. "I love you to death. You will always be my friend."

"Would this conversation have gone differently if he weren't in the picture?" he asks.

I frown. "I can't say for sure, but I don't think so."

The pain on his face is unmistakable. "You really wouldn't have even given me a chance?"

"I've always loved you as a friend, Chris. I'm sure if I had been capable of more, it would have happened before now."

I don't know any other way to make myself clearer. Chris looks away from me for a moment, and I give him space, even though all I want to do is reach out and take his hand.

"What if I say it doesn't matter?" he asks suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what if I say I don't care that you don't have feelings for me? Leave him and let me take care of you instead."

"Chris, you're not making sense."

"He's dangerous, Jessa," he repeats again. "He's not the right man for you. Even if he was half-decent, his lifestyle isn't. Is

that what you want for yourself and your child? I may not be as powerful or as exciting or as good-looking—”

“Chris, that has nothing to do with—”

“But I will give you the life you wanted before all this. I can give you safety and security. We can get a house just outside the city, near a good school district. You can try and start a restaurant or a café somewhere close. You don’t have to love me that way... but I can still give you the quiet family life you’ve always wanted.”

“What if I don’t want that anymore?”

He looks at me, clearly at a loss for words.

“You said it yourself. Sometimes, truths change,” I say.

“Jessa...”

“I’m sorry, Chris. I want to stay with him.”

“What has he offered you apart from protection from Marina?” Chris demands. “Is he offering love? Has he even said he loves you?”

The waitress approaches suddenly with a bright smile on her face. “Sorry it’s taken me so long to get to your table. We’re packed today.”

I slowly get to my feet. “That’s okay. I was just leaving.”

Chris jolts out of his seat and grabs my arm. “Jess, please. Don’t do this.”

The waitress looks awkwardly between us. “I’ll... give you two a minute.” She rushes off, and I notice that Lev and the bodyguard squadron are still sitting two tables down from us. All eyes on me.

“Don’t go, Jessa.”

I shake my head. “I have to.”

“Leave him and be with me,” he tries again.

“I don’t love you like that, Chris. I don’t think I can.”

He winces a little. I hate that I have to hurt him to help him understand the reality of our situation.

“You haven’t tried.”

“Oh, Chris,” I say, feeling miserable and guilty all in one breath. “You’ll always be my best friend. Nothing will change that, okay?”

I grab my bag and he drops his hand as defeat washes over him.

“Fine,” he says, the color draining from his face. “But if you insist on doing this, I can’t be in your life, Jessa.”

“Chris, wait—”

“No, I’m serious. I watched you make two mistakes already. I refuse to go for number three.”

He walks away before I can, throwing Lev and his men a dirty look as he goes.

Lev lets him pass and then walks over to me. “That looked intense. You wanna talk about it?”

“No,” I whisper. “I just want to go home.”

ANTON

Lev strolls into my study with his hands in his pockets. He was on Jessa's security team this morning. I know Chris won't hurt her, but that doesn't mean I trust him. And there is always Marina to look out for.

I put my pen down. "How was it?"

In answer, Lev just gives me a long, low whistle.

Frowning, I stand up. "What happened?"

"I can't be sure. I was mainly lip reading. But I'm pretty sure he declared his feelings for her."

"What did she say?"

"Well, she didn't tell me explicitly. But according to the vibe I was getting, she turned him down flat and stomped on his heart, spat and pissed on the pieces, then set it all on fire for good measure."

I nod in grim satisfaction. "Good."

"I wouldn't say that." Lev fixes me with a sharp expression. "She may not be *in* love with the guy, but she definitely loves him, you know what I mean? It was hard on her."

I suppress a sigh. "Where is she now?"

"In her room. Or your room, I'm assuming. She made a beeline straight upstairs as soon as the car had mostly come to a complete stop."

"And Chris?"

“Left in a huff,” Lev says. “I’d say it looked like the end of their friendship. Unless she decides she’s going to leave you.”

“Which is not going to happen,” I growl.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I won’t let it.”

“This is real then,” he says. “You and her.”

I don’t say anything, but my silence is answer enough.

“Have you told her that?”

“Do I need to? She’s made her decision.”

“Doesn’t mean she knows where you stand,” he says. “Not in so many words, at least.”

I shake my head in dismay. “I never pictured myself as this guy. The one who says the right things. Who fucking *cares* and shit.”

Lev laughs. Not a drop of sympathy for me, that bastard. “Time to learn,” he says.

I point to the door. “Get out.”

Still laughing, Lev leaves my office. I walk around my desk, more than disinterested in getting back to work.

I’m not sure if Jessa needs some time alone or not, but I can’t wait any longer before I see her. It was hard enough letting her out of the house without me while Marina is still at large.

When I walk into my room, Jessa is lying catatonic on the bed. She’s staring out the windows, her eyes glazed with tears.

“Jessa.”

She sits up the moment she hears my voice. Her gaze locks onto mine and then her entire face crumples like the world just collapsed in on her. I sit down at her side. Immediately, she leans into me, her head resting against my shoulder.

“He says—he says he can’t be my friend anymore,” she says in between sobs. “He b-basically said he can’t be in my life.”

“I’m sure he didn’t mean it,” I say because it sounds like the right thing to say. But fuck if I know.

“He did,” she says. “I know Chris. This time, he meant it.”

“You wanna tell me what happened?”

“I’ll tell you what *should* have happened. I should have kept my stupid mouth shut.”

I wait for her to continue. She wipes her eyes clumsily and gives a derisive snort of laughter. “I called his bluff. I asked him if the reason he was giving me such a hard time about you is because he had feelings for me.”

“He didn’t deny them?”

“No. What’s worse, he gave me a choice.”

“Me or him?”

She turns towards me. Her eyes are bright and filled with doubt. “I tried to make him understand... but...”

I nod knowingly. “He sees me as the enemy.”

“I can’t exactly blame him. I saw you as the enemy not too long ago.”

“Are you asking me to sleep with him? That’s what changed your mind, but I think I’ll have to draw the line somewhere.”

She shoots me a glare, but I can see the smile she’s trying to suppress. “Don’t be funny. Not now.”

I stroke a fallen lock of hair back from her face. “*Kotyonok*, don’t stress out about this. Just breathe and relax. Everything will be okay.”

“How can I be relaxed, Anton?” she demands, getting back on her feet so that she can turn and face me. “Everything *can’t* be okay, because everything I knew is gone. Everything I counted on is gone. I don’t have a job anymore. I don’t live in my apartment anymore. There’s a murderous psychopath after me, I’m pregnant and hormonal, and something I don’t understand is going on between us.” She throws up her hands in frustration. “We’re having a baby together, we have sex on occasion. But I have no idea what I am to you.”

“You are the mother of my child.”

She sighs. “Anything else?”

“What word do you want me to use?”

“What I want is not the point. I want to know what *you* want. How would you choose to describe me?”

I don’t know why it’s so hard for me to go there. To admit to being in another relationship after my nightmare of a marriage. I consider it for a moment and then give the most honest answer I can.

“My woman.”

“Your woman?” she repeats, her eyes wide. “Your woman.” Eventually, she gives a resigned nod. “I guess I can live with that.” She comes and sits back down beside me. “Thank you for buying me all those clothes.”

“You’re welcome.”

She frowns. “I should probably go back to my apartment, though.”

“The thought doesn’t bring a smile to your face,” I notice.

“The thought of walking past Freya’s apartment... of going back there...” She sighs and shakes her head. “But I should probably break my rental agreement, right? And I have stuff there I want. My cookbooks and photographs and documents. I can’t abandon it, as much as I wish I could.”

“I can take care of all of that for you.”

“Only if you want.”

“I want.”

She smiles, but the expression starts to slip.

“Is there something else?” I ask.

“With these crazy hormones, there’s always something else,” she chuckles. “Now, I’m kind of sad about not saying goodbye to the apartment. I’d like to see it again. Maybe I could take the security team you assigned me and—”

“No,” I growl. “I’ll take you myself.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. We can go now.”

She glances at the clock. “Don’t you have some big meeting in an hour or so?”

“They’ll wait for me,” I say. “In any case, this shouldn’t take too long.”

“Okay,” she says with a shy smile. She twines her fingers through mine and doesn’t let go.

I have one of my men bring my favorite Porsche around front and we load up. I keep the top down as we cruise through the streets, driving slowly because I can tell that Jessa is enjoying the fresh air. She throws her head back and looks at the sky. Her hair flows freely in the wind.

She looks like a photograph, like a magazine cover, blissfully untethered from grief and heartbreak and fear, if only for the length of a car ride.

“What was your father like?” she asks abruptly, glancing at me.

I arch a brow. “That’s what you’re thinking about right now?”

“I’m distracting myself,” she says. “Indulge me.”

I sigh. “Well, he was brutal. And demanding. Necessary qualities in any don.”

“So that’s how you’d want people to describe you?”

“They do. Or they’d better.”

She smirks. “Okay, fair enough. But I guess I mean, what was he like as a father? As your father?”

“He wasn’t much of a father at all,” I say honestly. “He looked at me and saw only a tool. I was his heir first, son second. I’ll be...” I hesitate. But I’ve come too far to back away from this thorny topic now. “I’ll be different with our child.”

Jessa blinks slowly. “You mean, you’ll, like, play ball with him on the weekends? Read bedtime stories to her at night? You’ll go to all their soccer games?”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to show our child they are loved.”

“And you wouldn’t see him as your heir?”

“If it’s a boy, he would be both,” I say honestly. “But it would be son first, heir second.”

“What if he doesn’t want to be your heir?” she asks cautiously, wondering if she’s crossing some invisible line.

I shrug. “Then he doesn’t have to be.”

She seems shocked by that. “Really?”

“Really.”

“You’d just let him leave the Bratva and become... I don’t know, a DJ or a carpenter or an artist or a priest?”

“Okay, well, if those are the only choices then I think I’d rather chain him in the basement.”

She punches me in the arm lightly. “I’m serious. He could have a normal, everyday job? If he wanted a normal, boring life, is that something you could get on board with?”

“If that’s what he wanted... yes,” I say. “I am not my father.”

“What about the whole ‘heir’ business? You’d still need one of those.”

I shrug. “I guess we’ll just have to make more babies then.”

She stiffens, a nervous kind of excitement making her sit up taller.

“And what if we have a girl?” she asks. Her eyes are bright as if she can already see this hypothetical future.

“What do you mean?”

“Could she potentially be your heir?”

I bob my head back and forth. “It’s not done often, I’ll admit.”

“Because even the Bratva is sexist. Not such a different world after all.”

“Fuck yes, it’s sexist. But I’m not. If I had a daughter and she wanted in, then she would get a fair seat at the table.”

“Hm. Okay. Do you know what you would like to have?” she asks. “A boy or a girl?”

I consider that for a moment. “I know how to handle boys. I understand them better, for obvious reasons. I can relate. For that reason alone, when I think about this baby, I picture a boy. But I would be equally as happy to have a daughter.”

“Margaret told me that daughters and fathers have a special kind of connection.”

“Well, if we have a girl, I guess we’ll find out.”

We turn down a broad road lined with greenery on either side. There’s an oncoming car that, as it gets closer, looks familiar.

Then I notice the license plate.

“Hey, it’s Yulian,” Jessa says.

Yulian pulls up alongside us and rolls his window down. “Fancy running into you two. Where are you headed?”

“My apartment,” Jessa tells him.

Yulian frowns and turns to me. “We have a meeting in like forty minutes. Are you going to be there for that?”

“She just wants to grab a few things and then we’ll be heading back. I might be a little late, but you and Lev can hold down the fort until I get there.”

“Great. Another day making excuses for you,” he says with an amused eye roll.

“I’ve been making excuses for you for decades. It’s about time you returned the favor.”

Yulian’s smile comes easier this time around. I can tell we’re slowly moving back into normalcy. “See you back at the mansion then,” he says before offering Jessa a special wave. “Looking good, girl.”

She laughs and says goodbye to him before I speed away.

““Looking good, girl,”” I mutter under my breath. “Give me a fucking break.”

“He’s being sweet.”

“He’s flirting. And walking a dangerous line.”

She rolls her eyes. “Glad to see things are a little less tense between the two of you. It’s about time you kissed and made up.”

For a girl who gets it wrong quite a bit, she can be surprisingly perceptive when she wants to be.

I snort. “Why are you playing peacekeeper?”

“Because I like Yulian and I care about you. I just want everyone to get along.”

“What a charming little Girl Scout you are.”

She shrugs. “I like to see the good in people.”

“That’s backfired on you a few times now, hasn’t it?”

She considers that for a moment. “Okay, yeah. I’m wrong a lot. But I’ve thought about it and I’d rather be like that than the alternative. I’d rather trust too much than too little. I’d rather love too much than not at all.”

I shake my head. “My father’s head would have exploded if he heard you say that.”

“Yours looks like it’s not far from exploding, too.”

I nod. “You’re not wrong. That mindset would have gotten me killed a long, long time ago.”

“You don’t trust anyone?” Jessa asks, sounding almost sad to hear it.

“I trust my inner circle.”

“And your inner circle consists of whom?” Jessa asks. “Lev and Yulian, right? That’s it?”

“Pretty much.”

“Don’t you think that’s kind of sad?” she asks.

“It’s smart.”

She sighs. “I notice I didn’t make it into your circle. Does that mean you don’t trust me?”

I give her a sideways glance. “Walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

“Answer the question, smart ass.”

“Of course I trust you,” I tell her. “I wouldn’t have asked you to move in with me if I didn’t.”

She stops talking, which strikes me as odd, considering the conversation was more playful than serious.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, taking the last corner before her street.

“Um... sorry. Can you pull over?”

I pull to the side of the road immediately and Jessa practically jumps out of the car. I follow after her, wondering what I said to get this reaction. Then I see it’s not anything I said at all.

She bends over and places her palms on her knees. Her back roils as she tries to suppress a heave. I move closer to her and put my hand on her back.

“Go back to the car,” she groans. “You don’t need to see this.”

“I’ve seen far worse things come out of people than vomit, *kotyonok*.”

She groans again, louder, and tries to push me away with one hand, but her concentration is split and I’m not willing to move. She dry heaves a couple more times before straightening up.

“Jesus,” she breathes.

“Just throw up instead of suppressing it,” I tell her. “You’ll feel better after.”

“I didn’t eat this morning because I was nauseous. And I didn’t end up eating with Chris at the restaurant. There’s nothing to throw up.”

“Maybe we need to get you an IV drip.”

“What will that do?” she asks.

“Get rid of the nausea so that you can eat and drink.”

Her eyes glaze over with desire. “Sounds like magic.” She takes a deep breath and stands tall. “Okay, I think I’m good

now.”

“You’re sure?”

She takes a second to answer, but then she nods confidently.
“I’m good.”

We get back in the car and finish the trip to her apartment. It’s only a minute away, but I drive extra slow so that I don’t aggravate her nausea.

“Thank you,” she says softly as I park just outside her building.

“For what?”

She glances at me. “For taking such good care of me.”

I give her a nod and get out of the car. By the time I reach the other side, she’s out, too. She stands on the curb and looks up at the building with a conflicted look on her face.

“This was my first grown-up apartment,” she murmurs. “It’s weird how attached you get to a place.”

“You felt safe here.”

“At one time,” she admits. Then she frowns. “That’s strange.”

“What?”

“Can you see that window up there? The small square one?” she asks, pointing up to the building. “I keep it open all the time. It leads into the bathroom, and I’ve never closed it. But it’s closed now.”

A weird sense of dread spreads through me. Jessa shrugs and moves towards the entrance.

“No,” I growl, grabbing her arm and pulling her back.

“What?”

“Don’t go in.”

“What do you mean?” she asks. “We came all this way to get my stuff.”

“If you didn’t close that window, someone else did.”

She freezes. “You think Marina—”

Her words are drowned out by an impossibly loud bang.

Jessa screams as I engulf her with my body and twist her away from the explosion.

The heat beats down on my back and smoke and debris fill the air. Still huddling over her, I sprint with Jessa across the street.

My ears are ringing, but I start to make out other sounds. Screams, cries, panic.

Then in the distance the sound of approaching sirens.

“Are you okay?” I ask Jessa.

But her gaze is fixed on her building. There’s smoke billowing from a single set of windows.

I don’t have to look to confirm my suspicions: Jessa’s apartment was the only target.

JESSA

Everything hurts.

Smoke stings my eyes, my head throbs, and my skin feels hot and prickly. It feels like there is fiberglass in my lungs.

“Oh my God,” I whisper over and over again. “Did that really just happen?”

I feel someone pulling me along, and I look up and see his gray eyes. They seem emotionless on the surface, but I’ve known him long enough to know that he’s furious. Seething, in fact.

“Anton?”

“Are you okay?” he asks, twisting me around so that my back is to the building. So I can’t see my burning apartment.

I can hear sirens in the distance closing in. Then I feel moisture on my cheek. For a second, I think it’s raining. Then I realize it’s a tear.

“Anton,” I say again, even though I have no idea what I’m trying to get out.

“Jessa. Breathe,” he tells me.

He pushes something into my hand. I look down dumbly to see it’s a bottle of water. Where did he even get that from?

“Drink,” he tells me.

I just stand there, too stunned to move. “My apartment...”

“Your apartment is gone now.”

“What about the others?” I ask as the enormity of what has happened sinks in. “My neighbors. Oh my god, Mrs. Harrison. And there’s a couple on the second floor. They have a baby.”

“Look at the building, Jessa,” Anton says, twisting me around again. There’s smoke surrounding the building, pouring into the sky. But it all seems to be coming from one apartment. “Your apartment is the only one that exploded. The others are intact. This was an assassination attempt.”

“Marina,” I whisper.

“Fucking Marina.”

Realization dawns, and I grab Anton’s arm. “If you hadn’t pulled over when I felt nauseous... we’d have been in there when the explosion went off.”

“The timing...” he says under his breath. “She’s watching us. Even now.”

What little sense of calm I managed to find on the drive is completely shattered, along with my hope that this is going to end soon.

We’ve all underestimated Marina and her violent ambitions.

“Let’s go.”

“Let’s go?” I repeat stupidly. “I’m not leaving my apart—”

“Jessa, there’s nothing you can do here. There’s nothing either of us can do. We need to go.”

“Your wife is trying to kill your child,” I whisper as my thoughts turn morbid. “One of these days, she’s going to succeed.”

Suddenly, Anton wraps his arm around my waist and whisks me away from the road towards a row of hedges nearby. He grabs my chin and forces my eyes up to his.

“Listen to me,” he says fiercely. “I know you’re in shock. I know you’re panicking now. But believe me when I tell you that she will not fucking succeed. I will kill that bitch before she ever hurts you.”

“She’s dangerous, Anton.”

“So am I.”

I blink and a tear falls. It feels cool against my hot cheek. “We need to go to the cops.”

“No.”

“Anton—”

“We don’t involve the cops in Bratva business. I will resolve this all soon enough.”

I can see it in his eyes: the promise of murder. Maybe I’ll see him kill her, maybe I won’t. But I get the feeling that I’ll sense it when it happens. One nasty, twisted soul snuffed out of existence.

Can I handle that? It feels like too many shocks to the system in too short a span of time. My hand lands on my belly.

“Is something wrong? Are you having pain?” Anton asks urgently.

I shake my head. “The baby is fine.”

He takes a step forward and places his hand on mine over my stomach. “I will keep you both safe, do you hear me?”

I nod. “I hear you.”

“The more important question is, do you believe me?”

I really think about my answer, taking my time answering. Finally, I nod again. “I believe you.”

He presses a kiss to my forehead, and I feel a pleasant warmth flood through me. Anton has never been so shamelessly affectionate before. The doubt in my chest turns slightly towards hope.

Maybe he’ll really take care of everything.

Maybe I’ll be alright.

Maybe we all will.

My phone rings, startling me out of my reverie. I almost drop it trying to pick up the call. “Hello?”

Before I even get the word out, a fire truck roars down the street and stops in front of my building. I can barely hear over the fire truck's siren.

"Jessa! Jessa?" Chris's voice comes through. "What's going on? I got an alert on my phone. There was an accident on your street?"

"In my building," I say, raising my voice so he can hear me.

"Where are you now?"

"Right out front."

The line cuts out abruptly. I'm not sure if he hung up on me or our connection dropped. But it's not like I can explain things to him over the phone, what with people gathering on the street now. So I choose not to call back.

Anton wraps his arm around my shoulders. "Jessa, we should go."

I shake my head. "I want to stay. They'll have questions for me."

He turns to face me, his eyes hard and serious. "They will. And your answers have to be confident and convincing."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't mention Marina. Feign ignorance. You don't know what happened today."

"But—"

"The police won't be able to do anything," he assures me. "Marina is outside their bounds, beyond their abilities. If they interfere, it will only complicate things."

"How?"

He raises his eyebrows as though he's shocked that I would even ask.

"Are you trying to protect her?" I ask, the idea hitting me all at once.

I don't know why I decide to go there. It's stupid, really, considering I know where he stands with Marina. At least I

think I do.

“Protect her?” he growls in disgust. “You must be joking.”

“Why else wouldn’t you want the cops involved? They have resources.”

“All their resources won’t make a single bit of difference, Jessa. I have more. And even if I didn’t, it changes nothing.”

“How does it change nothing? You’d have help. You’d have the law on your side. You’d, well, you’d—”

A few of my neighbors have gathered around now, looking up at the building in various shades of shock and awe. Anton pulls me away from the crowd so no one will overhear us.

“What do you think the cops will do if they get involved?” he hisses. “I’m talking best case scenario.”

“Arrest her?”

“Okay, fine. Say they do. She can easily make bail. We’ve already established she’s got people on the inside who are loyal to her. Say some prosecutor is stupid enough to resist bribes and threats. There would be a court case. She’d drag it out. The whole process could take months, maybe years. Do you really want to go through all that trouble and risk letting her walk in the end?” He tilts his head to the side to study me. “If you trust me, then trust that I will take care of Marina. I’ll give her the end she deserves.”

I hesitate, unable to express what I’m feeling.

“What is it?” he presses. “Tell me.”

I bite down on my resolve. “I don’t want you incriminating yourself. Staining your hands for me.”

He sighs. “I’ve got news for you, Jessa: my hands are plenty stained already. If we’re doing this, if we’re going to make this work, you’ll have to wrap your head around the reality of this life. It’s brutal and violent.”

I take a deep breath and Anton steers me down the street, away from the building and the throng of spectators who are watching the firemen race into the building.

From what I can tell, all of my neighbors are accounted for. It seems no one was hurt.

We're halfway to the car when I spot Chris. He takes one look and then sprints towards me. We embrace and he lifts me off the ground.

"Thank fuck," he gasps. "I was so scared."

Only when we break apart does he notice Anton standing there beside me. His expression falls visibly, but he does a good job of salvaging it.

"I'm okay," I assure him. "We weren't inside when it happened."

"When what happened?"

I glance at Anton. His expression is aggressively neutral. There's no sign there of whether I should spill details or not, but I'm tired of lying to Chris. "Marina."

"Are you serious?" He shakes his head and then his eyes narrow. "The woman has to be stopped."

"I'm working on it," Anton says.

"Maybe you should try a little harder," Chris snaps at him. "Because this isn't the first attempt your wife has made on Jessa's life."

Anton takes a step forward and I feel the air turn cold between them. "Rest assured, I've got this handled."

"Doesn't seem like it," Chris retorts, refusing to back down like he should. "Because Jessa almost walked into a building that was set to explode."

"Except she didn't." Anton is almost shaking with rage. He's controlling it, but just barely.

"But—"

"Chris," I say, getting in between both men before something bad can happen, "stop it."

He turns to me with an incredulous expression. "Jessa, this is getting out of hand. You can't stay with him. It's too

dangerous.”

“Staying with me is what will keep her alive,” Anton growls. Then he reaches out and pulls me out of Chris’s grasp. “I will protect her.”

Chris looks at him for a short second before turning back to me. “Jessa, please... Come with me.”

“I... I can’t do that,” I say.

“Why the hell not? I’ll keep you safe. We’ll book two tickets out of here and go.”

“Where would we even go?”

“Somewhere far away where she won’t be able to find you,” he says. “I doubt she’d even follow you.”

“Of course she would.”

“No,” Chris says confidently. “Let’s face it, the only reason she’s after you at all is because you caught *his* interest. Once you’re gone, she’s not going to care where you are—as long as it’s not with him.”

I glance at Anton’s face. I’m surprised to see his brow pinched in uncertainty. As though Chris’s conclusion makes too much sense to bat aside.

“I love you for coming here, Chris. I love you for worrying about me. But—”

“For fuck’s sake, Jessa!” he says, shouting so loud that a few people actually look our way in alarm. “You’re throwing your life away for the wrong man. Again.”

“That’s enough,” Anton snarls. “She’s made her decision. Take it like a man and walk away. Now.”

Chris looks between the two of us, then decides to stand his ground. He draws himself up to his full height, looks Anton in the eye, and says, “Do you really think you can make her happy? Is her happiness even a priority for you?”

“Would you believe me if I said yes?”

“No.”

“Then why even ask?”

“Chris, please,” I gasp, grabbing both his arms to try and make him see reason. “Anton will keep me and the baby safe.”

“You’re blinded by your feelings for him, Jessa. He’s not going to give a shit about you next year. Maybe not even next week.”

I gasp as Anton brushes past me. He grabs Chris by the collar of his shirt and then the next thing I know, Chris’s legs are dangling a foot from the ground.

“Anton!” I gasp. “Let him go.”

But he ignores me. “You don’t seem very good at listening, so maybe this will help. I understand you care for Jessa. I will not begrudge her this friendship. But you’re treading on thin ice, little man. I advise you to stop talking. If you value your life.”

Chris looks terrified, and my heart feels like it’s about to jump out of my chest. I put my hand on Anton’s arm.

“Anton, please!” I beg. “Please let him down.”

He doesn’t.

“For me?”

Anton’s eyes find mine. Slowly, he lowers Chris back to the ground and lets go of him. Chris stumbles back, gasping for breath.

“Go home, Chris,” I tell him gently. “I’ll call you later, okay?”

“You know what, Jessa?” he says, looking more disappointed than I’ve ever seen him. “Don’t bother calling me at all.”

“Chris—”

“No, we’re done.”

I bite my bottom lip, trying to hold back the emotions threatening to spill over. “Don’t do this.”

“I didn’t do a goddamn thing,” he barks at me. “You did.”

He turns away. I want to stop him. I want to grab him and force him to listen to me, to work this out.

But it's no use.

Because if I'm going to walk into the underworld with Anton,
I can't take Chris with me.

ANTON

Lev paces back and forth. I've never seen him look so agitated. If I were the type to worry, I'd be knee deep in doubts right now.

"She's getting bolder," he spits in disgust. "I should have been there with you."

"There's nothing you or anyone could have done. And she isn't any bolder. She was always a ballsy bitch with no regard for other people's lives. The only difference between then and now is motivation."

"You think she'll make another attempt?" Lev asks, stopping his pacing long enough to look at me.

"She's going to keep trying until she gets it right."

Lev groans. "She got too fucking close today."

"We would have been inside if it weren't for Jessa's nausea."

"Your baby saved you," Lev says. "It's almost poetic."

"Getting soft in your old age, Lev?"

"Getting tired," he corrects.

"Yeah, you and me both."

He drops into the armchair opposite me. "We'll get her, Anton."

"I know we will," I say, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees. "It's just a matter of when."

“The woman certainly knows how to hold a grudge. This could go on forever if we don’t stop it.”

“This is my fault,” I growl. “I should have killed her the day she crashed my meeting. I had her on the table, my hands wrapped around her neck. I should have choked the life out of her.”

“She was pregnant.”

I can feel the ripple of guilt, but I push past it. “Then I should have contained her in a room. Locked her in there until she carried the baby to term.”

Lev raises his eyebrows. “You’re telling me you would have killed her the moment she gave birth?”

“I’m saying I could have. Women die having babies,” I point out. “I could have concocted a story that would have made sense to Rodion. He would have believed me.”

“Would he, though?” Lev questions. “He knew how bad your relationship was.”

“You know what? At this point, I don’t fucking care. Even if killing her had incited a war with the Ivanovs, it would have been worth it.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do, actually,” I say, standing up. “Being rid of her and making sure Jessa is safe would have been worth it.”

“That’s your fear talking.”

“What do I have to be scared about?” I demand, turning on Lev.

He stays glacially cool. “Because for the first time in your life, you have something to lose.”

I think about Jessa and the child she’s carrying. She’s sleeping upstairs in my bed and it was still hard for me to walk away and come down to this meeting. I want to be with her all the time. I want to watch over her, protect her.

Because anything can fucking happen. Anyone can betray you.

The door opens without warning and Yulian walks in. There's a layer of sweat on his forehead that tells me he's just found out what happened.

"Is everyone okay?" he asks, looking between Lev and me. "Jessa?"

"Upstairs sleeping," I answer gruffly. "Where were you?"

"In the meeting with the Turks," he says. "I was expecting you to join, remember?"

"Fuck," I growl, running a hand through my hair. "How'd it go?"

"I negotiated a longer contract and a discount on our next shipment. There's a change in the leadership hierarchy that's going to come into effect next year, but I'll explain it to you later."

I stare at my brother, grateful that he has my back even after everything that has happened. Maybe Lev and Jessa are right. Maybe I have been too hard on him.

"They're gone now?"

"The Turks? Yeah. Is the baby okay?"

"I had the doctor come in and examine her. There was no bleeding, no sign of distress. The baby is fine."

"He's strong," Yulian says. "Like his father."

He comes around the sofa and I put my hand on his shoulder. "Thank you."

Yulian looks shocked for a second. "For what?"

"For holding down the fort for me," I say. "I don't say it enough."

He raises his eyebrows. "So I'm not a screw-up all the time then?"

"Not all the time," I say with a small smile. "Just most of it."

"I'll take it." He sinks into the sofa, taking the spot that I'd been sitting in. His left leg bounces wildly, and I can tell he's agitated, too.

“What are your spies saying?” I ask. “Both of you have teams on the lookout for Marina, right?”

“Nothing has changed in the last few days,” Lev says regretfully. “Every time I get a lead, it goes nowhere. It’s like she’s evaporating every time we close in on her.”

“How is that possible?” Yulian asks.

“She may have someone on the inside,” I growl.

“The men that were loyal to Marina were weeded out the moment she left this house,” Yulian points out. “I saw to that myself.”

“I did, too,” Lev adds.

“Which means she’s got a powerful ally at her back,” I say. “There’s no way she’s doing this on her own.”

“What if…”

I look at Yulian expectantly. “What if what?”

“What if Yaromir is playing a double game?” he asks. “What if he’s feigning ignorance but he’s aware that Marina is alive?”

I glance over at Lev. He shrugs. “It’s possible. He’s her cousin. Family is family.”

“But you don’t think it’s likely, do you?”

“Yaromir was not raised for this life. He is the nephew of a don. He’s not trained or experienced. He may have power, wealth, and influence now, but he’s not brave or smart enough to understand what he can do with them. Allying with you is the smartest move for him right now.”

I nod. “But what makes you think Yaromir is smart enough to know what the smartest move to make is?”

Yulian chews on his bottom lip as he considers the options. “Even if he’s not prepared to challenge you, what if Marina has convinced him otherwise?”

Lev nods. “She can be convincing when she wants to be.”

“Especially with men,” I muse. Yulian snorts, and I jerk my gaze towards him. “Something funny?”

He shrugs. “I just think it’s ironic. You keep saying she’s good at getting what she wants where men are concerned... But you’ve been the only exception.”

“Which is why she seems intent on making me regret it.”

“Your meeting with Yaromir is in a few days,” Lev reminds me.

“That’s too far away. We need to move it up. I don’t want to discuss this on the phone with him. I need to be able to see his face. If he lies to me, I’ll know.”

I walk over to my desk. Lev and Yulian follow me. I dial in Yaromir’s direct number and wait for him to pick up.

“Anton,” Yaromir greets, his voice shaking a little.

I keep my tone casual, unconcerned. “Yaromir, how is the don life treating you?”

“It’s more work than I expected.”

“Inheriting the second-largest Bratva in the city is no easy job to adjust to. I don’t envy your position.”

“Well, I have an ally in you,” Yaromir says. “Which eases my mind somewhat.”

I look up at my two most trusted Vors, and I know they’re thinking what I’m thinking. The fact that he’s reminded me of my promised friendship is a good sign. He’s counting on our continued alliance.

“You most certainly have my support,” I say. “Now, I’m calling to ensure yours.”

“Is my support in question?”

“I have something important I need to discuss with you,” I say. “But I’d rather not do it over the phone.”

“We’re meeting three days from now—”

“I’m afraid we’ll need to bring this meeting forward. Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow. I... I’ll move some things around.”

“Excellent. Same time and place then.”

“Very well.”

I hang up. Yulian is staring at the phone and Lev is looking at me.

“I don’t think he’s aware that Marina’s alive,” Lev says. “He’s too desperate for your approval.”

“It could be an act,” Yulian suggests.

I scoff at the same time that Lev answers. “Yaromir is not that good an actor. The man is nothing but a lot of false bravado.”

“I agree.”

“If that is true. Can we trust him to handle Marina for us?” Yulian asks.

“He won’t be the one handling anything,” I say. “I’ll handle it. He’s merely going to be the tool I use to trap her.”

Yulian looks doubtful. “She’s going to have her own spies within the Ivanov camp.”

“She very well may,” I say. “Which is why we’re not meeting here or at the Ivanov premises.”

“Where are we meeting him then?” Yulian asks curiously.

“I’ve sent him those details separately. He’ll show up at the appointed time and place with only two men in tow. Same as me.”

“How can you be sure you can trust the two men he’ll bring with him?” Yulian asks.

“Because I suggested he bring them. I told Yaromir they were the most competent and skilled fighters in the Ivanov ranks.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Yulian says.

I smirk. “Both the men work within the Ivanov Bratva, but they answer to me.”

Yulian’s eyes go wide. “I didn’t realize you had spies there.”

“I have spies everywhere.”

Yulian gives me an impressed smile. “I gotta say, brother, you think of everything. Guess you have Papa to thank for that.”

“Don’t be smug,” I growl. “I’m here today because of me, not because of Otets.”

“So if he were to rise from the dead to tell you he’s proud, you wouldn’t care?”

I shake my head. “You care too much about other people’s approval, Yulian,” I say. “You’d have made a terrible don.”

“The key is delegation.” He smirks. “If I were don, I’d have made you do all the grunt work.”

“So you understand my position then?”

He shoots me a glare and gets to his feet. “I better go do the rounds. If there are any more leads, I’ll let you know.”

I nod and Yulian heads out.

When he’s gone, Lev turns to me. “Isn’t it nice when we’re all getting along?”

I roll my eyes. “You are getting overly sentimental. I think it’s time you found a woman so she can listen to this crap instead of me.”

“Have you thought about it?” Lev asks abruptly.

“About what?”

“Marrying Jessa,” he says.

The question takes me off guard a little. “I never intended to get married again.”

“But you care about her.”

“She’s... different than any other woman I’ve met.”

Lev smiles. “Of course she is. Who knew you’d get involved with a woman outside of the Bratva?”

“First, I have to deal with Marina. Then I can think about the future.”

Lev nods. “Fair enough.”

“Now, go and get me those leads I need,” I tell him.

I spend the next several minutes in my office, trying to quiet the voices in my head. But I keep going back to the day of the

meeting when Marina stormed in with a point to prove.

She couldn't sit quietly. She couldn't be the obedient wife. She couldn't be the rock I needed to climb higher in the world.

It was why I knew I needed to end it.

Except I didn't realize at the time that ending it and ending her were synonymous. I won't make that mistake again.

Without a plan, I stand up and make my way upstairs.

Jessa is not on the bed like I expect. She's curled up on the sofa, her head pillowed on her arms. She has a book lying beside her, one of her hands closed in the pages.

I check the cover. It's a cookbook from my shelves, but I've never read it.

Her eyelashes flicker slightly. I can see her eyeballs moving fast beneath her closed lids. A sure sign that she's dreaming. I wonder if it's of me.

I bend down and pick her up. Her weight settles comfortably in my arms. She doesn't stir as I carry her to the bed. As soon as I lay her down, she rolls to her side, assuming the same position she was in on the couch.

Watching Jessa sleep seems to have become my new favorite pastime. If someone had told me a few years ago that I would be happy to sit next to a woman's bed and watch her dream, I would have cut their fucking tongue out for insulting me.

But now, I sit at the edge of her bed, marveling at all the little things I admire about her delicate features. Her long lashes. The gentle curve of her nose. The way her plump lips fall open as she breathes. The little scar on the top of her forehead.

Leaning in slightly, I trace my fingers over the scar tissue. When that doesn't satisfy me, I bend down and kiss it. She shifts slightly, but doesn't wake up.

I pull back, get myself a drink from the mini-fridge, and sit down on the sofa.

I should be thinking about Marina. About tomorrow's meeting with Yaromir. About a hundred other little things that I've put

to the side because of all the drama surrounding Jessa and our unborn child.

But instead, I find myself contemplating the question Lev asked right before I came up here.

Marriage.

For the longest time, I've dismissed it out of hand. Now, I'm thinking that maybe second chances are legitimate.

And maybe, just maybe, I could benefit from one.

So long as it's with her, I'm willing.

JESSA

Chris declined my first six calls. The rest he just ignored. At one point, he'd actually started typing in our message thread. I watched the three typing dots appear briefly. But no text ever came.

He's not online anymore, but I'm sure he's still got his phone in his hand. And since he's being stubborn, I decide my only option is to be relentless.

I know you're mad. And I understand why, but we can't just give up on each other, Chris, I text.

Please pick up your phone. I've called you a dozen times.

14 actually. I just checked.

I know you don't agree with my choices. You're hurt and angry. I get it. You can be hurt and angry. Just don't stop talking to me. And don't stop being my friend.

Chris, please.

Chris.

Chris?

No response.

I take a deep breath and decide to just address the elephant in the room. Ignoring it would be disrespectful to how honest he was with me.

I start typing something out. *Listen, Chris, about what you told me... about how you feel about me... I don't want you to think*

that there might have been hope for us if Anton weren't in the picture.

I read it back and wince. That sounds way too harsh. So I delete it and start over.

I want to thank you for being honest with me about your feelings for—

No. Condescending.

Unrequited love is hard.

Fuck no. What am I, a fortune cookie?

I wish you weren't hurting right now.

Delete. Stop pandering.

One more try. C'mon. I need to get my shit together.

I know you need space, Chris. But give me one conversation. Just one chance to explain things again. And if you still don't want to see or speak to me, I'll respect that.

I read it about a thousand times in a row. Then, before I can chicken out, I hit send. A few seconds later, Chris appears online, and I almost drop my phone.

The typing dots appear and I wait with bated breath. Then they disappear and Chris goes back offline.

“Damn it,” I mutter.

“Something wrong?” Anton asks as he walks into the living room.

I hug my legs to my chest. “Chris isn't returning my calls or answering my texts.”

“Give him space.”

“The last time I did that, we didn't talk for six months,” I say. “I don't want to let that happen. I promised him that would never happen again.”

“He's the one being stubborn.”

“Anton,” I say patiently, “he's hurting. He told me something deeply personal and I broke his heart.”

“He should have expected that.”

“Sometimes, you hope,” I whisper. “Even when hoping is naïve.”

It’s not lost on me how much that advice applies to my own situation.

He places his hand at the back of my neck and I take a deep breath. “What can I do?” he asks in that delicious rumble of his.

I give him a soft smile. “You’re really willing to help me?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because... you’re not exactly a fan of Chris.”

“He cares about you,” Anton says grudgingly. “I can’t fault him for that.”

My heart flutters. No one has ever made me feel quite so cherished. Anton says he’s a violent man in a violent world, and if you look at him from some angles, maybe he is.

But when you see him the way I do, all you see is love.

“I do need something from you,” I say cautiously. I already know he’s not going to like this plan, but I have to try. “Let me go and speak to him. I won’t take long and—”

“No.”

“Wait, you didn’t even—”

“Jessa, you realize that you nearly died yesterday, right?” he demands. “That bitch came within seconds of actually killing you and the baby. She almost won.”

I notice he doesn’t include himself in the hit list. I’m not sure if that’s because he’s so confident in his own invincibility or because he just doesn’t care about whether he lives or dies.

“I know, and I’m not asking to go by myself. You assigned me a security team, didn’t you?”

“I will not trust any of them with your life unnecessarily. They’re all good men, they’re all capable. But she just came too close yesterday.”

“I can’t hide from her forever.”

“Not forever. Just until I strangle the life out of her.” He sighs and knuckles at his tired eyes. “Why do you need to do this now?”

“Because he’s my best friend. If Lev or Yulian refused to talk to you, wouldn’t you go to them and try and explain things?”

“Fuck no. They’d come to me.”

I roll my eyes. “Please, Anton?”

“If you need to talk to him so badly, text him.”

“I did. He’s not responding to any of them. And there are some things that I can’t convey in a text message. In any case, he deserves more than that. He deserves a face to face conversation.”

“It doesn’t seem like he wants one.”

“I would ask him to come here, but I know he won’t,” I implore. I put my hand on his arm. “I won’t be able to sleep if I don’t do this.”

He sighs and groans at the same time. “Fuck.”

“Is that a yes?”

His jaw clenches. “I’m not happy about this.”

“Noted,” I say. “I won’t be long.”

“You say that now.”

“There’s no way Marina is going to know where I am.”

“She knew where we were yesterday.”

I shrug. “Coincidence.”

At least, I hope it was a coincidence.

He rolls his eyes. “You really are determined to go, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. Then Lev is going with you.”

“Lev?” I ask. “I thought he was joining you for some important meeting?”

“He was. But I’m not sending you out there without a man that I trust implicitly. That’s either Yulian or Lev. And I’d rather have Yulian in the meeting with me today.”

“Okay. I’ll go with Lev then.”

He growls irritably, but I give him a huge smile and then throw my arms around him. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“I don’t consider that a proper thank you,” he says.

“No?” I ask flirtatiously. “What do you consider a proper thank you?”

His hand snakes up my leg and slips under my dress. The stern man from a moment ago is gone. His steely voice has gone sultry. “Use your imagination.”

I lean in and press my lips to his. His arm wraps around my waist and he pulls me onto his lap in one smooth move.

I keep my hands on his neck and straddle him, grinding my pussy against his erection. His hands land on my ass and he squeezes hard, pulling me against his cock, letting the pressure between us build one degree at a time.

He sucks at my nipple through the fabric of my dress and I moan, desperate to move as close to him as possible.

“Ahem.”

Gasping, I jump right off Anton and almost land flat on my ass on the carpet.

Lev is standing by the door, looking between us with an amused expression on his face.

In the heat of the moment, I forgot we were downstairs in the sitting room, in full view of anyone walking past.

Anton, of course, looks completely unruffled. He’s sitting in the same position, his legs thrown wide perfectly at ease despite the ridiculous bulge in his crotch. He’s so damn big that his erection would be hard to hide even if he tried.

I'm so embarrassed I can barely look at Lev. My cheeks are flaming hot.

"Sorry to interrupt, Anton. But we're all set."

"Actually, there's been a change of plan, Lev," Anton says, jumping straight to it.

"Oh?"

"Yulian will accompany me to the meeting with Yaromir," he says. "You're going with Jessa to see Chris."

Lev frowns. "Now?"

"Yes. She'll need security and I don't trust anyone else. Take the men, too, but I want you with her at all times."

If he's disappointed, he hides it well. "If that's what you want, then of course."

"Thank you."

"But... just you and Yulian?" Lev says. "Do you want me to add one more guy to round out your party?"

Anton shakes his head. "Not necessary. Yulian and I can handle this."

"I mean, Lev doesn't have to come with me," I say. "I can just go—"

"You are not fucking going by yourself," Anton growls at me.

I hold up my hands. "I just don't want to mess up your plans."

"They're not messed up," he tells me. "This meeting is going to go off without a hitch. Trust me."

I glance at Lev. "You don't mind, Lev?"

"Of course not. I'll do what I'm ordered to."

"That doesn't exactly reassure me."

Anton looks at me with a frown. "You need to stop caring so much about what other people think and feel."

"That's never gonna happen."

“Jesus,” Anton mutters as he turns towards the door. “And Lev, if—”

“I know,” he says before Anton can even finish his sentence. “If anything happens to her, I’m a dead man.”

Anton smiles. “Exactly. Jessa... you’ve got an hour with Chris. And then you come right back home. Got it?”

Home. It leaves me with a warm feeling in my gut. Enough to drown out the annoyance at his bossy tone.

“Yes, sir,” I say, throwing him a mock salute.

He shoots me a glare and disappears. When he’s gone, Lev turns to me with a barely visible smirk. “I’m surprised he agreed to this at all.”

“I know this must seem stupid to you both, but I can’t put off talking to Chris any longer,” I say.

“I don’t think any of this is stupid. I do think it can wait. But I’m not best friends with the man.”

I give him a shaky smile. “Thanks, Lev. Shall we get going then?”

He nods and leads me out to the driveway. We walk out just in time to see Anton’s vehicle drive through the gates. It’s a massive black jeep with tinted windows and huge tires. The car that Lev picks is much more understated, but it’s practical and sturdy.

Once Lev signals for the security team to follow behind us and we head off, I turn to him. “You knew Marina, right?”

He nods. “Unfortunately.”

“So safe to say there was no love lost between the two of you?”

“My loyalty has always been to Anton. Marina was chaos in the order he built.”

“What was she like when you knew her?”

“Stubborn, impetuous, vindictive. She had an ego on her that made his look like peanuts. She was beautiful and she knew it.

She was also much smarter than anyone gave her credit for.” He sighs, like just the thought of her is exhausting. “I think she wanted everyone to know what she could do. She tried to be the don. But there can only be one don.”

“Anton told me that their fathers basically arranged the marriage between them,” I say.

“That’s exactly what happened.”

“Did you think it was a good idea?”

“At the time?” he asks thoughtfully. “I was thinking only of the political aspect of it. It seemed like a decent move. A way to tie two powerful Bratvas together. But of course, my knowledge of Marina was limited. I saw only a beautiful woman who’d been groomed for this life. I thought they’d make a good match.”

“Groomed for this life,” I murmur. No one would ever accuse me of that. “Do you think that’s necessary? Being groomed from birth, I mean.”

“I think it can help,” he says, not unkindly. “I think it definitely helps you understand the rules and know what to expect, what not to expect. But it’s not necessary, strictly speaking.”

I nod. “Anton told me that if our child had no interest in being part of the Bratva, he wouldn’t put pressure on him.”

“He told you that?”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s true,” Lev says with conviction. “Anton wouldn’t lie about something like that. In any case, he knows what it’s like to be forced into things. He wouldn’t do that to his own child.”

“What was he forced into?”

“Marriage, for one,” Lev says. “I don’t think getting married has ever been something he wanted to do. He married Marina for the Bratva, and we all know how that turned out.”

I stare out my window, lost in thought. “Were they ever happy?” I ask finally.

“I can’t say that I know for sure. The first few months of their marriage were the most stable. But after that, shit hit the fan.”

“Why?”

Lev shrugs. “Because she expected too much. She wanted to be consulted on everything. She wanted a seat at the table. Basically, she wanted to control everyone around her, including Anton.”

I raise my eyebrows. “So she was delusional?”

“See, the thing is, that approach had worked for her her entire life. She controlled the people around her. I suppose she assumed she could do the same where Anton was concerned. But it wasn’t just that. She was insanely jealous all the time. If a woman so much as looked at Anton, she would go into a rage.”

“Maybe she really cared for him.”

“Maybe,” Lev says cryptically. “It’s hard to know with her.”

A shiver runs down my spine. “She was so convincing with me. She played the part of my friend to perfection.”

“That’s what makes her so dangerous. If she’s got a plan, she’ll stick to it.”

“She was sure she would kill me eventually.”

“And she probably wanted to do it in the most dramatic way possible,” Lev agrees. “She likes the theatrics.”

“The woman needs therapy.”

Lev snorts. “No amount of therapy can save Marina. She’s beyond help. You see this scar here?” he asks, pointing to a thin white scar near his collar bone.

“Yeah?”

“I suggested she see a shrink once. It was an offhand jab, not even intending to insult her. She tried to stab me with a pen.”

“I think she made your case for you. Stabbing someone with a pen is a shrink-worthy offense.”

“True enough,” he chuckles. “I didn’t point that out, though. She still had the pen in her hand.”

“How did you stop her?”

“Anton did,” I say. “He pulled her off me and threw her in her room. After that, she barely acknowledged my presence. Which suited me just fine.”

“How about Yulian?” I ask. “Did she get along with him?”

“Marina didn’t really get along with anyone in Anton’s house. She and Yulian didn’t have much contact. I think he was wary of her. He kept his distance. He’s smarter than I give him credit for.”

“Do you think you’ll find her?” I ask softly.

He gives me a reassuring smile. “You’ve met Anton, haven’t you? The man always gets what he wants. You have nothing to worry about, Jessa.”

I hope to God he’s right.

ANTON

Yulian gets out of the car and looks around, perplexed. “This is the spot you chose to meet?”

Grass has grown up through the old railway tracks, almost hiding them altogether. What is visible is rust red. There’s nothing around for miles.

“I didn’t want to be obvious. When have we ever had a meeting of any kind in a place like this?”

“Never. Because there’s no damn place to sit.”

“You can’t stay on your feet for an hour?” I snort.

“Not if I can help it. My ankles swell.”

I ignore him and walk down the railway line until I reach the rail shed off to the right. There’s a garish red X painted on the side along with a bunch of faded graffiti, layer right on top of layer until it’s so thick the whole thing is starting to peel off.

Yulian follows behind me, looking around with distaste. He’s not finished bitching. “I mean, what was wrong with our usual meeting places?” he whines.

“I wanted someplace low-key. A place that Marina would never suspect we would go.”

“She’ll never think of this one, that’s for sure,” he mumbles. “They’re late.”

“No, they’re not.” I gesture towards the opposite side of the track where a car is parked.

I whistle low and Yaromir's head pokes out of the shed. He steps out, followed by two tall men who both acknowledge me subtly.

"Yaromir," I say, "I appreciate you meeting me here."

He looks as unenthusiastic about our venue as Yulian. I can't exactly blame them. The sun is beating down and it's hot.

"Of course," he says warily. "Anything for my closest ally."

I suppress a smirk. Apparently, someone is terrified that he'll lose my support. At least he's smart enough to know that without my blessing, his appointment as don would never have been accepted by the rest of the underworld.

"I'm sure you want to know what this is about."

"I have been curious," he admits.

"Well, prepare to be shocked," I tell him, watching every muscle on his face. "Marina is alive."

At first, there's no reaction. Then his entire face comes alive. Every muscle, every crease shifts into a mask of surprise. "Marina?" He repeats her name in a low voice, as though it holds power. Like she'll be summoned if he says it too loud.

Yulian glances at me and I give him a nod, confirming what we're both thinking: the man definitely didn't know of Marina's existence until just now.

"That... that's not possible," Yaromir insists, looking between Yulian and me with clear worry.

"It is possible. It's real."

"How?" he breathes.

"Simple," I say. "She faked her own death and pinned it on me."

"But... but Rodion didn't know she was alive."

"That's because she didn't tell him," I say. "She didn't tell anyone."

Yaromir shakes his head. "You buried her. You had a funeral for her."

I glance at Yulian. My brother shifts on his feet uncomfortably, but his expression remains confident. *Never exhibit weakness in front of an enemy or an ally.* It was a core part of our training.

“That was a fake,” I explain irritably. “A decoy.”

Yaromir nods uncertainly. “Okay, so you buried some nameless woman, believing she was Marina Ivanov. How did you find out that the real Marina was still alive?”

“Because she tried to kill my woman and the mother of my child,” I drawl. I’m getting tired of explaining every little detail to this moron.

“The same woman you were seen with at the dinner you hosted for my uncle?”

I frown. Word traveled fast. No wonder Rodion was so agitated that night. “The same one.”

“And she’s pregnant,” Yaromir infers.

“She very nearly wasn’t,” I growl. “Thanks to your cousin.”

Yaromir’s face flushes with color as he realizes the gravity of this meeting. “If you think I had any idea she was alive—”

“Calm down, Yaromir,” I say before the man can tilt into panic. “I believe you.”

He sighs. “Good. Because I would never align myself with that fucking bitch.” His tone is so severe that I know there’s a story there. It’s the first time I’ve seen him exhibit such decisive hate. Matter of fact, it’s the first time I’ve seen him exhibit decisiveness of any kind.

“Something tells me that you’ve seen Marina at her worst.”

“We were cousins,” he says in a hoarse whisper. “Growing up, she used to torture me. And I’m not exaggerating when I say that. I have the scars to prove it.”

“Again, I believe you.”

“I’m assuming you wanted to talk to ensure that you would have my support in cornering Marina?”

Maybe I was wrong about Yaromir. There is a straightforwardness about him that I can use. He's no don, but he'll be a useful tool. And loyalty isn't the worst thing to have in an ally.

"Exactly."

"You have it," he says at once.

Yulian raises his eyebrows. "Some would question why you would turn against your own flesh and blood in favor of the Stepanov Bratva."

"The Ivanovs' alliance with the Stepanovs goes back decades," Yaromir points out. "I'm merely carrying on a long-standing history."

"Marina certainly won't be in favor of that," Yulian argues, playing devil's advocate.

"Then fuck her."

I smile. "I might have underestimated you, Yaromir. But you do realize that the woman is poised for a takeover, don't you? She's going to want to take back what she feels is rightfully hers."

"Women can't lead a Bratva. The men won't follow her."

"That doesn't mean she won't try."

"I'll be ready for her," Yaromir says, the bite of determination clear in his tone.

"Good. Because I expect she'll try and make contact with you soon."

Yulian glances at me. "Why do you assume that?"

"She's been on the run for a few weeks now. And she made an attempt on Jessa by rigging up an explosion. There's no way Marina would choose such a detached way of murder if she had the choice. She likes to see her victims' faces when she kills them."

Yaromir shudders visibly.

“She’s running out of options,” I continue, “which means she’s either losing her support system or she’s running out of resources. You have both, Yaromir.”

“It’s a risky plan, even for her,” Yulian warns.

“Marina is nothing if not bold. Now, head back to the car, I’ll meet you there.”

Yulian fixes me with a questioning look.

“I want to speak to Yaromir alone.”

Yulian gives me a reluctant nod and heads back. I know he won’t like me sending him to the car like some errant child. But I’m not sure that Yaromir will talk freely in Yulian’s presence.

Yaromir waves off the two men standing at his back. They retreat as well, leaving the two of us standing in the thick of heat beside the dilapidated train shed.

“I didn’t realize you had a history with Marina.”

“Not so much as we got older,” he says. “By the time we were teenagers, I tried everything in my power to stay clear of her.”

“What did she do, Yaromir?”

His eyes go blank for a moment, as though he’s trying to ward off a memory he doesn’t want to remember. But when he focuses his eyes on me, I can see the pain he’s still carrying around with him.

“She got off on other people’s pain. She liked watching people suffer. She found a door into the basement and she used to sneak down there to watch her father torture and maim. That started when she was about six. And it became a habit. A weird, twisted kink. She said it made her feel alive.”

Jesus. I kill and maim when I need to, but it is always a means to an end. It is always with reason, with cause. It is never a source of pleasure.

“She used to talk to me. But at some point, she got tired of me.” He looks down as though he’s treaded into territory he never meant to.

“It’s okay, Yaromir. You can tell me.”

He looks at me uncertainly for a moment. Then he throws his arms into the air and swears. “You know what, fuck it. I was not built for this life, Anton,” he says honestly. “Being a fucking Bratva don? I don’t have the stomach for it. I was never meant to be don and I was happy about that. It takes a specific kind of man, a specific kind of personality to do what you do. I just don’t have it.”

More than anything else about Yaromir, I respect his honesty right now. Self-awareness is a rare trait in this world.

“I suppose Marina thought me weak because of it. She started targeting me. It started with tricks and jokes. Then it started to change,” he says. “She killed my cat. Wrapped a rope around its neck and hung it from the same tree that held my tire swing. When we got older, she held my head underwater so long that I passed out and came to hours later. And then when we were older...”

He stops short and shakes his head, clearly still haunted by his memories. “She liked mind games. She liked getting in people’s heads. I think she felt powerful seeing the fear in their eyes. She also liked being the center of attention. She hated when the focus was not on her. When I got my first girlfriend, it baffled me that she was angry about it. She had no interest in me, no love, not even affection as far as I could tell.”

Oh fuck. I know this side of Marina too well not to see what’s coming.

“It shouldn’t have mattered who I was with. But apparently, my indifference was an insult to her. That and the fact that everyone was complimenting Lana. She was a beautiful girl. She had the most amazing red hair...”

I know where this story is headed. I lived it myself under different circumstances. “Did your girlfriend survive?”

Yaromir swallows, his face mired in grief. “She told me that Lana was waiting for me in my room. That she was ready to lose her virginity to me. I went upstairs and pulled back the sheets. That psychotic bitch had slit Lana’s throat. She’d cut

off Lana's hair, too, and stuffed it in her mouth. Still to this day, I tell myself that she did the cutting after Lana was already dead. But I can't always convince myself of that."

He looks up at me with haunted eyes that want nothing to do with the world that Marina so naturally belongs to.

"I'm going to kill her, Yaromir," I growl. "This time, I'm going to do it myself."

He nods. "Good. Make her hurt."

"Oh, she'll hurt. I swear that to you."

Yaromir nods. "Then you have my full support. Anything you need."

"I'm going to need you to play a part," I say. "I'm going to need you to make her believe she's going to get what she wants from you."

He shudders at the thought, but nods all the same. "I can do that—if it means she dies by the end of it."

"She will."

I offer him my hand and he takes it with only the slightest bit of trepidation.

"I may not have a don in me, Anton, but that doesn't make me stupid," he says. "I know that many of my men aren't happy with my ascension."

I glance subtly at the two men standing by the car on the other side of the tracks. They both report to me in secret, and those reports confirm everything Yaromir just said.

"I also know that, with your support, I can quell some of that talk."

"It's not just talk you need to worry about, Yaromir," I tell him frankly. "Some men will talk. Others will act."

"Who do they have to follow?"

"Me, for one."

His eyebrows rise. "Are you telling me that you want my men?"

“Why would I need to? As long as you come when I call, I’m happy to let you keep your men and your new title.”

“So I’m just the figurehead?”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“I suppose if I say I do, I’ll end up with a bullet in my head.”

I smile. “I like you, Yaromir. You really are a lot smarter than you look. Which is why I won’t be putting a knife in your throat. You want to try your hand at being don? Go ahead. I won’t interfere.”

“And our alliance?”

“It will remain in place.”

His jaw drops. “Why?”

I shrug. “Because I can build my empire without stealing yours. Unless you give me reason to, I won’t be picking a fight with the Ivanovs.”

Yaromir nods. “That’s fair.”

“I have to ask, though: given what you just told me, why would you want to keep the title?”

“Because I have a wife and children,” he sighs. “I also have more debt than I care to mention. I have to do what I can to dig my family out of the hole I’m in. Even if it means taking a job I’m unprepared for.”

I nod. “There are easier ways of getting out of debt, Yaromir.”

His expression turns guilty. “I won’t lie. The lifestyle is seductive.”

“It comes at a cost. Never forget that and you might actually live long enough to really enjoy the benefits of your newfound position.”

“I’ll remember,” he says. “I promise.”

I give him a parting nod and set off down the path towards the car. Yulian is still sulking when I sit down in the driver’s seat.

“What was that about?”

“Just needed some reassurance that the thing I’m about to do is justified,” I say.

“And what thing is that?”

I put the car in reverse and back out slowly. “Killing my wife.”

JESSA

Driving with Lev is a silent, orderly affair. For a man who operates well beyond the bounds of the law, he obeys all the traffic rules and never ventures above three miles per hour over the speed limit.

I can't decide if he always drives this way or if it's just because he doesn't want Anton to kill him if we get in a crash.

"How did you get involved in all this?" I ask suddenly. The silence is killing me, and it's the first question I can think of, even if it sounds like a corny first date interview. *What's a gal like you doin' in a town like this?*

"In all what?" he asks, sounding genuinely confused.

"Ah, keeping secrets, are we?"

"It's not a secret," he says. "It's just no one's ever asked me that before."

"Well, I'm interested."

"You're the first one to be." He chews on his thoughts for a moment, so I give him space. He's not used to talking about himself.

"My father worked in the underworld. He pushed drugs. He was a small-time dealer but wanted to make it big. It's ironic, really. He had big names he wanted to make connections with. Like the Ivanovs and the Stepanovs. When I turned sixteen, he started taking me with him. He'd been dealing for about a decade by then. He earned enough to pay my mother's hospital

bills and to keep the roof over our heads, but it was still a lot of scraping by day to day.”

“Your mother’s hospital bills?” I ask, and then immediately regret it. I don’t want to cross the line from curiosity to prying. “Sorry, you don’t have to answer that.”

“She spent the latter half of her life in a mental institution. Paranoid schizophrenia.”

“Jeez, that’s awful. I’m sorry, Lev.”

He nods. “She had fits. Sometimes, she self-harmed, but mostly, she hurt others. After she threw a bottle at my head and split my forehead open, Dad had her committed.”

“That’s how you got the scar,” I say, eyeing the jagged curve of pale scar tissue snaking into his hairline.

He nods. “Other kids’ mothers baked them cakes and bought them footballs. Mine left me with scars.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You had nothing to do with it,” he says curtly. I assume he’s going to clam up on me, but he continues his story. “Dad was determined. He got shot down nearly every night I was with him, but he still pushed to get into the right rooms with the right men. One day, he got desperate. Probably because I was with him and he didn’t want me to think he was a failure. So he pushed past the security and tried to get within a foot of Don Stepanov.”

“Anton’s father?” I gasp.

He nods. “Anton’s security broke my old man’s nose and had him on his back in seconds. When he got back up, they knocked him down again. Six times they hit him, six times he stood.” I can hear the muted pride in Lev’s voice. “It was Don Stepanov that finally gave them the order to stop. My father was lying on the floor, bleeding all over the place, and asked to be given a chance to join the Stepanov Bratva.”

“What did he say?” I ask, even though I’m sure I know.

“Don Stepanov told him that the initiation process was rigorous. You couldn’t just become Bratva on a whim. Most

were born into it. And those who weren't had to earn the right. My dad said he'd do whatever it took."

"And did he?"

He sighs. "My old man had the determination, but he lacked skill, strength, and stamina. He died during the induction."

"Are you serious?"

"It involved accompanying some of the Stepanov men on a drug heist. He was shot on their way out. He stayed conscious for a minute before he died. And in that minute, he asked that I be taken care of. Apparently, he'd earned enough respect from Don Stepanov that Anton sent one of his men for me. I was nineteen at the time. I was given the same option as my father. Prove myself, earn my place, and pass my initiation—or die trying."

"You really wanted to go through the same test your father failed?"

"I had nothing to lose." He shrugs.

"And... your mother?"

"Killed herself trying to get the demons out of her eyeballs. Had a closed casket for her funeral. Gouged eyeballs don't make for a pretty corpse."

My stomach churns. "Lev, that... I don't know what to say."

"There's nothing to say. It's my life."

"It must have been horrible."

"There were moments that were horrible," he admits. "There were moments that were not. I choose to focus on those."

"You're a strong man."

He shrugs. "It's how I knew I could pass whatever initiation they threw at me. I was built for tougher stuff. The underworld is a place I understand."

"You never wanted to get away from it all?"

He raises his eyebrows. "If I didn't find this, I would have ended up in some street gang. I'd probably be dead in a ditch

by now. The Bratva gives me purpose. It gives me a reason to get up in the morning. Without it, I would have ended up like my parents. And I wanted to avoid that at all costs.”

“What about love?” I ask. “Is there room in your life for that?” It sounds silly when I say it out loud, but I’m genuinely curious.

“My father loved my mother,” he says quietly. “And it didn’t save either one of them in the end. They lived the last decade of their life apart.”

“Not all love stories end that way,” I remind him.

He smiles. “I take it you’re a hopeless romantic?”

I blush a little. “I’m just an ordinary girl. Most of us are.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. If you were an ordinary girl, Anton would have never fallen for you.”

I know Lev wouldn’t say something like that unless it was true. He’s not the kind of guy to offer insincere flattery.

“Do you really think he’s fallen for me?” I ask in a small voice. My heart clenches. “Did he say something to you?”

Lev smiles. “No. But I’ve known him a long time.”

“He’s not good at saying how he feels.”

“None of us are.”

I sigh. “Sometimes, it’s hard for me. The not-knowing.”

“Jessa, he may not voice certain things out loud. But actions say more than words ever could.”

“He’s protective of me, yes. But I am carrying his baby. I’m just a means to an end.”

“You think it’s just about the child?”

“Well, he hasn’t really known me very long.”

Lev drums on the steering wheel. “Don’t those fairytale books you read talk about love at first sight and fated soulmates and all that bullshit? Who needs time?”

I shoot him a glare. "I'm just saying, it's hard to know where I stand with him."

"He won't abandon you, Jessa."

"That doesn't mean he loves me. It means he's stubborn."

"He's as stubborn as any man who's ever lived," Lev laughs. Then he falls quiet again for a bit. "I never thought he'd entertain another relationship after Marina. And yet here you are. Pregnant, to boot."

"It wasn't exactly planned."

He gives me a pointed glance. "If you're searching for things to worry about, you'll find them."

I sit with those words for a while. The more I think about it, the more they resonate. "Thanks, Lev."

"For what?"

"Your advice."

He seems mildly amused by that. "Sure."

A few minutes later, we pull up outside Chris's apartment. It's a nice building, but worn. The bricks are sun-bleached and water stains dip low beneath the gutters.

"Will you wait out here for me?" I ask.

"Definitely not."

I sigh. "Really, Lev?"

"I'll stay outside of the apartment unit if you want, but I'm coming into the building with you."

I don't bother arguing. I already know what the end result will be. So I nod in defeat and get out of the car.

I give Chris's apartment a buzz, but get nothing in response. I try again.

"Maybe he's out?" Lev suggests, leaning casually against the wall.

"That's his car parked over there," I point out. "He's definitely in. And he wouldn't ignore his bell."

“Maybe he knows it’s you.”

I throw him a dirty look and smash the button a couple more times. The buzzer is a loud, annoying sound. He wouldn’t just sit and listen to it. If I keep this up for another few minutes, I’m sure he’ll cave and let me into the building.

Five minutes later, though, I’m starting to get angry. “Jesus!” I growl. “I get that he’s angry, but this is just childish.”

“Give him some space.”

“I was going to, but I thought we needed to have a conversation first.”

Lev raises his eyebrows. “I think you’re missing the point.”

“You don’t understand, Lev. He basically told me that he no longer wants to be friends with me. I can’t just let him get his way.” I can feel myself getting emotional. I bite down on my tongue and look up at the building. “Wait—sometimes he takes the bus to his parents’ house because parking in their area is a nightmare.”

Hoping to God he’s with them, I dial his mom’s cell number. She answers after a couple of rings.

“Jessa, dear, it’s been so, so long!”

I instantly feel bad for not making more of an attempt to keep in touch. Despite my rift with Chris, I’d invited them to the wedding. But they’d been in Portugal visiting their daughter and couldn’t make it.

Thank God, in retrospect.

“I know, Mrs. Eckhart. How are you?”

“Fine, dear. We’re doing just fine. I heard about what happened with Dane. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was a good thing.”

“You know what? I agree. After everything that Chris told us about him, I’m glad the wedding didn’t happen.”

I want to make more small talk, but I’m too wired to do anything but jump straight to the point. “Mrs. Eckhart, sorry to

be abrupt, but is Chris there?”

“Chris?” she asks in a bewildered tone that makes my heart sink.

Is he really up in his apartment right now ignoring me? Can he possibly be serious about not wanting anything to do with me anymore?

Surely not. We’ve been through too much together. And we promised each other that we’d never let anything get between us again. This is a speed bump, nothing more.

“No, he was here last weekend,” she says uncertainly. “And of course he calls every other day to say hi to his father and me. He didn’t call today, though. Funny thing, actually—he usually would have by now.”

“Shit,” I mutter to myself.

“Do you think everything is okay?” she asks, sounding worried.

“Um, yeah. You know what, I remember him telling me he was swamped at work,” I lie. “I wouldn’t worry.”

“Right. It must be something like that,” she says. But she sounds about as convinced as I feel—i.e., not at all. “I’ve sent him a few messages. He hasn’t replied.”

“I’ll track him down and tell him he’s a bad son,” I say in a lighthearted tone.

“Thank you, dear. I appreciate that.”

I say goodbye and look up at Lev, unable to contain my panic anymore. “Something is wrong, Lev. He hasn’t called his mom today. He hasn’t responded to her texts, either. He might ignore me if he’s pissed enough. But he’d never ignore his mother.”

He grabs my wrist. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“Around to the back of the building. There’s got to be a back door in.”

“There is, but it’s locked.”

“Good. A locked door can always be opened with the right tool.”

Sure enough, within a minute, he has the back door swinging open for us. “After you,” he says, gesturing me forward.

I rush in without complaint and head to the stairwell, though in the back of my head, I’m wondering when I started getting so cavalier with stuff like breaking and entering. It’s a slippery slope from there to doing what Anton does.

I shove those thoughts aside as we climb up slowly to the fifth floor and I rush over to his apartment.

“Chris!” I call, slamming my fist against the door. “Chris—”

“Just move,” Lev says, calm as ever. He pulls something metal out of his pocket, starts messing with the doorknob, and thirty seconds later, “Voila.” The door swings inward on silent hinges.

“You’re gonna have to teach me how to do that at some point,” I mumble as I squeeze past him into the apartment. “Chris?”

His apartment smells like him. Like pine trees and aftershave.

But there’s no sign of Chris.

I search through the apartment. Bedroom, bathroom, wardrobe. All empty.

“He’s not here.” I sound panicked even to my own ears.

“What’s that?” Lev asks, pointing to Chris’s neatly made bed.

I turn and notice the piece of white paper sitting haphazardly on the wrinkle-free duvet cover. I pick it up and turn it over. The words there are written in a neat, flowing cursive that I don’t recognize.

“It’s a letter...”

And then my eyes hit the first sentence and my knees buckle.

“Oh God.”

“Jessa?”

“It’s her,” I gasp. “It’s her...”

Lev snatches the letter from my hands before I have a chance to properly read it. Then again, I'm not sure I can read it myself.

"Fuck," he growls.

"Read it to me," I say. "Tell me what she wrote."

Lev looks uncertain for a moment.

"Please, Lev?"

He glances down at the small note in his hand and starts reading. *"Hi, Jessa, you must be wondering where Chris is. Well, he and I decided to get better acquainted. I have you to thank for introducing us. All my love, Freya."*

"Freya," I repeat. "She has him, Lev."

Lev grabs me by the arm and yanks me up. "Come on. We need to go."

He might as well be lugging around a concrete block. My legs are stiff and useless.

"Jessa, cooperate with me. We can't stay here. If she has eyes on the building, she'll know we're here."

I look up. "She has Chris."

"I know. We'll get him back."

"You know what that note really means, don't you?" I ask. "She's threatening to hurt him. Because of me."

"She won't hurt him."

But even I know that there's no way he can be sure of that. Marina has killed unapologetically in the past, for offenses much less significant.

I have no faith that she's not going to hurt Chris.

He grabs my hand so suddenly I gasp. Then he starts towing me through the apartment.

"Lev, let me go!"

"No," he spits grimly. "My job is to protect you. We're exposed at the moment. I have to get you out."

I stop struggling and just let myself be led out of the building. All I can think about is Mr. and Mrs. Eckhart. If something happens to Chris, I'll have to be the one to tell them.

But even now, I know that won't absolve me for my part in involving Chris in all of this.

Lev gets me out of the building and into the car. By the time I zone back in, we're minutes away from Anton's mansion.

"We have to find him, Lev," I whisper. "We have to find him before she hurts him."

"We'll find him, Jessa."

But he can't promise me that, not truly.

No one can.

ANTON

Some decisions must be made alone.

Lev would argue against this. Yulian would balk and whimper. Which is why neither of them are in the room with me.

The man who is in here, Misha, is a break-glass-in-case-of-emergency kind of Vor. He stays out of sight until he is needed. With his milky, scarred-over eye and the permanent leer on one side of his mouth, he's not exactly fit for polite company.

He nods as I finish my instructions. "I will do as you say, Don Stepanov."

He's always addressed me like that, with formal gravitas that seemed to belong in another time. He definitely doesn't look the part in his baggy pants and torn wifebeater, but he carries himself like a knight saluting his king.

"See that you do. I want it done fast. Text me when it's done and I will give you the signal."

He nods once more and then leaves the room on silent feet. I walk out onto the porch just as Lev pulls into the drive.

I catch one glimpse of Jessa's face in the passenger seat and I know it's bad. She's worked herself up into near hysterics. Tears are streaming down her cheeks and she's lost color.

I sprint down the stairs, towards the car, and meet her on the sidewalk. "Jessa—"

“She has him,” she sobs, throwing herself into my arms.
“Anton, she has him.”

“We’ll get Chris back,” I assure her, even though I know nothing about the situation.

She shakes her head. “I can’t believe I’ve been so stupid. I should have insisted that he be given security as well. She knew him, Anton. She met him. I introduced the two of them, for fuck’s sake”

She slams a white piece of paper against my chest. I unfold it and recognize the handwriting immediately. Marina didn’t even bother trying to hide it.

Her script is pretty, delicate and sophisticated. Like a lady from a Jane Austen novel.

As opposed to what she really is, which is a Lovecraft monster.

“She’s going to hurt him,” she says desperately.

“She’s not going to hurt him,” I say, even though I have no faith that that’s true.

Like I always knew and Yaromir confirmed, Marina is a born sadist. There’s no telling what she might do.

“How can you be sure?” Jessa demands. “She’s insane!”

“Come with me,” I say. “You need to calm down and get some rest.”

“Rest?” she balks. “How can you expect me to rest now?”

“Because you have the baby to think of,” I say sternly. “Now, come with me unless you want to be carried.”

She considers the threat for a moment and then huffs past me into the house. Lev is standing off to the side, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

“Anything?”

He shakes his head. “The place was empty when we got there. He’s been gone for a while.”

“She could have him anywhere at this point,” I growl.

“Any news from Yaromir?” Lev asks.

“Nothing. He sent me an update this morning. She hasn’t made contact.”

Lev raises his eyebrows. “Why don’t you seem worried?”

“Because I have a plan.”

I don’t divulge it, however. Instead, I turn back into the house and follow Jessa upstairs to my room.

She’s pacing nervously across the floor, her expression contorted into worry and fear and panic. She barely acknowledges me even after I shut the door and walk over to her.

So I step in front of her, blocking her path and forcing her to stop. “What do you hope to accomplish by working yourself up like this?”

She shakes her head. “You don’t understand. He is my best friend.”

“I understand that plenty.”

“No,” she snaps. “You don’t. He’s the only one who’s ever truly had my back all these years. He tried to protect me even when I was a bitch to him. He took care of me when my parents didn’t. He risked his life to keep your phone when I stole it from you, even though there was a fairly good chance he could die for it. And after everything he did for me, all I seem to do is break his heart and put him in danger. This is all my fault.”

“This is about Marina, not you.”

“I’m the one who introduced the two of them!” she protests. “I chose to trust her as much as my lifelong friend right from the start. Not once did I suspect she wasn’t who she said she was.”

I grab her hand in both of mine. “Why would you have suspected? The average person is not trained to suss out that kind of deception. You have no reason to expect it in your world.”

“It doesn’t matter. I should have been smarter about who I let into my life.”

I can’t argue with that. It’s a good rule for her going forward, too, but right now is not the time to say so.

“His parents, Anton,” she murmurs as a shiver runs down her body. “What do I say to his parents?”

“He’s not dead, Jessa.”

“How do you know that?” she says, dragging her eyes up to mine. “What if she’s chopping up his body as we speak so that she can send him back to me in pieces? I can’t stop thinking...”

She trails off, dissolving into tears. I grab her by the shoulders and pull her to me. Her whole body shakes and then she sinks into me. She twitches with sobs every few seconds. I ride them out with her, waiting until the front of my shirt is soaked through, and then I pull back so that I can look at her face.

“Do you trust me?” I ask quietly.

She blinks and another fat tear rolls down her cheek. “Yes. Of course I do.”

“Then let me take care of this,” I say. “You’re not used to any of it, I understand that. But this is the lifestyle I lead, Jessa. And you’re going to have to get used to it. Otherwise, you’re not going to survive.”

Her bottom lip quivers. “What if I can’t? What if I don’t have it in me?”

“You know who I am and what I’ve done, and you still stand your ground with me,” I remind her. “That’s half of the reason I fell for you in the first place.”

Her eyes go wide with shock as the words spill out of my mouth.

“You... you what for me?”

I laugh. “For a smart girl, you can be pretty damn slow sometimes.”

That almost ignites a smile. But she quickly stuffs it back down as though she has something to feel guilty about.

“I... hoped for it,” she says tentatively. “But I wasn’t sure if it was just wishful thinking on my part.”

“It’s not,” I say. “It’s real.”

“You can’t blame me for second-guessing my instincts. They clearly can’t be trusted.”

“We’ll work on that together,” I assure her.

She seems to have calmed down slightly. There’s a little more color in her cheeks now and she’s not breathing quite so hard.

She looks at me for a second and then reaches up to curve her hand against the side of my face. “I do trust you, Anton,” she whispers softly. “I’m just so scared.”

“I know. But you don’t have to be. I’m going to take care of that bitch once and for all.”

“What if it’s too late by then?”

“I’m going to do my best to protect Chris as well,” I assure her.

Her lip trembles again as a fresh wave of sobs threatens to swallow her up. “But you can’t promise me that he’ll be okay, can you?”

“I think you know the answer to that,” I admit. “But I know Marina. She took Chris for a reason and that reason was to lure us in. She only starts hurting people when she has something to lose. For now, Chris is just a card she’s waiting to play.”

I can tell she’s close to dead on her feet. I pull her towards the bed and force her to sit down on it. “You need to sleep. Lie back.”

She does as I say, but her eyes stay fixed on me. “Anton, can you stay with me?”

I hesitate for only a moment. Then, sighing, I slide into the bed beside her.

She places her head on my chest. “I feel so guilty,” she whispers after a long silence.

“This is not your fault, *kotyonok*.”

“No, not because of that. I mean, a little bit because of that. But this guilt is for something else.”

“What’s that?”

“The fact that I feel so... safe right now,” she says, her voice strained and shaky. “I feel so safe here with you. And I have no right to feel that way when Chris has been abducted by that psycho.”

I wrap my arm around her and pull her close. “Don’t feel bad for feeling safe, Jessa. Chris wouldn’t want you to feel guilty.”

She glances up at me. “I wish there was something I could do.”

“Trusting me is something.”

“I already do.”

“Then close your eyes and let that be enough.”

She does. After a few minutes, her weight sinks into me and her breathing becomes more relaxed.

When I’m sure she’s asleep, I disentangle myself from her and get off the bed. I pull the blinds closed and head back downstairs to my office. Both Lev and Yulian are in there waiting for me.

“She has the friend?” Yulian asks.

“Yes.”

“How is Jessa?”

“Distraught,” I say. “She feels guilty.”

“And Marina is getting bolder,” Yulian points out.

“It’s not boldness,” I reply. “It’s desperation. The bitch is cornered and she knows it.”

“We still don’t know how much support she has,” Yulian reminds us.

“If she had more support, she’d have made her move already. Marina’s never been the patient type. She likes making herself known. She’s too damn opinionated to keep her mouth shut for so long.”

“What if she chooses not to go to Yaromir at all?” Lev asks.

“She will,” I say confidently. “Like I said, he has resources and men. She needs both. And apart from that, she will feel a sense of ownership where the Ivanov Bratva is concerned. She’ll assume she’s the rightful heir, and she’ll come for what is hers.”

Lev snorts. “Rightful heir, my ass. Rodion may have doted on the bitch, but he was too smart to ever have made her the heir to his Bratva.”

“Which was why he married her off to me,” I say. “So that I would be the one to run both operations.”

“Except you couldn’t control Marina,” Yulian says.

I glare at him, and he flushes with color and turns away.

“I was trying to control her while she was trying to control me. It was a marriage made in hell.”

“What do you think she wants?” Lev asks suddenly.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Yulian asks, looking at Lev incredulously.

“No, it’s not,” he retorts. “She’s made an intentional decision to come after Anton. She’s started a war that she doesn’t have the means, the men, or the skill to finish. It seems poorly thought-out. It seems almost like...”

“Suicide,” I finish for him.

Yulian looks between the two of us with a baffled expression.

“Maybe she thinks she can win?”

“How?” I ask. “Yaromir controls the Ivanov Bratva, and he’s been legitimized with my support. The men may have fantasized about sleeping with Marina, but they’re not going to follow her into a hopeless war.”

Yulian’s expression twists and he considers that for a moment.

“Maybe she’s thinking less about control and more about

revenge.”

“She was never one to forgive an insult,” I agree with a nod. “And I suppose telling her I was divorcing her and kicking her out of my house was insult enough.”

“Not to mention you killed her father,” Yulian says.

It’s possible, I know, but somehow, I think there’s a deeper reason to Marina’s madness. She’s punishing me for something far greater than the threat of divorce. Something greater even than the death of her father.

Because as much as Rodion loved her, I’m not sure that Marina was ever capable of loving anyone apart from herself.

“Her reasons are her reasons,” I decide. “And frankly, I no longer care what they are. All I want now is to see the life drain from her eyes. She’s backed into a corner. The noose is tightening and she’s going to make her move sooner rather than later. She’ll have to be on the offensive if she has a hope of surviving this.”

Lev frowns. “What are you thinking?”

“I have to force her hand. Get her to go to Yaromir sooner than she might have done.”

“How are you going to make her do that?” Yulian asks curiously.

“By taking something from her.”

Just then my phone beeps and I look down at the lone text message on my screen. Just as I suspect, it’s from Misha. Four short words.

It’s done, Don Stepanov.

I can text back, but for the benefit of Yulian and Lev, I call instead.

“Don Stepanov,” Misha answers courteously.

“Can you see the land?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And it’s all set up?” I ask.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then detonate now.”

“Yes, sir.”

The next thing we hear is the sound of a massive explosion. Ten times louder and bigger than the so called ‘gas leak’ from Jessa’s apartment.

“Done, boss,” Mischa says, a bit unnecessarily.

“Good. Now, get out of there.”

“Already gone.”

I hang up and look up at Yulian and Lev, both of whom are slack-jawed and waiting for an explanation.

“When Marina and I got married,” I begin, “I gifted her a piece of land. She asked for this one specifically.”

“Fuck,” Yulian breathes. “The plot she had all the plans for. She talked about it constantly.”

“It was a symbol for her future,” I say. “And I just blew it the fuck up.”

Lev shakes his head. “There are subtler ways to send messages, Anton.”

“But none so effective. And anyway, I learned that with Marina, there’s no such thing as too obvious. You need to be clear and loud if you want her to listen. So wherever she is, whichever little rathole she’s hiding in... she’ll hear the boom. And she’ll know: I’m coming for her.”

JESSA

The stones splash and sink into the fountain like tiny cannonballs. *Ready, aim, fire.*

The fountain, like everything else in the garden, is immaculately kept. I'm probably making some gardener's life a nightmare. They'll have to pick out all the stones and undo my damage.

But I can't stop myself. Something inside me quivers every time the stone hits the water and splashes violently.

"You know there are fish in that fountain, right?"

I jump back to see Yulian watching me with raised eyebrows.

"Guppies, mostly," he adds. "But they grow. Unless they get their heads bashed in by a flying rock."

I put my hands on the concrete rim and look over into the water. I see movement underneath the surface. Orange koi scrambling for safety.

"Shit," I mutter.

"Feeling a little murderous today?" he asks lightly as he moves closer to me.

I close my eyes and my shoulders sag with defeat. I turn my back on the fountain and sit down. Water soaks through my jeans, but I don't care.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think there were fish in there."

Yulian sits down beside me and gives me a comforting smile. “I’m a great listener when I want to be. If you want to talk about why you’re pelting helpless little fish, I’m here for you.”

I exhale deeply. “I used to get frustrated a lot as a kid,” I admit. “I was bullied and my mom and dad weren’t exactly the most attentive or involved parents out there. There was this little lake close to my childhood home that I would bike over to when I was feeling especially down. I used to sit by the lake and throw stones.”

“And that made you feel better?”

“I used to pretend like I could transfer my heavy feelings into each stone. And throwing the stone away was my way of trying to get rid of some of those emotions.”

Yulian looks impressed. “That’s a high-level metaphor for a kid.”

“It worked back then,” I laugh bitterly. “Not so much anymore.”

“Only because the stakes are higher.”

“I don’t know how you guys do it,” I admit. “The constant danger, the threat of losing the people closest to you... it’s so much.”

“It’s different for us. We’ve always known what to expect.”

“I’m not sure I can ever adopt that kind of attitude. No matter how long I live in this world.”

“Does that mean you’re planning on trying it out?” he asks.

I raise my eyebrows. “I am carrying your brother’s baby. Kinda seems like I’m stuck here, even if I didn’t wanna be.”

Yulian is the more easygoing of Anton’s inner circle, but I can tell that even he is uneasy about this whole situation. His brow knits together in worry, which does nothing to ease my own concerns.

“I don’t want anything to happen to my baby, Yulian,” I add in a whisper.

He looks at me with fierce eyes full of determination. “I promise, no harm will come to you or your baby. I’ll make sure of it.”

It’s sweet how confident he sounds right now, but I know he can’t guarantee anything. He picks up a stone and tosses it up into the air before catching it again.

“Let’s play your game,” he suggests. “This stone is my worry for my brother.” He throws it over his shoulder and it lands with a plink in the water. “Your turn.”

Smiling, I reach for a stone of my own. “This is my fear. Fear that my best friend will be hurt or killed because of me.”

I throw the stone, but not far enough, so when it lands in the fountain, cold water droplets splatter on my back.

Yulian finds another rock and goes again. “This is my frustration for everything that’s gone wrong that’s led us to this moment.”

“I think you’ll need more stones for that one. Maybe a boulder.”

He smirks and throws the stone. Then he hands me a new one. “This is my anger at Marina for not staying dead. You can throw it.”

I chuck it behind me and feel some of the pressure on my chest lighten somewhat. “It’s helping,” I whisper.

“You’re right. Good game you made up,” he says, picking up another stone. “This is my doubt about my own abilities and my own skill.”

He turns and whips it hard into the water. Fish scatter in every direction. It must feel like their world is ending. Death by vicious meteor shower attack from above.

“Do you really doubt yourself?” I ask.

“All the time.”

That surprises me. He always seems so damn confident.

As if he’s reading my mind, he says, “All my confidence feels like a mask sometimes. I have to appear confident because the

alternative is looking weak. And that's easy to do when I'm standing next to Anton and Lev."

"They're not going to judge you."

He snorts. "Then you don't know either one of them very well. It's not in their nature—or any of our natures—to be compassionate or understanding. Strength is the only thing that's respected here."

"Anton and Lev aren't just anyone," I point out. "Anton is your brother and Lev is your friend."

He nods, but I can tell he doesn't believe what I believe: that they'd have his back no matter what. It makes me sad to think that the toxic masculinity of the underworld would bleed into their relationships.

"Have you ever talked to Anton?" I ask.

"About what?"

"About your self-doubt."

He raises his eyebrows. "Did you not understand what I just said?"

I roll my eyes. "I'm just saying that a lot of what you told me is based on assumptions. Maybe if you allowed yourself to have a real conversation with your brother, you might realize that what you're scared of is actually a non-issue."

He shakes his head. "You didn't see his face when he found out that Marina was still alive. That's on me. I fucked up."

"Mistakes happen all the time, Yulian."

"Yes, but when they happen in our world, people die," he retorts. "You almost did."

"Almost," I underscore. "But I didn't. I'm still here."

He shakes his head. "It's nice of you to want to give me a pass, but I have to hold myself accountable for my mistakes."

"If I have a son, I'm going to make sure he knows that it's okay to screw up," I say firmly. "I'm going to make sure he doesn't beat himself up because he made one wrong move."

Yulian smiles. “Not sure how well that’ll go down with Anton, but you can certainly try.”

“Anton will want his children to be happy.”

“He’ll want them to survive,” Yulian corrects. “The two things don’t always go hand in hand.”

I feel a sense of unease spread through me as Yulian says those words. It forces me to confront the simple truth I’ve been avoiding: that living with Anton, raising a child with him, is not going to be anything like I expect. He’s cut from a different cloth.

And this child will belong to his world more than to mine.

“You’re going to be a great mom, Jessa,” Yulian says, surprising me with his heartfelt words.

“You think?”

He nods. “You’re warm and kind and patient. That baby’s going to need you a lot. Especially if he’s raised in this world.”

“It’s funny—I’ve always known I was going to be a mother. I’ve looked forward to this day for a long time.”

He smiles with understanding. “It’s not anything like you pictured it, though?”

I sigh. “Not even close.”

“Maybe it’ll be better than what you pictured,” he says. “Ever thought of that?”

I glance at Yulian and feel my heart swell a little. I see Anton in him, of course. The posture, the width of the shoulder, the dark eyes. But whereas Anton broods and simmers, Yulian is lightness incarnate. He tries to pretend otherwise, but it shines through him no matter what he does to hide it.

Maybe that’s why, before I can stop myself, I blurt out, “Yulian, will you be my baby’s godfather?”

I’m not even sure I have the right to make that decision. But apparently, I just did.

Yulian’s eyes go wide. “Are you serious?”

“You’ll be the baby’s uncle, of course. His only uncle. But I think I would like you to be his godfather, too.”

He looks amazed, but there’s a kind of reservation in his reaction. “Um... have you and Anton discussed this?”

“Well, no,” I’m forced to admit. “But I’m sure he’d agree. You are his brother, after all.”

“His screwup of a younger brother.”

“Come on, Yulian. He may have been pissed at you, but I doubt he’s going to hold it over your head for the rest of your life.”

“Then you don’t know Anton very well. The Bratva is everything to him.”

“You’re his family.”

“So are you now,” he says. “That doesn’t mean that he won’t put the Bratva first every time.”

I frown. Those words land heavy on my already-fragile heart.

“I’m sorry, Jessa,” Yulian says quickly. “I ruined the moment.”

“No, no—”

“I did,” he cuts in apologetically. “I didn’t mean to; I was just surprised. And touched. And I don’t really know how to process it.”

“Little by little,” I tell him with a shy smile.

He smiles back. “You’re good for my brother, you know? He needed someone like you to soften him up.”

“You don’t think he’ll get bored?”

I’m laying my biggest insecurity bare, but I trust Yulian. He won’t judge me.

“Don’t underestimate yourself,” he says.

“Sometimes, I wonder how Anton and I are gonna make anything work,” I admit. “Especially given what happened between him and Marina.”

“What does that have to do with you?”

I shrug, trying to act carelessly detached from the situation. “She was born into the Bratva. She knew what to expect and so did he. And still, the marriage blew up in their faces.”

“Because they were all wrong for each other,” Yulian says. “Maybe what Anton needed was not a mirror of himself, but someone completely different.”

“A mirror of himself?”

He smiles, though it’s thin and tight. “I know you may not want to hear it, but Marina was a lot like Anton in many ways.”

“How?”

“She was confident and opinionated. She was all alpha, all the time. She was highly intelligent, very perceptive. She knew when to be charming and when to be ruthless. She could wrap people around her little finger without them being any the wiser. She would have made the perfect wife—if only Anton had known how to handle her.”

“I know this is a controversial question but... did you like her?” I ask.

Yulian raises his eyebrows. “Are you asking if I had the hots for my brother’s wife?”

I shrug. “Might as well while we’re being honest.”

He nods. “Truth?”

“Please.”

“She was nice to me,” he admits. “Sometimes. But I barely had contact with her. We shared a dance on their wedding day. It was the deepest conversation we ever had. Probably the longest, too.”

“What did you talk about?”

“I wished her happiness with her new marriage and she looked... hopeful. Gotta give it to her, she made a beautiful bride.”

Of course I can see that, too. She is a beautiful woman. But it’s still hard for me to reconcile the friend I thought I had with the

murderous wife of the man I was in love with.

“She was always easiest when she had things her way,” Yulian continues. “And she certainly got the wedding she wanted. It was the grandest thing I’ve seen in my entire life.”

“It was a big ceremony?”

“A thousand guests,” Yulian says. “She had Rodion book out the entire hotel for the week of their wedding.”

“Wow.”

“She liked to make a statement.”

“I can see that,” I say. “What did she look like?”

Yulian pulls out his phone and starts scrolling up. “I might still have a picture or two on my phone. I don’t usually delete shit.”

It takes him a minute before he finally locates the photo. “Here,” he says, holding it out so I can see.

Immediately, I have the urge to suck in my breath. Not only does Anton look more handsome than I’ve ever seen him—but Marina looks like she was made for him.

She’s wearing a lace dress that hugs her perfect body to perfection. Bits of her tan skin show through the thin fabric. The skirt of her dress is embellished with crystals and silk. It hugs her hips before flowing out to give the shape some drama and body. Her golden hair is piled into a chic but messy updo with a tiara resting on top.

She looks like modern-day royalty.

As if that weren’t enough, Anton and Marina are standing in front of a spectacular backdrop made exclusively of roses. It’s easily a million dollars’ worth of floral arrangements alone. God only knows what their clothes cost.

“Whoa,” I breathe.

I take the phone from Yulian’s hand and stare at their expressions. They look more like models on a job than a blissful young couple on their wedding day.

Anton's face is composed and confident, but slightly detached. Marina isn't smiling at all. No, she's posing. Her jawline is pushed out and her eyes are fixed pointedly at the camera, though she keeps one arm placed possessively across Anton's chest.

"They look... perfect," I admit softly.

Yulian laughs darkly and takes back his phone. "Sure, they *look* perfect. But as you already know, the way something looks is the least important thing."

"I know that," I sniff.

"Then why do you look so miserable?" he asks suddenly. "Should I not have shown you that picture?"

"No, it's okay," I say, feeling bad for making him feel guilty about it. "It's just... I guess it reminds me that they're still married. Technically speaking."

He snorts. "Jessa, trust me—they were never really married. Their union was always a sham, a way to bolster a political alliance that should probably have never been made in the first place."

"I know. But at the end of the day, she is his wife, right?"

Yulian looks at me regretfully. "You've been cooped up in this mansion too long. How about a drive? We can get some fresh air."

"That actually sounds amazing," I say, rising to my feet. "Let's do it."

The thought of getting out a little is maybe exactly what I need right now. "Great, I'll bring the car around and—"

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

We both turn in the direction of the angry voice. Anton is standing there, watching us both with furious eyes.

"Yulian was just suggesting a drive," I say weakly.

"I heard," he snaps. Then he turns to his brother. "You realize Marina is watching our every move, right? I thought I made it

clear I didn't want Jessa leaving the mansion anymore until the bitch was taken care of."

Yulian flinches and his shoulders drop. "She was upset. I thought I'd—"

"Cheer her up?" Anton demands. "That's not your fucking job."

"Breathe, Anton," I protest. "It's not a big deal."

"Get back in the house," he snaps at me in a tone that scares me just a little. He hasn't spoken to me like this in a long time.

Something is wrong.

I stare at him. "What happened?"

His gaze flickers to Yulian. "Yaromir just called me. Marina made contact with him."

Yulian freezes. "Okay. And?"

"We're in play. Get ready and meet me out front."

Yulian hurries past me without another word and disappears into the garden, heading towards the house. I take a step towards Anton when we're alone again.

"You're leaving now?" I ask.

"Yes. I'm going to put an end to this."

I nod. "Please come back."

His expression softens just a little. He steps towards me and cups the side of the face with his hand. "You need to stay safe, *kotyonok*. You need to stay here. You understand me?"

"I understand." He's about to release me, but I grab his hand and keep it fixed against my face. "Anton, please. Promise me."

"I'll come back to you," he says. "I swear it."

He dips his head down and catches my lips with his. He kisses me hard and then pulls away abruptly, leaving me wanting so much more.

Then he turns and disappears the same way that Yulian did.

ANTON

Meeting in the armory has become something of a ritual before any meeting of significance. It's calming, to be here among the tools of our trade. To see guns and know I can use them. To see knives and know I can use them.

It reminds me who the fuck is in charge.

I am.

Lev is standing alone when I walk in. "Where is Yulian?" I ask.

"I don't know. I thought he'd be with you."

"I was talking to Jessa. I expected him to be here already."

"Something wrong?" Lev asks.

I'm not sure. I have an instinct for this kind of thing, for trouble. And something seems wrong. But there's no proof yet. Nothing but my gut.

Not that it's ever let me down before.

"We'll have to see," I say vaguely.

"How is Jessa?"

"She's going to remain here with a contingent of men protecting her. I'm taking you and Yulian for this mission, so I've doubled the guard around the mansion."

"If you want one of us to stay, you know we will," Lev says at once.

I know how much Lev hates to be left out of this kind of thing. The man was built for action. He doesn't do well as a watchdog. But he's loyal and devoted. He'll do whatever needs to be done, which means I need him by my side even more.

"I know that. But this time, I need both my righthand men with me."

Lev nods. "She's not going to get away this time."

"We'll make sure of that," Yulian says, walking through the door and taking his place between us.

"Where were you?"

"Checking on the men," he says. "I wanted to make sure everything was in order before we move out. Did you double the guard around the mansion?"

"I did. Jessa is here, I want to make sure she's safe."

Yulian nods in agreement, but I notice he's a little pale. Battle has always made him more nervous than he likes to let on.

"Jessa remains in the mansion at all times," I instruct.

He sighs. "I was just trying to make her feel better. I thought a drive would help. She's going crazy in this house."

"It's a necessary precaution," I say. "She won't need to be locked away in here once Marina is six feet under."

"As long as she can make it until then. She's spiraling."

"Spiraling?"

Yulian raises his eyebrows. "Sometimes, you get so wrapped up in this Bratva, you forget about everything else."

"You want me to take my eyes off the ball when this bitch is on the loose and she just blew up Jessa's apartment?"

"Wouldn't be the first time you let a woman come between you and business," Yulian mutters.

But he doesn't do it quietly enough. I'm on him in a flash, hands fisted in his shirt, pinning him against the wall and

snarling in his face, “What the fuck did you just—” when Lev steps between us.

“Respectfully,” he says, “we don’t have time for the two of you to fight.”

Yulian glances at me. “He’s right.”

“I know he’s fucking right,” I spit. I sigh and let go of my brother. “Pick your weapons. We move out in the next fifteen minutes.”

I head to the back wall where my favorite guns are kept. Lev and Yulian go to their respective corners. We each have our preferences, our own specific skills, our own sets of tools.

Yulian favors guns, like I do. Quick and simple. But Lev likes a good fist fight, so he chooses to deck himself out with little accessories, blades and brass knuckles and the like.

“What did Yaromir say?” Yulian asks as he holsters a gun at his hip.

“That Marina made contact with him minutes before he called me,” I tell both of them. “She asked if they could meet and talk. She said she wanted to explain what happened back then and why she’s back now.”

Lev snorts. “Like we don’t all know what she’s doing here.”

“Did Yaromir say how she sounded?” Yulian asks.

“Sugary sweet. She’s going to do whatever she thinks it will take to get what she wants out of him. In her eyes, he’s easy pickings.”

“She could just as easily kill him to get what she wants,” Lev points out. “That would give her command of the Ivanov Bratva as well.”

“If they choose to follow her, that is.”

“She doesn’t need all of them to follow her,” Yulian says. “Just enough to put up a fight against us.”

“She’s no great strategist,” I say. “She wants power, but she has no idea how to get it. More importantly, she has no idea how to keep power once it’s hers.”

“You’re doubting her?”

“You forget, brother,” I tell him. “I know her better than anyone.”

Once we’ve all geared up, we head outside where the rest of my men are waiting for me.

“We need to keep a low profile,” I tell all of them. “So we’re not approaching the Ivanov grounds together. The gates at the back will be kept open for us to enter. The moment we get inside, we surround the place and move in.”

The men all look determined, ready. It’s been a while since we had a mission of this magnitude to carry out. They all know their marching orders. More importantly, they know who we’re really moving against.

“If you see Marina Ivanov, you will detain her immediately and bring her to me,” I say, looking in every man’s eyes. “If she proves difficult to trap, then use your fucking guns.”

Both Lev and Yulian look at me with surprise.

“Like I said,” I tell both of them, “I want this shit over with. Let’s move out.”

Yulian, Lev, and I climb into one jeep and peel out. As we hurtle towards the Ivanov property, I check the time. Yaromir’s estimations have Marina on the property within minutes. The plan is to let her get inside and then pin her there like a rat in the corner.

“What if this is a trap?” Yulian asks suddenly.

“What do you mean?”

“What if Yaromir is secretly allied with her?” Yulian continues. “What if we’re walking straight into a trap?”

I glance at my brother. “Don’t you have any faith in me?”

“What do you mean?”

“What have I always taught you? Never trust anybody. Even your allies can turn on you at a moment’s notice. All it takes is a better offer. Which is why I can’t even fully trust Yaromir.

She's going to try and seduce him first in order to convince him that she's the better option."

"Yaromir has a wife," Yulian says.

I glare at Yulian. "Sometimes, you're so damn naïve, I don't know how you survived this long."

He flushes with color and stops talking.

"I know where Yaromir stands with Marina," I add. "He hates her fucking guts and she knows that, too. She has to toe the line with him or risk losing everything."

"She's not accustomed to hearing no," Lev warns.

"I've told Yaromir to take certain precautions," I say. "The rest is up to him."

Yulian still looks nervous as we approach the Ivanov property. I wonder when he got so cautious about everything. He would have benefited from some of the training Otets reserved solely for me. Action cures. Indecision kills.

"Drive around," I instruct Lev.

We make a long detour before getting to the back gates of the Ivanov compound.

"They're closed," Yulian observes anxiously.

"Yes, but not locked. Go on."

Yulian leaves the vehicle and goes to check on the gates. For a moment, I wonder if Yaromir has gone back on his word. But then Yulian slides the black gates open and Lev drives through.

When we get out of the car, one of Yaromir's men approaches. It takes me a moment before I recognize that he's one of the two who accompanied Yaromir to the meeting.

In effect, one of my men.

"Boris," I say, gesturing him over.

There's a line of men waiting behind him. Obviously, they've been told to expect us because they're all relaxed. They don't have their weapons drawn.

“Sir,” Boris says with a respectful half-bow, “the Ivanov don is inside.”

“And our visitor?”

“She’s expected soon. There are guards up front waiting to open the gates for her. She said she was coming with two men.”

“That’s it?” I ask, smelling a rat.

“It’s what she told the don.”

I glance back over my shoulder. Lev and Yulian are watching the exchange. They’re both tense, uneasy. Are they thinking what I’m thinking?

“How many men are inside the house with Yaromir?”

“At least thirty,” he says. “Spread throughout the house.”

Lev and Yulian come forward. “Where is Yaromir?”

“On the first floor. The main sitting room where the meeting was requested,” Boris explains. “You won’t be able to see into it from the outside, however. He drew the blinds early.”

I stop short, my suspicions become more and more pronounced. I still don’t have any fucking proof, but I know Marina.

“She made the request?”

Boris looks confused. “Um, I believe so, Don Stepanov.”

“What’s this about?” Yulian interrupts, his eyebrows knotting together.

I ignore my brother and continue with my line of questioning.

“And how many men are inside the room with him?”

“Just one other,” Boris says. “There are at least three stationed outside the door, however.”

“But he’s barricaded in there?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck,” I growl, moving past Boris and into the house.

Yulian and Lev follow behind me. I can tell they're both struggling to keep up with my train of thought.

"Anton," Lev hisses as we get to the front door, "what the fuck is going on?"

I nod to the guard at the door and he steps aside to let us pass. I put a finger over my lips to signal to everyone to be as quiet as possible.

I move towards the sitting room where the three guards have been stationed. They're relaxed, but the moment they see me, they stand at attention.

One is about to speak when I raise my hand and silence him. I signal to the men to surround the room and move on my command.

On the count of three.

One.

But I already know what we're going to find when we bust in there.

Two.

This is a precaution that we don't really need.

Three.

I kick down the door, but there's not so much as a flutter from the inside. We take no one by surprise.

Because both the men in the sitting room are dead.

"Fuck!" Lev spits.

I stand over Yaromir's body. He's lying a few feet away from the unlucky soldier he chose to keep him company. Their throats are similarly slit, eyes open, faces frozen in death shock.

"Fuck," Lev says again, circling the room like a caged animal.

"Explain yourselves!" Yulian yells at the men who were standing guard outside the room.

All three of them have paled. They're staring at the bodies of their brother and don't like it's a bad nightmare they hope to

wake up from.

“Answer me!” Yulian roars.

I hold my hand up again and Yulian backs off immediately, giving me the floor. I turn to the three guards, meeting each one of their gazes in turn.

One of the men steps forward. He’s trembling. “Don Stepanov, I swear to you on my life, no one walked in or out of this room. The door has been shut for half an hour.”

“So their murderer can walk through walls, is that what you’re saying?” Lev snarls.

“I think that’s exactly what she did,” I say grimly. Both Yulian and Lev turn to me in surprise. I explain, “Marina grew up in this house. She used to brag to me that she knew all its secrets. She also requested that their meeting take place in this exact room. She must have had a reason.”

“You think there’s a trap door in here?” Lev asks.

“Without a doubt. The men have been standing outside the door for half an hour. Which means, in that time, someone entered the room, killed both men, and left.”

“She could still be here in the building,” Yulian breathes.

I shake my head. “No. No, she left the moment she cut Yaromir’s throat.”

I sniff the air, taking in the faintest whiff of her favorite perfume. Chanel number five. Unforgettable. It still makes my blood run cold.

“Why would she have wanted to?” Lev asks. “She needed his help. Killing him only alienates more of the Ivanov men.”

My eyes narrow as I circle the room. “She knew it was a trap.”

“How could she have known?” Yulian asks. His eyes meet mine, and he says what I’ve suspected now for a while. “Fuck me, she has a mole on the inside.”

“A mole?” Lev growls. “No fucking way. Your men are loyal to you and you alone.”

“Clearly not,” Yulian hisses. “It makes sense. She’s been ahead of us every step of the way.”

“What other explanation is there?” I ask. “She always seems to know when we’re coming. We pick up a trail and the moment we close in, she disappears.”

“Accusing your own men of betrayal without any proof is not gonna go over well, Anton.”

I turn to Lev. “We have to weed out the mole somehow.”

“Leave that to me,” Yulian says. “I’ll smoke the fucker out.”

“I’ll help you,” Lev says.

Yulian looks annoyed. “You don’t trust me to do the job on my own, Lev?”

“I’m just saying you’re going to need all the help you can get.”

Yulian’s eyes narrow. “I don’t need you to hold my hand.”

“Stop it,” I growl. “We don’t have the time for a goddamn pissing contest. I want both of you on the job immediately. Lev, get back to the mansion. I want you to protect Jessa until I get home.”

He doesn’t argue. He just gives me a curt nod and disappears. Yulian stands there awkwardly, waiting for me to hand down his command.

“Yulian, I want you to take the men and do a complete sweep of the house. The Ivanov business ledgers will be in this building. Tear the place apart brick by brick if you have to. Look for anything locked with a combination lock.”

“What makes you think they’re behind combination locks?”

“Because Marina told me that a long time ago. Back when she trusted me.”

“Must have been a magical five minutes.”

I glare at him, not in the mood for jokes at this moment. I stare down at Yaromir’s body. His eyes are still wide, the pupils fully dilated in death. Something tells me that he pleaded for his life in his last few moments. A fool’s request. He knew

Marina well enough to know that nothing could move her once she'd set her sights on blood.

"She's not going to get anywhere near, Jessa, you know," Yulian says, breaking through my vengeful thoughts. "I'll make sure of that."

I look up at Yulian as the rage courses through my veins.

"I'll protect her, brother," he continues.

"Why does it sound like you think I can't?"

Yulian looks taken back by the question. "I don't think that."

"No? Then why assure me that you're going to protect my woman?"

His face hardens. But he doesn't look pissed. Just determined.

"Because we're brothers," he says. "We're family. And nothing will ever change that. Blood is thicker than water."

I meet his gaze and nod. "Blood is thicker than water."

JESSA

I meander through the broad corridors of Anton's mansion, trying to find a corner of the house that feels like home to me.

But everywhere I look, I see Marina.

Did she choose the paintings on the walls?

Did she walk barefoot through the rooms just to feel the plush carpet beneath her feet?

Did the vase on the table ever hold flowers Anton had bought for her?

Anton isn't the only one haunted by the ghost of his ex-wife. I get now why he scorns the idea of remarrying, and I can't even blame him for it. After tying himself to a nightmare like Marina, getting married again probably seems like an unnecessary risk at best—and a fucking curse at worst.

I step into another room. White carpet, a cream loveseat near the window, baby grand piano in gleaming white set in the center. More questions bubble up in my head: did she play this? Did he? It would seem strange for a man as violent as Anton to do something as gentle as playing music—but on the other hand, it would also seem right on brand.

But if that's the case, he hasn't played since I've known him.

Then it strikes me that I haven't cooked in a while. Is that what life will be like for me if I choose to stay? I'll slowly end up giving up all the things that make me who I am. I'll slowly morph into some muted, chained version of what Anton's world demands.

Or maybe I'll become what Marina became: cold and reserved, ambitious and power-hungry, jaded and lonely.

Neither one sounds particularly appealing.

I walk over to the piano and sit down on the cushioned bench. I gently touch one of the keys. Even though I can't play a lick, the sound moves me. It's pure. Just a single note ringing out in an empty room.

Then the door behind me opens.

I startle, my fingers jumping over the keys, creating a jarring clang that makes me wince.

The maid at the door winces. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I didn't mean to scare you."

"Oh, it's okay," I say once my heartbeat has calmed back down. "It's easy to do these days. I was just in my own little world." I notice the broom in her hand. "Were you about to come in and clean?"

"Yes, but I can come back later."

"No, no," I say quickly. "Please come in. Don't let me stop you."

The truth is I've had enough of solitude. My fears only grow louder and more consuming when I have no one else to talk to. Trapped in your own head is a dangerous place to be.

I keep reaching for my phone to call Chris—and then I remember he is the prisoner of a mad woman, and the cycle of loneliness begins again.

"Are you sure, ma'am?" the maid asks. She's tan and petite. Her eyes are a striking hazel brown and her smile is soft, if somewhat self-conscious.

Most of the household staff keep to the shadows. I'm not sure if they're told to stay out of sight or not, but I don't want the woman to leave again.

"I'm sure. I wouldn't mind the company, to be honest. What's your name?"

"Lida," she says.

“That’s a nice name.”

“It was my grandmother’s.”

“Hey! I was named for my grandmother, too,” I say. “Her name was Jessalyn.”

“That’s lovely, ma’am,” she says quietly.

She looks distinctly uncomfortable. Instead of saying so, she just gives me an awkward smile and starts moving through the room, dusting with a feathered brush.

“Can I ask you something, Lida?”

“Of course, ma’am.” She seems unsure of whether she should look at me when she speaks or not.

“How long have you worked here?”

“Almost six years.”

“That’s a long time.”

“It was my first job. I never expected to be here so long. But it pays well and I actually enjoy it.” She flushes with color. “I mean... not that I didn’t expect to.”

I give her a reassuring smile. “It’s good that you’re happy here. I was just wondering... you must have known Don Anton’s ex-wife?”

Lida tenses immediately. “Yes, I knew her.”

“What was she like?”

Lida chews nervously on her lip as she busies herself picking things up and dusting around them. Almost like she wishes she could sweep this question under the rug, too.

I’m about to apologize for putting her on the spot when she starts talking. “I kept my distance,” she says in a soft voice. “I saw her with the other maids. I didn’t want to get on her bad side.”

“She was that bad?”

“She was scary,” Lida admits. “There was something about her... Well, sometimes, it seemed like she had two personalities. She could be sweet and welcoming one moment.

But in the next second, she turned dark. Bad things happened when she turned dark.”

A shiver runs down my spine. Of course I understand that—I experienced it first-hand.

“Were you ever in the room when that happened?” I press.

“Only once,” Lida admits. “Don Anton was hosting a cocktail party. Ms. Marina came down in the most gorgeous dress I’d ever seen. It looked like it was made of pearls. She was stunning, and I wasn’t the only one who thought so. She charmed the entire room. She was just so vibrant and lovely.”

“And something changed?” I guess.

She nods. “There was this other girl there. She was young, probably nineteen or twenty. One of the other dons’ daughters. She kept looking at Don Anton.”

“Oh no.”

Lida nods, and I get the feeling she’s suppressed this conversation for so long that it took only the slightest little push to get her to talk.

“I saw her hug the girl goodbye,” Lida tells me. “I saw her face when she did it. Her smile dropped away and she looked...”

“Murderous?”

Lida nods. “Sometimes, the expression on her face still haunts my dreams.”

“I believe you,” I say. “At least that girl got away easy.”

Lida frowns, and I know instantly there’s more to the story. “I heard through the grapevine that the girl fell ill right after the cocktail party. Apparently, she suffered some sort of stroke.”

“What?”

Lida nods. “I can’t be sure it was her—”

“It was her,” I say instantly.

Lida shudders. “I did think I saw her slip something into the girl’s drink before she left. I’ve always convinced myself it

was just a hallucination, that I saw wrong. But deep down, I know that isn't true."

"Did you ever tell anyone?"

"No. She was still my don's wife," Lida says. "I didn't dare."

I nod. Nausea roils through me. But this time, I know it has nothing to do with my pregnancy.

"I'm glad that Ms. Marina is no longer here," Lida says, drawing herself up to her full height. "The whole staff is glad that you've replaced her."

I stop short, surprised by that statement. "I, um... I'm not replacing anyone, Lida."

She looks confused for a moment. "We know you're pregnant, ma'am. We were told you're moving in as well."

"Well, yes, I suppose—"

"That makes you the new mistress of the house."

I blink at her. "I'm no one's mistress."

Lida looks uncomfortable again. "I'm sorry if I've offended you, ma'am."

"No. No, of course not," I say quickly. "It's just strange being in this house. Sometimes, I feel like she's watching me."

Lida frowns. "This house is safe, ma'am. Don Anton made sure of that. I've never seen so much security here."

"Is that an inconvenience to you?" I ask, wondering if I've put everyone out.

She gives me a sympathetic smile. "No. I kind of like the extra security."

"Yeah?"

"Sometimes, I feel like she's watching me, too."

I feel another shiver run down my back. "I'm not the mistress of this house, Lida, and I never will be," I tell her. "But you can count me as a friend."

She smiles. "I appreciate that, ma'am."

“You really can call me Jessa, you know?”

“I’ll work on it.”

I give her a smile that comes easier than I expect. Then I excuse myself and head upstairs.

I walk slowly, taking my time as the light fades out of the sky. I expected Anton back at least an hour ago. It feels like I haven’t seen him in days.

What if something went wrong? What if Marina laid a trap for him? What if she killed him and she’s on her way here?

Horrifying scenarios play out in my head, new ones popping up before I can bat them away.

But Anton is stronger than she is. I repeat that to myself again and again. A mantra.

He’s stronger and smarter.

He’s going to corner her.

He’s going to end this.

I know the mansion is secure and that there are guards placed everywhere, but I keep seeing her shocking blue eyes in the tiniest refraction of every light. For the first time, I utilize the bolt on the bedroom door, sliding it into place.

And yet I still feel her presence behind me. I smell her perfume. I hear her laughter every time the wind whistles through the house.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I mutter, taking a deep breath.

I inhale deeply and push the air through my teeth. I breathe in and out like that for several minutes. It usually helps, but today, nothing can ease the tight crush of panic in my lungs.

I place my hand over my stomach and try singing to my baby. *“Hush, little baby, don’t you cry... Every little thing is gonna be alright...”*

I sit on the edge of the bed and stare through the window. The moon is visible in the darkening sky, stars beginning to show

themselves as darkness descends. I hope Anton comes home soon. I don't want to be alone in the dark tonight.

Then the hallway floor creaks.

I gasp and spin towards the door just as someone turns the handle. I get to my feet shakily. Do I stay and fight or run?

The lock clicks, and I'm trembling. Marina could have a key. She has access to everything somehow. There's no room secure enough to keep her out. Not a vault, not a fortress, not a —

"Jessa?"

I sag in relief at the sound of Anton's voice. Then the door opens, and his massive frame is standing in the threshold.

"Anton," I sob, pressing a hand to my thundering heart.

"You locked the door."

I run right up to him and throw my arms around him. "Thank God it's you."

"Who else would it be?" he asks, kicking the door closed and walking me back to the bed. Even as we sit down, he holds me close. Which is fine with me because I don't want to let him go, either.

Now that he's here, I feel silly for thinking it was anyone other than him. But then again, all the bad things in the world seem further away when he's here. When I feel safe and protected.

His body stiffens a little. "You thought it was Marina."

"I was just being paranoid."

He tips my head back so that he can look at my face. "How long have you been holed up in here, scared of whoever's outside the door?"

"Uh, I'm not sure. I lost track of time." I check the clock in the corner and realize that I've been up here more than an hour. "A while," I add self-consciously.

He hoists me up higher so that I'm straddling his hips. My hands land on his neck and I stroke his shoulders gently. "I'm

glad you're back."

"Me, too."

"How did it go?"

I realize the moment the words are out of my mouth that it didn't go according to plan. It's written in his clenched teeth, his rigid posture. I run my fingers along his square, tense jaw.

I know already that she's still out there.

"You know what?" I say quickly. "I don't need to know. Not tonight. How about we just... be together?"

I feel guilty even saying it. She still has Chris. My best friend doesn't deserve to be caught in the middle of it.

But there's nothing that can be done about it tonight. In order for me not to completely crumble to pieces, I need to compartmentalize this situation. If I don't, it will rage out of control like a wildfire and destroy me.

Anton sighs. "That sounds good."

"Just promise me... we'll find Chris."

He nods. It's not a promise, not exactly, but I take it anyway.

I lean in and press my lips to his. He kisses me back hard and when we break away, my lips feel raw. "It's weird..."

"What is?"

"This feeling," I say. "Missing you."

He runs his hand down my left arm, watching the goosebumps erupt along my skin. "Do I make you nervous, Jessa?"

"Sometimes."

"Because you're scared of me?"

"No."

"Then why?"

His hand lands on mine and I turn mine over. He draws circles on my palm, but he keeps his eyes fixed on me.

"Because I care about you," I whisper. "Because I love you."

He doesn't react to that. His expression remains unchanged as he takes in my declaration. "Does that make you nervous?"

I want to kiss him again, but I also don't want to lose sight of his face for even a second. "It doesn't just make me nervous," I admit. "Loving you scares the hell out of me."

"I can understand that."

"I don't fit into your world, Anton," I say. "And you definitely don't fit into mine."

He shrugs. "Guess we'll have to create our own world, then."

He says it like it's easy. I raise my eyebrows, cautious and hopeful at the same time. "Do you mean that?"

"I don't say anything I don't mean."

"But Marina..."

With his free hand, he reaches up and cups the side of my neck. I feel warmth spread through my stomach. It's turning fast to desire.

Again, I feel guilty. It's not right that I should be able to feel all these good things when my best friend's life is in danger. And yet I can't stop the burn that pulsates through me.

"Marina will be handled."

"I don't want her to hurt you."

He scoffs instantly. "She won't ever get that chance."

"Anton—"

"Listen to me, *kotyonok*," he says softly, cutting me off. "I need you to breathe. And I need you to trust me."

"I do trust you. I just—"

He presses his lips against mine and I completely forget what I was about to say. For that moment, I fall into his lips and stay there for as long as I can.

"Then forget about Marina tonight," he says finally, drawing away. "It's just you and me right now."

“Can there be a you and me if there’s still a her?” I ask. “She’s your wife.”

“She’s nothing more than a nuisance. And she won’t be in my life for very much longer. As my wife, ex-wife, or anything in between. She won’t even be a memory. You are my everything now, Jessa. Everything in the past is irrelevant.”

I needed that reassurance, and I allow myself to bask in it for a moment. Then I lean my forehead against his and pray silently that this will end soon.

“I’ve got you.” Anton places his hand over my stomach. “Both of you.”

I sigh deeply. “I know that. We both do.”

ANTON

I leave Jessa wrapped in the sheets and wearing one of my old t-shirts. It's years old and threadbare, so I can see the swell of her breasts, the points of her nipples, and just like that, I'm hard again, even though we just fucked for the better part of two hours.

I lean in and kiss her forehead. She stirs, sighs, and then doesn't move again. I pull on a clean shirt and head downstairs to my office.

It's early. Too early. But I've already been up for almost an hour. I spent most of that time staring at Jessa, watching the flat plane of her stomach rise and fall.

In another month, she's going to start to show. That thought still baffles me. This life I never expected to have is right at my fingertips.

My office is empty when I walk in. I don't bother paging Yulian or Lev. I know they'll be here by five-thirty at the latest.

I've just poured myself a cup of coffee when Lev walks in ahead of schedule. He's got his own mug in hand.

"Morning," he says, sounding grumpier than usual.

"Talk to me."

"I checked with security. No one came within ten yards of this place the whole of yesterday. So she wasn't ever planning on making a move on the estate."

“I wouldn’t put anything past her.”

Lev nods. “Yulian?”

“He should be here by now.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Yulian says right then, rushing into the room and shutting the door. “Ran late, but I managed to get a hold of the security tape from the Ivanov estate.”

“You had that yesterday,” Lev says impatiently.

“Yeah, well, it was encrypted, wasn’t it?” Yulian snaps back. “But I cracked it, combed through the footage, and we have eyes inside the room now.” He pauses—whether because he’s out of breath or for dramatic effect, I’m not sure, and I wouldn’t put either one past him. Then he adds grimly, “It was her.”

Lev rolls his eyes. “Of course it was her. Who else could it have been?”

“Why is there a stick up your ass today?” Yulian growls.

“Maybe because we failed in our mission yesterday,” he retorts. “We were supposed to bury that bitch, but here we are, still plotting.”

“And why are you looking at me like it’s *my* fault we’re not standing around a grave right now?” Yulian demands.

“Enough!” I spit, standing up. “We don’t need infighting right now. Lev, cool off. Yulian, put the tape in. Let’s watch it.”

“Have you already seen the whole thing?” Lev asks my brother.

Yulian shakes his head. “No, just the first two minutes. Right when Marina enters the room. Then I stopped it and brought it right here to the two of you.”

Lev and I wait while Yulian queues up the tape. It snaps into life.

Drawing room in the Ivanov mansion. Yaromir is sitting on the sofa facing the door as though he expects her to walk through it at any moment. His lone guard is looming right behind him with his hand hovering on his gun holster.

“Watch the bookshelves behind them,” Yulian says.

But I’m already scanning the surrounding walls, looking for the secret door that let the killer in.

“Do you remember being in this room?” Yulian asks, throwing me a glance.

“We were in it yesterday.”

“I meant before that.”

“Should I?”

He nods. “It was the day that your engagement to Marina was decided.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You were there?”

“You don’t remember?”

“I think I mostly remember the sinking feeling that my life was over.”

“Now, hers is about to be,” Lev says grimly. “Maybe that means you’ll get yours back.”

“I’m counting on it,” I mutter—just as I see movement behind Yaromir and his man.

One shelf of the bookcase swings open. It’s slow and silent, so it doesn’t attract the attention of the oblivious man positioned in front of it. Marina slips into the room stealthily, her blonde hair streaming down her back.

According to Jessa, she dyed it brunette for the purpose of her deception. It seems she’s gone back to her natural color. I despise that. It feels wrong for the two of them to share anything, even just a single feature.

I can see her face clearly. Venom surges through me.

Those vicious eyes are bright with bloodlust. Her smile, beautiful under different lights, is an incredulous sneer here.

Lev seems to be thinking the same thing. “Hasn’t changed a bit, has she?”

She creeps towards the bodyguard. I see the glint of silver just before she strikes. The guard senses something at the last

moment, but it's too late to do anything except turn and see the face of his murderer.

She slices her knife across his throat. He hits the ground, alerting Yaromir to another presence in the room.

Yaromir jumps up to face her. Even in the video, I see the color drain out of him. His hand moves to his weapon, but she stops him by turning her own gun on him.

"That's enough, cousin," she says.

Yulian turns up the volume. I still have to strain my ears to hear them.

"Marina," says Yaromir warily.

"I ask you for a meeting and you deck the halls of my father's estates with men," she says, shaking her head in disgust. "Still as scared as ever, I see."

"I'm not scared," he protests. But the tremor in his voice betrays him.

"Fucking pathetic," Yulian growls.

"No?" Marina asks in the footage. "Then why bring out all the guns for a simple meet-up? I'm just one little woman."

"A woman who just murdered my man in cold blood."

She raises her eyebrows, looking amused. "Do you expect something different from me?" she asks. "The men in this family have always killed without conscience. Why am I expected to do any differently?"

"How did you get in here?" he croaks.

"I have my ways," she says. "I grew up in this house, Yaromir. I know all its secrets. And if you so much as think about calling on your men, I will pull this trigger and end you right now. You're going to die anyway, but if you cooperate, it will be much less painful. Understood?"

He nods. She gives him a sweet smile and walks forward, keeping her gun raised the whole time. I notice the knife she used to kill the guard dangling from the waistband of her pants. Blood drips from the blade. Yaromir seems to be

preoccupied with the crimson drops landing on the white carpet under their feet.

“Oops,” Marina says, noticing the same thing. “I’m making a mess. How rude of me.”

“What do you want, Marina?” Yaromir asks.

“The question is, what do *you* want, Yaromir?” she asks, twisting the question around on him. “I’ve risen from the dead to come and meet you, and this is how you welcome me?”

“Why fake your own death?”

She sighs. “If you haven’t figured that part out already, then I’m not going to help you. You always were a little slow in the head.”

“He’s on his way, you know,” Yaromir says foolishly.

“Fucker,” Lev growls. “He should have kept her talking.”

Marina looks perfectly at ease. Not a hair out of place. “You think I don’t know that he’s got you eating out of the palm of his hand? I’m not just a pretty face, Yaromir.”

“What do you want?” he asks again.

She smiles. The effect is chilling. It would be upsetting for even the bravest of men. For Yaromir, it’s overwhelming. He seems to wither on the spot, folding in on himself.

“I want what’s mine,” she says simply.

“Your father handed the reins of the Ivanov Bratva to me.”

“Because he thought I was dead.”

“Exactly,” Yaromir says. “He thought you were dead. Why would you let him think that?”

She rolls her eyes. “Why do you think? My father loved me to death, but he was too much of a traditionalist to give me his Bratva. He wanted me to marry for it. So I did.”

“You had the Ivanovs and the Stepanovs,” Yaromir points out.

She scoffs. “If you believe that, then you’re an even bigger fool than I thought you were. Do you really think Anton gave

me any power at all? Half his strength came from me, but he wanted me on the sidelines.”

I heard versions of this sob story for years while we were married. I’m almost bored hearing it again.

“If Daddy had known I was alive, he would have told Anton. They would have tried to bring me to heel. But I’m no one’s bitch. You’d do well to remember that, Yaromir.” He takes a step back and she raises her gun higher. “Another move and I blow your head clean off.”

“You’ll give yourself away.”

“But you’ll be lying on the floor with your brains gushing out. So what does it matter to you?”

He cringes away from her, but his feet stay rooted in place. She gives him an approving smile. “My father must have really been desperate for an heir to hand the Bratva over to you.”

“I’m his last surviving heir.”

“Heir?” she repeats scornfully. “No, you’re no heir. You’re not even Bratva. Not for the first time, Daddy made a mistake.”

Yaromir tries to stand tall. “I may not be as ruthless or as brutal as you or Anton, but I have the head for this.”

She laughs softly. “What’s the point of having the head if it’s not firmly fixed on your shoulders? It’s much harder to think when your severed skull is rolling around on the floor, Yaromir.”

Marina bares her teeth. Just like that, she goes from composed to feral. The outside finally matches the inside.

I glance at Lev and Yulian. Both are transfixed by the scene playing out in front of us. Lev looks like he wants to reach into the screen to strangle Marina himself.

Yulian is enthralled. Like he doesn’t know what’s going to happen next, even though we saw the aftermath yesterday.

“I’m your cousin, Marina,” Yaromir whimpers. “Are you really capable of killing family?”

She looks surprised by the question. “I told Daddy once when he was questioning my direction for the Bratva: I’m capable of anything.”

Yaromir’s face goes blank for a moment. It’s the same expression he gave me at our last meeting. And I know exactly which memory he’s reliving.

“Aw, are you still sore about the girl?” Marina taunts.

“All these years, I knew you killed her,” he says softly. “But I never really understood why. She did nothing to hurt you. She was innocent.”

“No one is ever innocent, Yaromir.”

She presses the tip of the gun up under his chin. Yaromir closes his eyes and whimpers again.

“Do you remember that night when we were thirteen?” she asks. “The dinner party by the lake?”

It’s a tone I recognize well. It’s the tone she uses when she really wants a man to listen to her. Raspy, seductive, irresistible.

“Well,” she amends, “I was thirteen. You would have been a little older... Do you remember how wonderful that night was?”

“You killed her because you were jealous,” he interjects.

“I killed her because I wanted to,” she says simply. “Because it made me feel powerful. Because it made me feel *heard*.”

“You really are fucking crazy.”

Her eyes widen at the insult, and for an instant, I’m sure this is the moment where Yaromir takes his last breath.

But I’m wrong. I watch her hand twitch violently before she reins in the urge. She still has more to say, apparently.

“I gave you my virginity that night,” she continues as though he never interrupted her. “I rode you under the stars while you promised you’d never look at another woman again. Do you remember that, cousin?”

Yulian's eyes go wide and he turns to me, looking sick to his stomach.

I feel nothing. Incest is just another check on Marina's growing list of sins, barely worth a footnote. I'm honestly not even surprised.

"Do you remember, cousin?" Marina asks again, her voice low but sinister.

"I remember."

She nods. "Remember the promise you made me?"

"I remember everything," Yaromir whispers.

His body is beginning to slack, as though he knows what's about to happen and he's surrendering to it. He keeps glancing at the bodyguard bleeding out on the floor just behind the sofa. I wonder if he's imagining himself sprawled out in the same way.

"I didn't look at another girl for three years," he says—as if that will save him now.

"You should have spent the rest of your life pining for me."

He doesn't even look surprised anymore. "I wish Anton had killed you."

And in the end, that's what does it. Maybe my name was the final straw. Marina suppresses a scream, a shrill sound like nails on a chalkboard emanating from her like some unholy nightmare creature. Then her hand slashes through the air.

Yaromir's throat splits open. His eyes go wide and blood sprays out in a wide arc. Then he falls, his blood soaking into the white carpet. An ocean of red spreading and spreading and spreading.

Marina stands there, one hand holding the bloodied knife and the other hand holding the gun. She's shaking uncontrollably with rage.

She stands over Yaromir's body for a full minute before she turns and goes back the way she came. The hidden door swings shut behind her.

And then she's gone.

"Jesus Christ," Lev hisses.

Yulian pauses the video on the two dead bodies and turns to Lev and me. "That was... more intense than I was expecting."

"She wants the Bratva," Lev says. "The Bratvas, rather. Both of them."

"No," I say. "That's not all she wants. There's something else."

"Revenge," Yulian offers.

I give my brother a nod. "Correct. But she's not going to get any of it."

"The bigger question is, how the hell do we get our hands on her?" Lev says. "She's evaded us for a goddamn month now."

"I've questioned the men," Yulian says. "There doesn't seem to be a mole in the ranks, at least not that we can suss out."

"And yet..."

"Brother," Yulian says in a quiet voice, "I think we need to start talking to the staff. Think about it: they're the silent, invisible part of the house. Always around but never considered."

Lev looks mildly impressed as he turns his gaze on me. "He has a point."

"I've vetted each and every member of my staff," I snap. "None of them can be the mole."

"We need to be doubly sure, Anton," Lev says. "Yulian's logic is sound. And I don't think any of the men have betrayed their oath to the Bratva."

"Not one?"

"Not one," Lev says. "These are men who bear the mark and live or die by it. They'd never go against their own don. Especially not for that mad bitch."

"Alright then, question the staff," I say. "But be discreet. If anyone throws up suspicious vibes, bring them to me."

“Understood,” Lev says, getting to his feet. “I’ll get started now.”

“Check on our spies first,” I instruct him. “I want to see if anyone has heard anything from her.”

Yulian shakes his head. “Doubtful. Everyone still thinks she’s dead.”

“Well, it’s time to disabuse them of that notion.”

Yulian looks surprised. “You want to out her?”

“Why not? We have nothing to lose.”

Yulian nods. “I’ll make sure it’s done.”

“Good.”

Lev heads out, but Yulian lingers for a moment. He sits opposite me, his shoulders squared and his body language tense. “This may get a lot messier,” he says, as though he needs to prepare me.

“I’m counting on it.”

He nods solemnly. “Leave it to me, *sobrat*.”

“Leave it to you?”

“I’m only thinking of Jessa,” he says. “If you die, her world ends. If I die, no one will mourn me.”

I shake my head. “You’re wrong about that.”

Yulian looks sad for a moment. He puts his hand on my shoulder and nods. “Thank you, brother.”

“Go now,” I say. “Be my right hand.”

“I will. Always.”

JESSA

There's a swell.

It's small but indisputable. I run my hand over my tiny baby bump, imagining the life growing inside me. Is it a boy or a girl? Both are equally strange and awe-inspiring. It makes my head hurt to think about it, so I just imagine a sweet little creature that is part me and part him.

Anton was already gone when I woke up this morning. I took an extra-long bath and slipped on black leggings, but before I could pull on my cashmere sweater, I paused in front of the mirror to examine myself from the side.

The door opens as I'm caressing my belly. I try to pull on my sweater fast but I know he's already seen me. His eyes go wide. I've never seen Anton look awestruck before.

"It's really happening," he murmurs.

I laugh. "Doesn't feel real, does it?"

"Not until just now."

He moves forward and I notice the files he's carrying under one arm.

"Is that about Chris? Is he okay? Have you heard anything?"

"We're following a couple of leads as we speak," he assures me. "We're closing in."

"On Marina or Chris?"

"We find one, we find the other," Anton says confidently.

“It’s been two days, Anton,” I remind him. “His parents must be worried sick.”

“They haven’t filed a missing persons report,” Anton says. “We’ve been keeping tabs on the situation. They seem to be going about with their lives as usual.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that Marina doesn’t want the publicity from an abduction report. So she’s explained away his absence to his parents.”

“How?”

“The same way I got your location in England,” he says.

And that’s when it strikes me. “You mean she’s using his phone to send them messages.”

“That’s my best guess.”

I shake my head. “Okay. Okay. Well, do you think that means he’s alive or dead?”

I don’t actually want to know his answer. There is a peace in not knowing. A real benefit to existing in the liminal space.

“Alive,” Anton says decisively.

“Are you just saying that to make me feel better?”

“No. She took him as leverage, Jessa. She’s not going to fuck with him before he can be of use to her.”

I nod, feeling lightheaded all of the sudden. He takes my hand and leads me to the sofa.

“Sit,” he commands. I do what he says without a second thought.

“Here.” He hands me a file.

“Do I want to see what’s in here?”

“I think it might be a nice distraction,” he says.

I frown. “A distraction?”

“Go on.”

So I open the file, expecting yet another devastating blow. Planning for a new fracture to appear throughout my life, an earthquake threatening to submerge the little island of safety I’ve scabbled together for myself.

Instead, I found myself looking at a house listing. “House” doesn’t really do it justice, though. These are *mansions*. Castles. The dossier contains five in total, each with huge glossy panoramas of gorgeous rooms and endless gardens.

Slowly, I look up at Anton. “What is this?”

“A change,” he says simply.

I try to understand it for a few more seconds and then give up. “You’re gonna have to walk me through this.”

“You’re not comfortable in this house, Jessa,” he explains. “Last night, I walked in here to find you shaking in your fucking socks. That’s not what I want for you when I’m away.”

“It’s just because of everything that’s going on right now.”

“Bullshit. It’s because you look around this place and see Marina in every wall.”

He’s not wrong. I open my mouth, then let it fall closed again.

Anton nods knowingly as my silence stretches. “I asked you to move in here with me. But that was the wrong choice.”

Despite the pages in my hand, my heart sinks at the words. He wants to move me into my own house. I’m going to live on my own with our baby. His mistress in every way now. He’ll stop by on weekends, maybe in the evenings, whenever he deigns to spare a minute with us.

I’ll be utterly alone.

“I shouldn’t have forced you to move in here,” he reiterates. “I should have asked you to move out of this house and into a new one with me.”

And just like that, my dashed hopes rally and soar even higher.
“Do you mean that?”

“What have I always told you?”

“That you never say anything you don’t mean.”

He smirks. “Glad to hear you listen from time to time.”

A smile spreads across my face, but I try to tamp it down. I need to be coolheaded and rational about this.

“Anton, this will be a huge expense.”

He waves away the concern. “It’s a drop in the bucket. I want a place that feels like home to the both of us. I’m not doing this just for you. Marina tainted so much of this house that I can still feel her presence here sometimes, too. I don’t need that shit anymore. It’s poison. We’re having this baby together and we both deserve a fresh start.”

I find myself pushing back tears. “Anton, I... I don’t know what to say.”

“You could say yes.”

I lean into his broad chest. I want to say that my home is right here in the circle of his arms. If it wasn’t the cheesy thing that’s ever been put to words, I might.

“Of course my answer is yes,” I murmur.

“Great. Then the only thing left to do is pick one,” he says.

I look at him incredulously. “Like it’s that easy?”

He smiles. “It’s only the place we’re going to raise our child. No pressure.”

“Gee, thanks for that.”

“Look through the binder. Anything that you want is what I want.”

I glance back down at all the binders in my hand. “Okay. Which one has the biggest kitchen?”

He smiles and flips to the third house. “This one. Biggest kitchen and second biggest pantry. I checked the square footage of both.”

“Sold.”

He nods. “Done.”

“Done?” I ask, not quite believing it. “Just like that?”

“Yes, *kotyonok*, just like that.”

“Dare I ask how much it costs?”

“Not important.”

He says it so casually, like money is no object. Which it probably isn't for him. But I still feel guilty. He's acting as though we're shopping for shoes and I picked a pair on the top shelf.

“Anton.”

I grab the binder and look through the pages, confident I'll find something about the price of the house. But as I comb through the pictures, I realize it's much more than just a house.

There is a twelve-car garage, a pool, a fully equipped gym, and eleven bedrooms, all of which is spread out on more than an acre of land.

It's not a house.

It's a *compound*.

Then I turn one more page, and a very, very large number pops out at me.

“Dear God!” I clasp, putting my hand up to my heart. “Anton, you can't spend that much.”

“Why not?” he asks. “I have the money. What good is it doing me sitting in some bank account, collecting dust?”

“I can't even imagine that much money. What it would even look like. Plus, it's a really expensive way to make me feel comfortable. We can just redecorate this house.”

“No,” he says firmly. “I'm buying the house.”

“Forty million dollars, Anton? You're out of your damn mind!”

He enfolds my hand in his. “She’s all over this place, Jessa,” he says softly. “I’ve purged the place of all her things, but her presence is still here. I want to be rid of it. I’m doing this for me just as much as I’m doing it for you.”

I stare at him, wondering if that’s true. Somehow, I don’t think so. He’s doing this for my benefit, because he cares. Because he loves me.

I fall a little more in love with him because of it.

“Thank you.”

He nods. “Let me go make the call.”

He gets up, but I grab his arm, forcing him to stay. He turns to me with raised eyebrows.

“You can make the call later,” I tell him. “I’ve got some business that needs taking care of first.”

Then I pull him towards me and part my legs, dragging him between them. I start to unbuckle his pants, maintaining eye contact with him the whole time.

His eyes darken as I slowly pull down his zipper and push his pants down his hips. I can feel him hardening as I reach inside his boxer briefs. I pull them down and his massive, gorgeous cock stands at attention.

I wrap my hand around his shaft as I lean forward and run my tongue over his tip. He gives a low growl that comes from somewhere deep inside and reverberates right through me.

His desire spurs me on. I haven’t felt like myself in so long, but desire for Anton is a part of me now. Feeling it now, aching for him now, reminds me who I am. What I want.

I open my mouth and take him inside. He’s big, so it takes me a moment to work myself around him. But I adjust fast, sucking on him while my right hand twists gently around his shaft.

The more comfortable I get, the easier it is to push my boundaries. I open my mouth a little wider with each stroke, taking him deeper and deeper inside my throat.

I can taste his salty precum, and it only makes me want him more. I suck hard until he groans with pleasure. Then I plant my hands on his hips and start moving in and out, picking up speed, fucking my mouth with him.

Anton wraps his hand around the back of my head, guiding me against him. His thighs tighten under my palms. I'd be content to take him this way, to finish him like this, but Anton pulls out at the last minute.

"Come in my mouth," I beg him, licking my bottom lip.

His eyes flash, but he shakes his head. "I love hearing you say that. But not today. Today, I want to feel all of you."

Then he grabs my hand and pulls me upright. He peels down the black tights I'm wearing until they're knotted around my ankles.

His huge hands squeeze my ass and I moan, loving the ways he and I seem to fit together.

When I'm naked, he takes a step back and looks at me. I avert my gaze self-consciously.

"Look at me, *kotyonok*," he commands.

I obey, meeting his eyes. And just like that, all of the self-consciousness fades away.

I can see his desire for me written plainly on his face. I recognize it because the same desire is burning in me.

There's nothing to be nervous about.

This is how it's supposed to feel.

Anton steps towards me and pushes me back on the bed. He rolls me with strong hands and curls his torso along my back, fitting his hard body against all my soft edges.

I can feel his cock between my cheeks. His hands run down my body, stopping to massage my breasts even as his cock slides up and down my ass.

"Anton," I moan. "Stop teasing me."

He laughs cruelly, then kisses my ear and moves down my neck, blazing a path with his lips as his fingers clamp down on my nipple. I cry out in pure lust.

“Anton!” I exclaim as I press my ass back against his erection.

This time, he moans, too. As though he can’t hold himself back any longer, he pushes his cock inside me. He fills me completely with one thrust and my vision blurs underneath a haze of pleasure.

“You feel so good,” he whispers, nuzzling against my shoulder.

I reach back and clasp his neck as he starts rocking against me. The position feels both erotic and intimate. Our bodies are glued together, our hips rolling in rhythm. I can feel his sweat slick against my back.

I arch my neck and his lips land right in the curve. He keeps massaging my breasts as he fucks me harder and harder.

I know he won’t come until I’ve gone first. I always start out caring more about his pleasure than mine. But somewhere in the middle, he makes me forget all my expectations.

Suddenly, I’m chasing an orgasm, oblivious to anything and anyone else in the world.

I can count the number of times I orgasmed with Dane on one hand. They were always hard-fought climaxes that depended on my contribution as much as his.

With Anton, however, I feel like I have no control. He’s driving my body and there’s nothing left for me to do but surrender.

Anton is breathing heavily in my ear, groaning with each hard thrust. “I want to take you in every conceivable position. Every way I can get you.”

I press my hips back, giving him more access to me, moaning as he enters me at a slightly different angle.

“Do it,” I gasp. “Show me.”

His hand wraps around my body and settles between my legs. As he enters me again from behind, he strokes my clit, driving me higher and higher.

“Come for me, Jessa,” he rasps.

“Touch me,” I say, even though Anton is already touching me everywhere. I’m a greedy little bitch for him and I want more, more, *more*. “Fuck me. Don’t stop. Don’t ever stop.”

He starts thrusting into me with a new determination. He slides his other hand over my chest and clasps the front of my throat. But I’m not afraid. I’m not worried.

I know Anton would never hurt me.

And with that thought, pleasure courses through me. I cry out as the orgasm takes hold. As my body clamps around Anton again and again.

Even as I fall apart, Anton doesn’t stop. He keeps slamming his hips against my ass. And seconds after my orgasm starts to unravel, I feel him release inside me with a roar.

I ride his length in long, lazy strokes, helping to bring him down.

Eventually, he slides out of me with a sigh and rolls onto his back. I twist around so that I can see him.

Fuck, he’s beautiful. Gorgeous, sculpted, unyielding. I drag a finger over his bottom lip and he sucks it into his mouth. His tongue flicks the end of my finger, reminding me of how much I want that mouth on my body.

Anton looks at me as if he can read every dirty thought going through my head. I’m about to lean in and kiss him, when I become aware of footsteps pounding down the hall.

Anton turns towards the door. “What’s going—”

“Anton!” someone yells, pounding on the door.

Anton gets out of bed and reaches for his boxer briefs. He pulls them on and heads straight for the door. I just barely manage to get my sweater on before he opens the door to Yulian.

His brother looks frantic. All he says is, "I found her."

ANTON

“Where?” I demand.

“One of my leads checked out,” Yulian says. “I planted one of my guys at The Looter. He’s been there posted up at the bar for the last couple of days. A few hours ago, he called to tell me that a woman came in earlier and asked about security.”

“She’s looking to hire mercenaries?” I ask.

“Yes. Apparently, she doesn’t have as many resources as we thought she did.”

“She has money, though.”

“Rodion would have set her up well,” Yulian agrees. “The point is, my man tailed her.”

“Do we have a location?”

“It’s a house in the middle of nowhere. Somewhere in the valley, removed from the suburbs, but close enough that she won’t draw attention to herself.”

“How do we know it’s really her and not just another lead that takes us to a dead end?”

“Because I followed my guy’s direction to the house,” Yulian explains. “I saw her myself.”

“You saw her?” I ask, watching my brother closely.

“With my own two eyes.” Yulian looks remarkably pleased with himself.

“Did she see you?”

“No, I made sure she didn’t.”

I hope Yulian is right about that. With Marina, there’s no way to know for sure.

“How many men does she have with her?”

“Not many,” Yulian says. “I counted ten on the property. There may have been more inside, though.”

I nod. “She’s keeping a low profile. That’s unlike her.”

“She has a plan,” Yulian says. “You’d have checked all the places she was likely to hide out.”

“Hm. Maybe. Something is not adding up about this.”

“What do you mean?” Yulian balks. “It all makes perfect sense. We have to go now.”

I consider that silently for a moment. My thoughts are whirling fast, too fast to vocalize.

Yulian is insistent, though. “Brother, we could lose her if we hesitate. I know you’re worried about leaving Jessa. If it makes you feel better, I will stay with her. I’ll protect her.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You’d do that?”

“I’m your right hand, aren’t I?”

Jessa steps to my side. She’s back in her sweater and black leggings. Her euphoric, post-coital expression has vanished.

“Did you see any sign of Chris?” she asks desperately.

Yulian’s expression clouds over a little. “She has him in the house.”

“You saw him?”

“Yes, partially. The room he’s being held in has a window. I caught a glimpse, I think.”

“So he’s alive?” Jessa asks.

He nods. “It looks like it. But I can’t be sure.”

“Yulian!”

He sighs. “The truth is, he was unconscious, Jessa. He’d been beaten. There was blood everywhere. I’m pretty sure he’s still alive, but we’ll have to get to him fast.”

Jessa grabs my arm immediately. “Anton! Please. We need to leave now. I’ll come with you.”

Protectiveness like a lion roars inside of me. I shake my head. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Fine,” she snaps. “Fine! I’ll stay. But you have to go now. You have to get him before it’s too late. Please, Anton.”

“I’m not leaving you here without real protection, Jessa.”

“I have real protection,” Jessa says, clasping my hand tightly. “Yulian just said he’d stay here with me.”

Yulian nods. “And I’ll keep my entire crew with me. These are all men I’ve vetted and trained myself. They’re the best. No one’s getting past them.”

I’d like to have more time to prepare, but Jessa is right—for this to work, we need to move now. And Yulian has a plan. It’s about time I trusted his instinct.

“Okay, let’s go,” I say, moving back into the room to retrieve my clothes. “Yulian, give the instructions to the men. And get Lev, too.”

He disappears instantly. Jessa just stands at the door, looking lost. I pull on my shirt and walk to her.

“You need to stay here,” I tell her. “In this room.”

She frowns. “The house is safe.”

“Stay in this room,” I repeat. “Bolt the door.”

“Won’t your brother be with me?”

“You don’t need Yulian to protect you, Jessa,” I tell her. “You’re strong enough to protect yourself.”

She smiles shyly. “You really think so?”

“I know so,” I say confidently. “And in case you need a little help, I’ll always have your back.”

I lead her to my bedside drawer and open it up. Inside sits a sleek dagger with an embellished hilt. Jessa sucks in a sharp breath.

“It looks purely decorative, but that blade is deadly. So handle it with care.”

“I won’t need to handle it at all,” she assures me.

“But you need to be ready to, just in case. I want you to feel safe.”

She smiles. “You have no idea how much that means to me.”

I take her hand and bring it to my lips. Then I nod towards the knife in the drawer. “Hold it.”

She seems uncertain, but she does as I say and picks up the blade. “It really is beautiful. And I’ve never said that about a weapon before.” She turns it in her hand, and I can tell when she sees the engraving. “You had this engraved?”

I nod. “Can you read it?”

She squints at the fine script that runs along the curved blade. “That... that’s my name.”

“It’s a gift.”

“Most girls prefer flowers,” she laughs. “But this is better. Thank you, Anton.” She sounds so genuine that it makes my heart ache with love for her.

“I hope you never have to use it,” I tell her somberly. “But if the moment comes, don’t hesitate. You understand me?”

She looks uneasy for a moment, but then I see her expression turn to resolve. Pride fills my chest. My woman is a fucking warrior.

“I understand.”

I lean in and kiss her hard on the lips. Then I walk away, leaving her still holding the engraved dagger like it’s a little sliver of me.

I close the door behind me just as six of my men walk up. They’re our latest batch of recruits, and I know they’re of

particular pride to Yulian because he trained them himself.

“Don Anton,” the man at the head of the pack says, “Yulian wants us stationed outside Ms. Jessa’s door.”

I nod. “Good. Don’t let anyone get through unless it’s me.”

They give me their assurances and take up positions. I keep moving, feeling my body beginning to ignite with the rush of battle adrenaline.

When I get downstairs, Lev and Yulian are both waiting for me. “I’ve got our teams ready,” Lev informs me. “We have sixty men waiting.”

“And there’s going to be twenty more staying back to guard the house and protect Jessa,” Yulian adds.

I nod, turning to my brother. “I can have Lev stay with Jessa if you want to join me.”

He looks surprised by the offer, but then he shakes his head. “I appreciate that. But I actually want to be the one to stay here and protect Jessa.”

“You do?” Lev asks.

“She’s carrying my niece or nephew,” Yulian says, surprisingly emotional. “This is the most important responsibility I could hope for. I need to make sure she’s safe.”

There’s real sincerity in those words. I feel my gut twist for my brother. He’s a good man when he most needs to be.

But I have a plan in place now and I refuse to veer from it.

“Let’s move out then,” Lev says.

I wave him ahead. “You go. I have to speak to Yulian first.”

Lev nods and heads outside to rally the men. I turn to Yulian, realizing for the first time that this day will make or break us. It’s do or die.

It will be her blood on the floor...

Or it will be mine.

“Marina is no fool,” I tell Yulian. “It won’t be as simple as busting through the doors and killing her.”

“I know that. But whatever she’s got in store for you, you can take her. I know you can.”

“You sound confident.”

“I am,” Yulian says. “The sun will rise tomorrow on a fresh start.”

We clasp hands in the same way we used to do as boys. I take a moment to savor this fleeting feeling. I know I’ll have to hold onto it in the coming hours.

When we break apart, I see the similarities in our faces. My brother. My blood.

There is no going back now.

“Good luck, brother,” he says to me.

I wonder if he’s growing sentimental like I am. I see the flicker of something in his eyes, but in the next moment, it’s gone.

I clap him on the shoulder once more, then I join Lev and the soldiers outside.

“Lev,” I call, “you’re in this vehicle with me.”

Lev joins me in my jeep and we pull out, armed with the location in the valley that Yulian gave me.

I wait five minutes before I lean forward and speak into the comms system that links all twelve of the vehicles in our convoy.

“Men, pull to the side of the road.”

Lev looks at me, confused. “What are you doing?”

“We’re waiting.”

Lev looks around as though he’s expecting someone to jump out from between the trees. “Waiting for what?”

“For Marina.”

Lev frowns. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither did I,” I say. “But my gut has been trying to warn me for the last couple of days. I didn’t listen because it was all too

fucking unbelievable. But I realized I needed to trust my instincts.”

Lev glances at the men sitting in the backseat behind us. Then he pulls up the partition so we’re more or less alone.

“What aren’t you telling me, Anton?”

“I know her plan,” I say.

“How?”

“I know her,” I say simply. “I just never allow myself to get in her fucked-up headspace. But in order to catch her, that’s exactly what I needed to do.”

“So you don’t have any real proof of this plan,” Lev surmises. “This is all instinct?”

“My instincts haven’t failed me yet.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” he grumbles.

“Not for me.”

I open up the comms system again. “Fredrich, Henri? I want you two to take your teams ahead to the house. Keep me informed once you’ve neutralized the threat.”

“You’re sending Fredrich and Henri up there?” Lev asks.

“Yes.”

“That’s only ten men.”

“It’ll be enough,” I tell him.

“You’re underestimating her.”

“Trust me, I’m not.”

Lev groans in frustration. “Why do you have that look on your face?”

“What look?”

“The kind of look that suggests we’ve won the battle, but lost the war.”

“You’ll understand soon enough.”

“But you’re not going to tell me now?”

I press my lips together. “I don’t have the energy.”

“We are going to get her, Anton,” Lev says, misreading my contemplation. “She’s not going to get away this time.”

“I know.”

“Then make me believe it.”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “I need you to have my back, Lev. Today has more surprises in store for us.”

“I always have your back, Anton,” he says. “You know that.”

I nod. “Good.”

“Did we really need to pull over for this conversation?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, we did.”

He doesn’t ask me why. He just sits there with me, waiting for me to give him and the men the next command.

It’s how he’s one of the last people on this earth I can trust.

JESSA

I sit here in my bedroom—in *our* bedroom—running through all the different scenarios in my head and checking a clock repeatedly like my thoughts alone can control time and outcomes.

Have they arrived at Marina's location yet?

Have they found Chris?

Is he okay?

Is Anton okay?

I don't even for a moment entertain the thought that Anton might lose. He can't lose. The world might as well end if Anton loses. Because it would be the end for me. The end for our baby.

Marina wouldn't let me go, even if I did try to run. She'd follow me, hunt me down until she could kill me herself.

A shiver races down my spine, and I remind myself that Yulian is watching me. He'll protect me, but I just don't have the same confidence in him that I do in Anton.

There's something about Anton that calms me down. I can't look at him and not feel safe. Whole. Happy.

It's weird to think that I've arrived at this place. Especially considering how our first meeting ended. Just the thought of him made me fear for my life. Now, it feels like he's the whole point of my life.

A sound right outside my door makes me freeze. I stare at the door, waiting for something. I'm not sure what. When it doesn't come, I groan.

"Calm down, you crazy bitch," I mutter to myself. "The next few hours will be unbearable if you don't calm down. Relax."

But I might as well be talking to a brick wall for how well I listen to my own good advice. Anxiety and fear are warring for domination inside of me.

When the feeling doesn't subside, I decide to go and find Yulian. He may not be able to reassure me, but he can at least distract me. But when I try to open the door, I realize it's been locked.

From the outside.

Feeling the anxiety grow, I grab my phone and open up a new text thread with Yulian. *Yulian? What's going on? My door is locked.*

He responds immediately. *Stay calm okay?*

ME: *What do you mean stay calm? What's going on?*

YULIAN: *We've noticed someone trying to breach the walls on the south side of the estate. I've got the men down here with me. We're checking it out now.*

ME: *So... I'm here alone?*

YULIAN: *Of course not. The men are standing guard outside your door. But I wanted to lock you in just to be safe. If anything happens, call me. I'm literally a minute away.*

ME: *Who's trying to breach the south side?*

ME: *Yulian, who is it?*

ME: *Yulian?*

Nothing.

Something about this doesn't feel right. I've learned over the last few months that I can't trust my instincts, but that doesn't stop them from blazing to life now. Nothing feels right about

this. Anton just left and now, we have someone trying to breach the estate?

Someone. As if we don't know exactly who it is.

"It's a distraction," I whisper to myself.

Just then, I hear another sound outside my door. I grab my phone and start to call Yulian just as the door slams open.

I jolt back, dropping my phone. But before I can scramble to grab it, I look up at the person now standing in the doorway.

"Marina," I whisper.

"Come on now," she chides with a simpering smile. "I'll always be your Freya."

I take a step back and hit the bedside table. My phone is on the floor about a foot away. But Marina is holding a gun.

"Long time, Jessa," she says. "Have you missed me?"

She still talks like Freya, but she looks like Marina now. It's the weirdest mindfuck.

Her hair is a creamy blonde and her eyes are a pale, eerie blue that sets off shivers down my spine.

"Where's Yulian?" I ask. "What have you done with him?"

"Oh, don't you worry. I've taken care of him."

A sob catches in my throat. I know how close the two brothers are. I know that Anton can't afford to lose Yulian.

She looks around the room. "Are you enjoying your stay in my house? Are you enjoying my bed? I know you're certainly enjoying my husband."

I square my shoulders, refusing to let her intimidate me so easily. "He's not your husband anymore. And this is not your house."

"I suppose that's what all mistresses tell themselves."

It stings. And apparently, that's obvious, because she laughs. "What, is that word uncomfortable for you, Jessa? It shouldn't be. You earned the title."

“You faked your own death!” I remind her. “He thought he was a widower.”

“And I bet he was enthusiastic about fucking you,” she snarls through her smile. “He was always good in bed, I’ll give him that. Did he ever tell you how he used to fuck me?”

I want to scream. “Please don’t—”

“It was so fucking passionate. We used to bite and claw and try to tear each other apart before we made each other come. It was a bloody mess. God only knows how many sets of sheets we ruined.”

I stand there, listening unwillingly, with my heart beating hard against my chest. I’m terrified to even glance at my phone in case she decides to stomp on it or something. If I lose that, I truly have nothing.

“Every time we had sex, we were left with the scars of our lovemaking. He probably still has some of those marks.”

She says it like it’s a good thing. Like it’s a testament to their love.

“Sounds like you were at war even when you had sex.”

She shrugs. “That’s when you know it’s real.”

“Oh my God,” I whisper as the dots connect in my head. “That’s why...”

She narrows her eyes at me.

“You love him, don’t you?” I accuse.

She hesitates for a moment, and I can tell she doesn’t want to look weak. “I always loved him. But he didn’t want an equal in the relationship; he wanted a docile little lamb. And it looks like he got one. But I know him better than anyone else. He’ll be bored of you in two fucking seconds.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“The only reason you’re still here is because he managed to knock you up,” she snarls.

I can see the anger in her eyes. She hates the fact that I'm carrying his baby. Despises it. It burns her up like nothing else.

"But once that runt in your womb is gone," she continues, "he'll have no reason to keep you around."

"Other than the fact that he loves me," I say.

Her expression turns murderous. "Loves you?" she scoffs. "You stupid girl. You actually think someone like him could love someone like you? I was always meant to have his children. *Me*. No one else. Definitely not you."

"So that's your plan?" I ask. "You're going to kill me so you can resume your role as his wife? Do you really think he'll just go along with that?"

She raises her eyebrows. "You think that's my plan? Fuck, you really must think I'm crazy."

"You've made it easy to think that."

She shakes her head. "I always knew what I was doing, Jessa. Right from the beginning. I may have loved Anton, but he was too stubborn, too bullheaded to realize that I could be an asset to him. Right up to the end, I thought there was hope of changing him. That's what every girl wants, right? To reform the bad boy? But when he told me he was going to divorce me, I knew then that it was over between us. And I will beg no man to be with me."

"Then why all this?" I ask. "Was it just revenge?"

"Of course it was revenge. He married me because he wanted my father's Bratva. I was a means to an end."

"No, he didn't," I say. "He never wanted the Ivanovs. That was his father's idea. It was pushed on him. He never thought marrying you would be worth it."

"That's a lie."

"I heard it from Anton's own lips."

"Then he's lying to himself, too," she snaps. "He wanted to marry me. He wanted to fuck me from the moment he laid eyes on me. Most men do."

“Anton is not like most men,” I whisper.

Some of her confidence slips away. “Don’t act like you know him.”

“But I do know him,” I say, only now realizing how true it is.

Maybe we haven’t known each other long, but connections are formed on other things than time. We are drawn together by something greater than both of us. I know him, and he knows me.

And no matter what happens now, Marina can’t take that away.

The edge of the bedside table cuts into the back of my leg, and I remember with a jolt that the dagger Anton bought for me is sitting in the drawer. If I move fast enough, I may be able to arm myself.

Of course she’s still holding a gun. But at least I’m not as powerless as she thinks I am. I remember some of Anton’s last words to me before he left.

You’re strong enough to protect yourself.

It’s like he knew I’d need the encouragement in the moment that mattered most.

“So if you can’t have him, no one can, is that it?” I ask.

She smiles, a cruel slash of a smirk. “That’s about the gist of it. You wouldn’t have been able to make him happy, anyway. I was the perfect woman for him. He was just too proud to see that.”

“He’s been doing fine without you.”

Goading her is probably not the best idea, but my emotions are getting the better of me. Also, a part of me feels like keeping her talking is the best possible option right now.

Because even if I manage to get the dagger in my hand, I’m still not sure I’ll have the guts to use it.

She shakes her head. “You distracted him and now, he’s going to pay for that mistake.”

“What are you going to do?” I ask bluntly.

“I’m going to take his Bratva,” she says. “I’m going to run the Ivanov and Stepanov Bratvas simultaneously, and I’m going to do a better job than he ever did.”

“You really think his men will follow you?”

“I know they will.”

“Why?”

She gives me a secretive smile and turns towards the window. Her stance is casual now. She still has the gun in her hand, but she seems to have forgotten about it.

While her gaze is turned to the window, I slowly try and get the drawer open. I’m on pins and needles the entire time, praying the drawer doesn’t creak and give me away.

“You know, I wanted my father to be alive to see this,” she says contemplatively. “I wanted to sit him down and force him to look at what I could do.”

She sinks down on the window seat and pulls her legs up. For a moment, it feels like we’re just two friends hanging out and talking. That is, if you ignore the gun in her hand and the dagger I’m trying to retrieve.

While her gaze is averted, I grab the blade and manage to shove it into the back of my tights. It rests there, cold and sharp.

“Come over here, Jessa,” Marina says. “Let’s have a little chat. Woman to woman.”

Walking is uncomfortable with the blade tucked away, but it’s more of a mental block than anything else. I’m half-terrified the knife is going to fall out and cut me open. Thankfully, my leggings are binding enough that they hold the dagger in place.

All the same, I move slowly. I have to walk past my phone to get to the window seat, but there’s no way I can bend now with the dagger lodged where it is. Not that Marina would let me, anyway.

“Take a seat,” she commands when I reach her.

“I’ll stand.”

“Suit yourself. No beanbags here for you to sit on, right?” She cackles at her own joke, a callback to the night we met in her apartment. It occurs to me now that she probably wasn’t even drunk. Just faking to buy my confidence. Not that it matters, but still—there were signs.

I glance out the window and notice a handful of Anton’s men manning the south entrance into the estate. Everything looks calm and serene.

Clearly, Yulian isn’t aware that Marina is in here with me.

“You remember, before you knew my real name, we were friends, weren’t we, Jessa?”

“We were never real friends,” I say bitterly. “Freya was never real.”

She shakes her head like that disappoints her. “I did like you, Jessa. I’d still like you... if it weren’t for the fact that you fucked my husband.”

“He’s not your husband.”

“The only way he’ll stop being my husband is if I die or he does.”

“Anton’s a lot stronger than you are.”

She sighs like she’s bored. “Yes, people have been telling me that for most of my life. My father told me the same thing. It’s why I wanted to prove to him that I could do what he didn’t think was possible. That I could run both Bratvas. I could be the don of all dons. Isn’t that a great story?” she asks, turning her blue eyes on me. “A woman succeeding in a man’s world. It’s all about breaking glass ceilings, Jessa.”

“You’re trying to spin this as some sort of feminist triumph?” I ask. “You really are delusional.”

She shrugs. “I’ve proved countless men wrong over the years. Why not one more?”

I’m tired of listening to her psychotic aspirations. “Why did you take Chris?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she asks. “I knew you would insist that Anton come and rescue him.”

My stomach drops. “Where is he now?”

“Sitting alone in a house about twenty-five miles from here,” she says. “I injected him with quite a hefty dose of Zolpidem, though, so I’m not sure if he’s still breathing.”

I blanch as the blood in my veins turns to ice. *No, no, no, no...*

“What’s the point of killing him?” I rasp.

“He just annoyed me,” she snaps. “The way he looked at you, like you were something special... it was irritating.”

“Do you really expect to be the center of every man’s world?”

“I didn’t care about Chris, runty little man child that he was. I just wanted to make a point.”

“You really think you can threaten me into staying away from Anton?”

She smiles. “I told Chris you didn’t care enough about him to leave Anton. It’s why I upped the dosage before I injected him. It was a mercy killing.”

“You’re a raging psychopath.”

She shrugs. “By the end of the night, I’m going to be the most powerful woman in this city. Shame you won’t be alive to see it.”

“You’ll never succeed, Marina. He won’t let you.”

“He’ll live long enough to see me get everything I’ve ever wanted,” she says. “He’ll live long enough to see me take back my own Bratva and then take his for good measure. And then, he’ll have to die knowing that he could have been by my side—but he chose you instead.”

She leans in and gives me a sweet smile.

“I wonder if he’ll think you were worth it.”

JESSA

The knife is cutting into my back. I can feel the warm trickle of blood beading on my skin.

“It doesn’t have to be like this, Marina,” I say.

She sets the gun down at her side. Because apparently, we’re just two women having a conversation now. She doesn’t see me as a threat.

“If you stop this now, you might have a chance to live,” I add.

She scoffs. “You really don’t know shit about him, do you? He’d never let me live now. That’s why I know we’re doomed as a couple. I played my hand and he played his. There’s no going back now. And why would I want to? My plan is working out perfectly.”

“You’re not doing any of this alone, are you?”

“I’ve had support,” she says. “Every don needs her Vors.”

“How many men did you fuck to do this?” I snarl at her.

She smiles. “Just one.”

If that really is the truth, then she’s more talented than I’ve given her credit for. But it’s not like I can trust a single word that comes out of her mouth.

“How did you manage to get in here?”

She smiles. “Haven’t pieced it together yet, have you? I expected Anton to choose smarter, but it’s not like he was planning on keeping you around.”

“You don’t know anything about what he wants,” I grit out.

She raises her eyebrows and gives me a smile. “And I’ll bet you do?”

“I do, actually,” I say. “I know that he thinks I’m strong and capable and more than a match for you.”

“Is that what he told you?”

“It’s exactly what he told me,” I say. “And what he showed me. He wanted me to be protected, and he knew I’d be able to do it myself.”

In one fluid movement, I yank the knife out of my pants and slash my arm towards her. I move with all the confidence that Anton seemed sure I had.

But Marina anticipates the move. She lurches backward, falling off the window seat and dropping to the floor. But I feel some resistance against my blade.

When I look down, I realize that I’ve missed her neck entirely. But I managed to catch her face. Just barely. There’s a thin cut across her right cheek. The line bleeds red and gives her already sinister appearance an extra edge.

She looks furious. More so because her gun has fallen to the ground, inches from my feet. Instead of picking it up, I kick it hard to the side. It twirls under the bed and out of sight.

“You fucking bitch,” she snarls. “You’re going to regret that.”

“Do you like my knife?” I taunt, holding it up a little so that she can see the hilt and the blade. “Anton got it custom-made for me.”

“Don’t you fucking smile at me, you cunt,” she snarls. “That gift means nothing.”

“Then why do you look so threatened?”

Her lip curls. “I am going to carve out your tongue first,” she hisses at me. “I’ll use that precious dagger you’re holding. Then I’ll take your eyes. But don’t worry, you won’t miss a thing. I’ll make sure you’re alive through all of it.”

“You don’t think I’m going to fight you?” I ask. “Of the two of us, which one is bleeding?”

Apparently, she hasn’t realized yet that she’s cut. Her fingers tremble up to her cheek and she touches the blood there.

“Missed that, did you?”

“It’s the first and last mark you’ll ever leave on me.”

“Since you told me about your sex life, I think it’s only fair that I tell you about mine,” I say, tightening my grip on the dagger.

I have no intention of killing Marina. As crazy as she might be, I’m not about to cross that line, no matter the circumstances. But I need to hurt her badly enough that she backs off. And the only way I’ll do that is if she’s distracted.

“Anton is passionate,” I continue. “You were right about that. He bites and licks and sucks. He drives me wild. But no matter how vigorous the sex gets, he’s never left scars on me. Because he doesn’t want to hurt me.”

Suddenly, Marina arches up off the floor and jumps to her feet in one quick motion. Then she slides a knife out of her boot and points it at me.

“You still want to tell me about the sex you’re having with my husband?” she growls possessively.

I take one step back. But I know something now, something Anton taught me about myself: I’ll never back down.

“He kisses me softly, gently,” I continue. “He really does make love to me. Because when you love someone, that’s easy to do.”

“Stop talking now,” she warns.

I’m getting to her. I can see that it’s working. But I’m also getting a little nervous that I’ve bitten off more than I can chew. This woman has killed countless people. But me? I’m shaking just holding a dagger that I know can make people bleed.

I'm so deeply enmeshed in my own internal turmoil that I'm taken aback when she lunges at me, her eyes wide and her nostrils flared.

She screams, I scream, and I swipe my arm through the air as I tumble backwards.

She manages to avoid my knife and kicks me in the knee. I crumble to the floor instantly. Pain shoots through my leg, but I keep the dagger in my grasp.

If she gets her hands on it, I'm done for.

I swipe at her again, and she backs away. Her own penknife is no match for the gorgeous weapon I've got. But she's more skilled than I am. The weapon doesn't matter if she outmaneuvers me.

As she tries to come at me another way, I crawl backwards, putting as much distance between us as possible. And as luck would have it, I crawl right into my phone.

I manage to unlock it subtly with my thumb, but there's no way I can take my eyes off the murderous bitch in front of me.

"Don't run away, sweetheart," she says, her voice lilting almost like she's singing.

I crawl back some more, but this time, I take my phone with me. When I get close enough to the bed, I grab one of the fallen pillows and hurl it at her.

It hits her in the face, and I use that moment of distraction to get to my feet and vault over the bed. My knee complains, but I ignore the sting.

My only priority is getting out of this room as soon as possible.

But before I can make it to the door, Marina jumps in front of me with her knife raised. "You're not going anywhere, Jessa."

"Marina, please. I'm pregnant..."

"I know. That's exactly why you have to die."

I bite back a sob. "Don't do this."

“Don’t beg,” she says. “I’ll like you a lot better if you die gracefully.”

She’s about to take another stab at me when the door bursts open and Yulian rushes into the room.

His eyes are wide and slightly panicked. “Marina! Stop.”

Marina looks pissed off now. “Why the fuck are you here?”

I don’t know why she looks so damn surprised to see him, but it gives him the opportunity to walk right up to her and pluck the knife from her hand.

Did she think for a moment that it was Anton, like I did? In the heat of the moment, they look so much alike.

“Enough,” Yulian growls. “Leave her alone.”

“Like hell I will!” she screams as she starts banging her fists against his chest.

He grabs her arms and holds her down. “She’s fucking pregnant. You don’t want that unborn baby’s blood on your hands.”

“Then you don’t know me at all!” she screams. “I want to fucking bathe in her blood. Hers and the baby’s.”

“I will not let you hurt them!” Yulian roars.

He twists her around so that her back is to him. Her eyes fix on me, and I can see the determination there. She’s going to kill me or die trying.

She drives her elbow back into Yulian’s stomach.

“Fuck,” he grunts.

And his hold on her must slip because she launches herself at me. She grabs my face, her fingernails clawing into my skin.

I cry out. But almost as soon as the attack begins, it’s over. All at once, she’s ripped off me.

Her body hits the floor with a hard thud. I look up expecting to see Yulian, but instead, I see the only man I truly believe can end this.

“Anton.”

His eyes meet mine for only a moment before he turns to Marina. He gathers her up by her hair, and she screams as he forces her to her feet.

“What are you doing here?” I gasp. “You’re supposed to be rescuing Chris.”

“We secured Chris about a minute ago. I split up the convoy so we could kill two birds with one stone.”

Marina is clawing at Anton’s hand, trying to get him to loosen his hold on her hair, but he’s immovable.

“You’re done, Marina,” he growls. “Quit.”

He shoves her backwards hard. She hits the back wall and slides down to the ground. Her eyes turn to me immediately, but Anton steps between us.

“You’re not going to fucking touch her ever again.”

Her eyes bore into his face, searching for something she clearly doesn’t find. “You really think you’ll want this whore around in a year? In two years?”

“I’ll want her around forever.”

For the first time, my gaze leaves Marina’s face. As if he can feel my eyes on him, he turns and says to me, “You know that, right?”

Before I can answer, Marina screams and moves forward. I’m not even sure who she’s going for, but Anton is too damn fast. He turns and grabs her by the throat. Her eyes bulge as he shoves her up against the wall.

“No!” she screams, her voice rasping under the strength of Anton’s hold. “No...”

She claws at his wrist, but he doesn’t let her go until she starts to go limp. Only when all the fight is gone out does he release her, letting her drop to the floor in a whimpering puddle.

“Your men are dead, Marina,” Lev says as he joins us in the room. “There’s no one left to protect you.”

I expect her to plead with them, but she just laughs. “I will always have men in my corner. Always. They’ll protect me.”

“Not if I cut off the serpent’s head,” Anton says darkly.

“You don’t know who the serpent is,” she hisses.

Anton sighs. “Actually, I do.”

Lev grabs hold of Marina as more Stepanov men pour into the room. Then Anton turns his back on Marina and his eyes lock on Yulian.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself, brother?”

ANTON

Yulian's eyes widen, but before he can say anything, I rear back and slam my fist into my brother's face. He crumples to the ground.

Jessa looks dazed. She turns slowly and looks down at Yulian. Blood streams from both of his nostrils. I felt his nose crack under my fist. It sounded like the closing of a door.

"Yulian?" Jessa gasps. "It... it's not possible."

"I didn't suspect anything until a week ago. I knew there was a mole. I also knew that it was someone close to me. But when the checks on my staff came in spotless, I realized that I was giving the search too wide a berth. I needed to bring it in." I look from Yulian to Lev. "And my inner circle consists of exactly two people."

Lev turns to Yulian, his expression graver than I've ever seen it. "Is it true?"

Yulian tries to sit up, but his eyes are pinwheeling wildly in their sockets. When he doesn't answer, Lev turns to Marina.

"How the fuck did you manage to turn him?"

Her expression is slack with defeat, but the moment there are eyes on her, she forces the confidence back into place. "You really think it was hard? He was the second son. Always underestimated, always talked down to, always pushed around. I made him see his real worth. I made him realize that he didn't have to play second fiddle anymore. He could have everything. And I would be by his side for all of it."

“That’s how you planned on controlling both Bratvas,” Jessa whispers. “Once Anton was gone, Yulian would have been the natural heir.”

“The men would never have followed you,” Lev growls, turning back to Yulian. “Especially not with this bitch by your side.”

She struggles against Lev’s grip, but he’s holding her tight. She twists against his hold and winces in pain.

She deserves much, much worse.

“Someone get him up,” I say, gesturing to Yulian. “I want him to look me in the eye.”

Two of my men come forward and force Yulian up to his feet. They have to hold him in place because he doesn’t look steady. I can see the indigo bruise starting to form around his nose, rippling just beneath his eyes.

“Three decades you’ve been at my side,” I growl. “My friend, advisor, and Vor. My brother.”

His eyes are glazed over. He probably has a concussion. But he does his best to focus on my face.

“Brother—”

“You will address me formally from now on.”

He hesitates, as though he’s not sure if I’m serious or not.

“If you need to be punched in the face again,” I add, “I’m happy to oblige.”

“Don Stepanov,” he says bitterly. “I was protecting her.”

“Marina?”

“Jessa,” he says insistently. “I was going to protect her and the baby.”

“But you were going to kill me?”

“It was the only way forward,” Yulian sighs, his dark eyes dropping. He’s wracked with guilt, and yet he went through with Marina’s mad plan anyway. “If we kept you alive, you

would have come for me. For us. But Jessa and the child were innocent.”

“She would have killed them the first chance she got,” I spit.

“Like ten seconds ago!” Jessa says, jumping in. “When she almost killed me!”

“But she didn’t—because I stopped her,” Yulian argues.

“Give the boy a prize,” Lev scoffs viciously.

“You are my brother, Anton,” Yulian says with a wince. “And I have love for you. But you’re the one who’s always telling me to be ruthless when you want something.”

“Not against your own fucking blood!” Lev roars. “You broke the most sacred oath we make as a brotherhood. Except yours is a double betrayal, because he’s your blood brother as well as your don.”

“How could you do this, Yulian?” Jessa asks softly.

Her eyes bore into his. I can sense his will start to crumble under the weight of so many broken loyalties.

“Tell them, Yulian,” Marina says, bitterness coating her tone. “Just fucking tell them.”

“I love her,” he says, so quietly that I almost miss it.

We all spin wildly in place looking at each other for a moment before it clicks.

Lev speaks first. “Marina?” he exclaims, looking incredulous. “You love *Marina*? Are you fucking high?”

Marina’s expression turns into a sneer. “You see what you lost, Anton? Your brother saw what you didn’t.”

“My brother is a fool,” I tell her. “A naïve idiot who let himself be used. You don’t love him, Marina.”

“How can she love him?” Jessa asks. “When she’s only ever loved you.”

I stop short, turning to Jessa. “You’ve got that wrong—”

“No, I don’t,” she says with a straight face. “Why do you think she wanted revenge so badly, Anton? It was never about me.”

She started this way before I entered the picture. This was about punishing you for not loving her back.”

I turn to Marina and wait for her to deny it.

She doesn't.

“Jesus...”

She meets my gaze and I see the truth reflected in them. If that's how she loves, I wonder what she can do with hate.

I turn slowly to my brother. “You can't be that much of a fool that you didn't see this?”

Yulian only shrugs. “I've been second best to you my entire life. Every woman I've ever wanted has wanted you first. This wasn't going to stop me.”

“When did your ambition grow past your loyalty?” I ask.

“When you started treating me like I was your errand boy instead of your brother.”

“You wanted me to take you seriously?” I demand. “You should have worked to earn my respect. You spent your nights in whorehouses and casinos and your days sleeping off your hangovers. You stepped up only in the last year or two. And now, I guess I know why.”

“He just needed the right woman,” Marina interjects. “And he found her in me.”

I look at my brother and shake my head. “She would have used you and discarded you, Yulian. She would have gutted you like a fish long before she let you take charge.”

“We would have been equal partners,” Yulian says, clinging to the delusion.

“Is that what she told you?”

“It's the truth,” Marina says, and I can tell she really believes it. “I only ever wanted a partner, Anton.”

I scoff. “Very sensible. If only it came remotely close to reality.”

“You and I would have ruled the world together,” she snarls, trying to will me into believing the same thing.

“We would have killed each other long before that happened.”

She shakes her head. “You only say that because you were scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“Our passion. Our chemistry.”

“It was toxicity you’re speaking of, Marina,” I growl. “I never loved you. I married you because I had to. For the Bratva. For my father. But it is the decision I regret most in my life.”

Her eyes flash with anguish and frustration. She’s still looking for closure. I can see it in the way she’s looking at me and sneaking glances towards Jessa, as if even now, there’s a chance for her to make this end the way she wants it to.

She’s wrong. This ends only one way: mine.

“You faked your death to try turning the tide against me,” I say. “But as it so happens, your father was the only one who cared enough to hold me accountable. The rest of the underworld didn’t give a shit.”

“They will now.”

“Now?” I ask, pulling my gun out and raising it to her face. “Most of the underworld still believes you’re dead, remember? They won’t ever know otherwise.”

Her confidence is starting to wane. She’s looking nervous now. Terrified, really. I know Marina. I smell her fear.

Panic rising, she turns to Yulian. “My love, you can’t let them do this to me.”

Yulian just hangs his head in defeat. “It’s over now, Marina.”

“What? No! No, it isn’t over. We had a plan.”

“Plans don’t always work out, do they, Marina?” I ask. “We were supposed to be married. But you died and freed me. Now, I have a second chance with a woman I actually love.”

Jessa sucks in her breath, the same as Marina. I ignore the latter and look over to the woman who's carrying my child.

Our eyes lock and I give her a small smile. "Look away."

She fixes her eyes on the dagger I gifted her only hours ago and turns her back on Marina.

"No, no, you can't do this, Anton. I am still your wife," Marina begs.

"No, you're not. You're my brother's whore. You're the lying bitch who pinned your death on me. Since I'm being given the blame anyway, might as well make good on the accusation."

I cock my gun and she pushes back against the wall, trying to get away from me. But she can't run from the bullet.

I press the gun to her temple and pull the trigger.

The gunshot rings through the small room. Marina goes limp and hits the ground.

Silence, hot and thick, swallows us up. Lev rolls her body over with his foot so that her face can no longer be seen. He nods to the men standing behind him and two of them come forward to remove the corpse.

Jessa doesn't turn back around until I tell her the body is gone. When she does turn, she looks towards Yulian. I notice the lone tear running down her face.

"How could you?" she whispers to him.

He is standing between two of my men, but it's clear he doesn't really need to be restrained. He's lost his will to fight. He is a broken man.

"She made me think that this was the only way," he whispers in a hoarse croak.

"The only way to what?"

"To be something," Yulian says, glancing towards me. "Be someone."

"I trusted you more than anyone else in the world," I say. "Most people have to earn my trust. You were the one man

who didn't."

"I was never going to let Marina hurt Jessa or the baby. When I told you that I would protect them, I meant it. You could trust that."

Despite everything, I believe him.

But Marina? I'll never believe a goddamn word she ever said.

"She would never have allowed that."

He shakes his head vigorously. "I was planning on smuggling them out of the country and giving them a fresh start somewhere Marina would never be able to find them."

"There is no fresh start for me," Jessa says, moving to my side. "Not without Anton. Did you really think I would have accepted your help after you'd killed your own brother to seize power?"

"You wouldn't have had a choice," Yulian says.

Jessa shakes her head, looking as betrayed as I feel. "I liked you so much, Yulian."

He gives her a sad, haunted smile. "I liked you, too, Jessa. I would have protected you anyway, for my brother's sake. But it helped that I liked you."

"You have lost the right to call him your brother," Lev says, stepping forward.

"You may be right about that," Yulian says, and even though I didn't need the confirmation, I know now for sure that he's abandoned his ambitions. They've been bled out of him, leaving him pale and lifeless in their absence. "You were always the better brother to him, blood or not."

Then he glances up at me. "For what it's worth, I did have doubts."

"Based on what?"

"Love," he says simply. "I really do love you, brother. I just decided to be ruthless."

"Otets would have been proud."

Yulian scoffs. “The irony is, he wouldn’t have been. You were always his favorite son.”

“No, I was his heir. There’s a difference.”

“You still don’t get it...”

“Actually, I do. You were ignored and underestimated your whole life,” I say. “You had to follow his orders and then you had to follow mine. You wanted to be the don I was. And you lost track of what was really important. You lost track of Otets’s most absolute rule. Do you even remember what it was?”

Yulian’s shoulders hunch, the exact same way they used to when he was a boy and he was being reprimanded by our father.

“Never go against the family.”

“Never go against the family,” I repeat with a nod. “There have to be consequences now, Yulian.”

Jessa’s eyes dart to my face. She looks both alarmed and terrified. I swallow my own doubt, my own regret, and stare at my brother without reservation.

“All I ask is that it be quick,” Yulian says. “But I will understand if you can’t grant me that.”

“Anton,” Jessa gasps, moving forward to stand in front of me. “Please, he’s still your brother. Traitor or not, you can’t kill him.”

I almost smile at the stark contrast between my first wife and my future one.

One full of love. One incapable of it.

One full of life. One barren of it.

“I’m not going to kill him.”

Yulian looks far more surprised by that than Jessa. “You... you’re what?”

I take Jessa’s hand, but look up at my brother. “You will be taken to the airport. From there, you will be put on a plane that

will transport you to the motherland.”

“Russia...” Yulian breathes.

“You will be moved from the airport straight to White Swan.”

Yulian’s eyes go wide. “You’re putting me in a maximum security prison?”

“Ten years,” I intone. “That’s your sentence. At the end of those ten years, you will be released. A man free to live out the remainder of his life in Russia.”

Yulian understands immediately. “You’re exiling me.”

“If you step foot on American soil again, I will kill you, brother,” I say. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

I move forward and clasp his shoulders with both hands. He looks up, clearly startled at the gesture.

“I love you, too, Yulian,” I say. “That is the only reason you’re still breathing. But if you disobey my orders one more time, not even the walls of White Swan will protect you.”

He doesn’t say anything. He just looks at me one last time before my men drag him away.

The room clears out. I’m left standing there between Lev and Jessa. Lev looks pale and Jessa looks like she’s holding back sobs.

“Anton, what about Chris?”

“We have him,” I say. “He’s drugged and weak, but he’s alive. I’ve got a team of doctors tending to him as we speak.”

“So he’ll be okay?”

“He’s expected to make a full recovery.”

“Oh God,” she breathes, leaning forward for a moment. When she straightens back up, her eyes find me again. Her relief gives way to sadness. “I’m sorry, Anton.”

“Don’t be sorry. At the beginning of this, I said I had two people who comprised my inner circle. I still do.” I draw her

hand up to my lips and kiss it gently. “Now... let’s get out of this cursed fucking house.”

EPILOGUE: JESSA

It was Jessa's idea to give birth in our bedroom. She thought of it as an auspicious start to our baby's life. I didn't really care where she pushed the little one out, just so long as both of them were safe and healthy.

Dr. Mathers appears at the threshold of the bedroom. She gives the nurse some instructions and ducks back into the lavish suite.

"Hey," Lev says as he approaches me where I'm standing in the hallway. "Is it time yet?"

"Almost."

"Did she kick you out already?"

"I just needed to check on some shit before I knock off for the next few weeks."

"You're really taking time off?" Lev asks in amazement. "I said I wouldn't believe it 'til I see it, but damn, I'm seeing it."

I laugh. It's easier and easier to do that these days. "Things are stable at the moment. Old alliances have been established and the Ivanov Bratva is officially under my control. I think I deserve a little time off to spend with my family."

My family. The words still taste strange on my tongue. Bittersweet, really.

I still feel a pang every time I think about my brother. He's five and a half months into his sentence. I got monthly updates on him from the prison's warden. Apparently, he's established

himself within the prison. No one is messing with him anymore.

They'd certainly tried in the first few months, but I told the warden not to intervene. Yulian would have to fight his own battles from now on.

"Besides," I add, "I have you handling shit for me."

Lev looks less than enthusiastic. "You can make me your right hand, but that still doesn't make me the don. Our allies will want to see you."

"And for the important shit, I will be there," I assure him. "But I need to take this time. For myself and for Jessa. You are more than capable."

Lev nods. "I get that." He gives me a pat on the shoulder. "You'll let me know when the baby's here? I bought you a bunch of cigars for the occasion."

I chuckle. "I will. I better get back in there."

"You should also know, I've got five grand on it being a boy," Lev informs me.

I roll my eyes. "I guessed there were bets being placed when one of the men asked to see our sonogram."

"Care to toss some money in the pot?" Lev asks, wagging his brows.

I wave him away. "Maybe with the next one."

Lev snorts. "This one isn't out yet and you're already thinking about the next one?"

"There's a lot of rooms in this house, Lev. Might as well make use of them."

Lev chuckles. "Oh, by the way, the friend is here. The one with the sour face."

"I'll tell Jessa."

"I'm not sharing my cigars with him," Lev adds.

"You won't hear the end of it from Jessa," I warn him.

"She is oddly protective of the bastard."

“Leave Chris alone,” I say. “It can be your gift to Jessa.”

“She’ll call me cheap.”

“If the shoe fits,” I laugh.

“If you weren’t becoming a first-time father today, I’d tell you to fuck off.”

“Your restraint is admirable.”

He flips me off and mouths “*Fuck off*” anyway, and we both start laughing. Then Lev heads back downstairs and I go into our suite.

Despite the sweat clinging to her brow and the obvious discomfort she’s in, Jessa’s face brightens when she sees me.

“Anton,” she whimpers.

I move to her side and grab the damp towel on the table next to her to dab it across her forehead.

“Everything okay?” she asks.

“Only you would ask me that while you’re in labor.”

She smiles. “Well, is it?”

“Everything’s fine. I don’t want you to worry about any of that, okay? I’ve got it handled.”

“Okay,” she sighs.

I snort quietly. I trust her acceptance there about as far as I can throw her, but now is not the time to press the issue.

“How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” she admits. “The contractions are coming closer to... together now... fuck, owwww.”

“Move forward,” I instruct her. “Let me massage your back.”

I sit right behind her and she settles between my legs. I massage the bottom of her spine and she sighs with a wordless murmur.

She sags against me, and I think she’s asleep. Until the next contraction starts. Then she grabs my hand with freakish strength and groans.

Dr. Mathers comes towards us. “We’re almost there, Jessa. Are you ready to start pushing?”

“God, yes,” she says fervently. “I’m so done with being pregnant.”

“Let’s get this show on the road then,” Dr. Mathers says.

“Can Anton stay behind me?” she asks.

“If that’s where you want him to be, then yes.”

I wasn’t exactly prepared for this to happen right this second. But my eyes are locked on the doctor as she parts Jessa’s legs and then disappears between them.

“This is so fucking weird,” I mutter.

Jessa laughs, but her laughter dies on another contraction.

“Okay, Jessa, I’m gonna need you to push through the pain, got it?”

“Owww!”

“Jessa, screaming isn’t gonna help you. Just push.”

“I’ve got you,” I whisper in her ear.

She clenches. I can feel her entire body flex and heave. She screams through gritted teeth and Dr. Mathers resurfaces.

“Good, Jessa,” she says. “You’re doing well. On the next contraction, we’ll push again.”

Jessa takes long, slow breaths. In no time at all, another contraction takes hold of her. I twine my fingers through hers and squeeze as she pushes again.

“Excellent, Jessa,” Dr. Mathers says. “One more push. The baby is crowning now.”

Ninety seconds later, another contraction comes. Jessa screams through the final push. Then her screams die off and the room falls into silence.

Until it’s broken by a high-pitched wail.

Jessa trembles against me. I can’t see her face, but I know she’s crying, so I just wrap her up in my arms and let her

breathe through it.

“Is... is... the baby... okay?” she asks between gasps.

Dr. Mathers and two of the nurses circle around Jessa. I can't even see the baby.

“Let's just get the little one cleaned up for you,” one of the nurses says.

Jessa leans against my shoulder. “What do you think?” she whispers. “Boy or girl?”

“Lev has five grand that says it's a boy.”

Jessa's eyebrows shoot up on her forehead, but she's too exhausted to much more than limply swat at my chest.

“Here we go, Mom and Dad,” Dr. Mathers says, handing us a tiny little bundle. “It's time to meet your daughter.”

“Oh my God,” Jessa gasps. “A girl...”

I can practically feel the love in every word she utters. Her arms reach out and Dr. Mathers places the bundle in them.

And as Jessa pulls the soft green blanket to her chest, I see my daughter for the first time.

She's small and rosy-cheeked. Her eyes are closed, but she mewls every so often, clearly annoyed with being wrenched from her warm, dark home of the last nine months.

“Anton,” Jessa whispers, “are you seeing this?”

I smile and stroke her hair. “I'm seeing this.”

“She looks like you.”

“Please. She's beautiful. Clearly, she takes after you.”

Jessa gives a laugh that's half a sob. “I can't believe she's finally here. Our daughter.”

I hug Jessa as she hugs our girl. It feels like a full circle moment. This is the journey to fatherhood I was always meant to have. With the woman I was always meant to love.

Since the moment Marina's body was dumped in an unmarked grave in the middle of nowhere, I put the past in the rearview

mirror. I spare her a thought now—if only to remember how bad things once were and how wonderful they are now.

I kiss the back of Jessa's head. "We need to come up with a name."

"Right. We've been so busy moving in that I completely lost track of my name list."

"You have a name list?"

"No, that's the point," she laughs.

"Okay, well what are your suggestions?" I look down at my daughter and brush a finger across her cheek. She's so damn soft that I have to touch her again.

She smiles. "I don't care. I just want a name that suits her."

"Nikita?"

Jessa considers it for a moment. "Doesn't feel quite right."

"Polina?"

"Polina," Jessa repeats. "Hmm. Let's circle back to that one."

I chuckle. "Oksana?"

"Let's give the kid a chance, shall we?"

"Yana?"

"Yana," Jessa repeats with awe. I can hear in her tone that she likes the name right off the bat. "Do you know what it means?"

I smirk. "Ironically, it means 'gift from God.'"

"Why is that ironic?"

"Because I don't believe in God."

She kisses my jaw. "I do. Especially after the way you came into my life."

"So you believe in a God with a sense of humor? Because only a real sick bastard could've dreamed all this up."

"God made you, so I'd say he's hilarious."

It's my turn to roll my eyes and poke Jessa in the forehead. She laughs and cuddles up against our child.

"Is it Yana then?" I ask.

She smiles contentedly and looks down at the child in her arms. "What do you think, baby girl? Is that your name?"

She yawns and her big eyes blink open. It's just for a moment, but it's enough to see that her eyes are a clear, uninterrupted gray.

"Anton! She has your eyes."

"Yana," I whisper.

"I think it's her name," Jessa says. "Yana Stepanov. It's perfect."

Slowly, I remove myself from the position behind Jessa. I plump up the pillows behind her back and then reach for my coat hanging in the corner.

"What are you doing?" Jessa asks curiously.

I don't answer her. I just retrieve what I want from my coat pocket and walk back to her.

"I don't know. What about Jessa Stepanov? How does that sound?"

Jessa snorts. "I'm not naming her after me."

"No," I say gently. "Her name is Yana. I was thinking about you."

"What do you—"

I hold out the black velvet box and open it for her. At the sight of the champagne diamond nestled in the velvet folds, Jessa's mouth falls open.

"Anton..."

"Jessa Gilmore," I say, "will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Her eyes drift from the ring to me. "I... I didn't think you'd ever want to get married again. Not after... well, you know..."

“I’d do anything for you, Jessa. Anything to keep you safe. Anything to keep you happy.”

Her face lights up. “Of course I’ll become Mrs. Stepanov. Of course I’ll marry you.”

With our daughter nestled between us, I lean in and kiss Jessa soft and deep. It feels like the best way to seal this promise. The three of us here, together. The start of our little family.

Everything soft and pure and perfect.

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