



 *Satin*

SINNER

STEPANOV BRATVA BOOK ONE

NICOLE FOX

SATIN SINNER

STEPANOV BRATVA

BOOK 1

NICOLE FOX

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SATIN SINNER

STEPANOV BRATVA DUET BOOK 1

I walked in on my fiancé sleeping with my maid of honor...
On the day of our wedding.
I did what anyone would do:
Threw my ring in his face and found somewhere quiet to cry.
But then something else happened.
Something unexpected.
In that quiet place...
Someone found *me*.
Anton Stepanov is like something out of a dream.
Scratch that: out of a nightmare.
He's rich as sin, arrogant as heck, and way too handsome for his own good.
He's also way too handsome for mine.
So when he offers me his hand and a way out of the worst day of my life, I do the only thing I can do:
I say yes.
That's how I ended up on his yacht.
That's how I ended up in his bed.
That's how I ended up pregnant with his baby.
Satin Sinner is the first book in the Stepanov Bratva duet. Anton and Jessa's story concludes in the second book, Satin Princess.

JESSA

It's my wedding day, and my fiancé is nowhere to be found.

"Jessa, sit down. We're gonna find him, okay?"

My mom is trying to guide me towards a chair in the corner of the room. I can't move, though. My muscles are stiff and unresponsive. My brain is a whirling hurricane of thoughts that don't make sense.

"I can't sit down," I whisper.

"We'll find him, honey," my mom says. "He's probably just... I bet he's getting some air. We'll find him. Sit down."

I shove her hands away and gesture at the white wedding dress I'm wearing. "I can't sit down, Mom. This dress is already about to bust at the seams if I take too big an inhale. It needs to be intact for the pictures."

The pictures that my fiancé, Dane, is over twenty minutes late for.

"Where is he?" I snap. "He was here earlier."

I turn and find myself staring at the photographer. She's looking at me with the kind of expression that people reserve for sick puppies.

"He'll be here soon," I tell her. "He's never been good with time. I'll just... I'll just go find him now."

I brush past everyone and stride out of my dressing room. My mother doesn't stop me. In fact, I can feel her relief as I walk

away, even as she starts assigning various caterers and family friends to go check different corners of the venue.

But I know no one else will find Dane.

I know this because *I'm* going to find Dane.

And then I'm going to kill him.

My fiancé has never been the most serious man, but I always told myself that that is part of his charm. He is easygoing. He doesn't sweat the small stuff. Sometimes, he doesn't even sweat the big stuff.

But I never doubted that he would show up for me when it counted.

On our wedding day, for God's sake.

The yacht club is large enough and the dress restrictive enough that it takes me a full ten minutes to get to the second floor. From every window, the vastness of the ocean stares back at me.

Dane and I are supposed to be sailing out on that very ocean less than two hours from now, officially man and wife.

It's still going to happen, snaps a haughty voice in my head. *Everything will go the way you've always dreamed it will.*

Maybe it will, another, grimmer voice answers. *Or maybe not.*

I try door after door. Most of the rooms are empty. In one, I come across a cluster of older club members sipping whiskey and smoking cigars. They all give the panicked bride at their door a strange look.

I avoid their eyes and keep searching.

I reach the third and final floor of the pretentious club that Dane insisted we get married in. That's when I hear a laugh that makes me stop in my tracks.

Because I know that laugh.

All too well.

It's the laugh that accompanied me through college and my first job. A laugh that I have always associated with trust.

A trust that is now splintering away with each and every step I take.

I turn the corner and catch sight of the two of them through the narrow slit in the doorway. My fiancé and my maid of honor entangled together.

Dane is trying to pull his jacket back on, but she's pawing at him, pushing her breasts against his chest and pulling his attention from the open door.

"Salma, I'm late," he mutters. He sounds more amused than annoyed.

"I can't help it. You know I can't resist you in a suit," she says, her voice high-pitched and breathy. I've heard her sound like that hundreds of times before.

In bars and restaurants.

At the beginning of new relationships.

In the thick of burgeoning sexual chemistry.

I should crash through the door and break up whatever the hell is going on between them, but all I can think is, *How many times has Salma seen Dane in a suit?*

A dozen times? Maybe more? We've attended weddings together as a group. Salma invited us to her company's Christmas gala. My grandma's funeral.

Did they have sex each time? And if so, how the hell did I miss it?

Because standing here in my perfectly fitted white dress, I feel stupid. And I'm not a stupid person. I worked my whole life to avoid being associated with that word.

But somehow, it snuck up on me. While I was making plans for the future, picking out flowers, and choosing between the salmon or the veal.

"Kiss me again," Salma says in a loud whisper. A whisper that's begging to be heard, like she knows I'm marooned in this hallway, helpless and watching. "Better yet, fuck me again."

“I can’t, Sal. She’ll be waiting.”

She. I flinch at the way he throws the word out, so casual and unconcerned. No regard for the woman behind the pronoun.

But I lose focus on him as I wait for Salma’s response. Surely, this is all a sick joke. After all, it’s Salma we’re talking about, right?

The girl who held my hair back during the worst hangovers of my early twenties. The girl who encouraged me to be confident and fearless. The girl who sat up with me late at night and told me to pursue my dream of becoming a chef.

Is this that same girl? Or had I imagined her?

God, it’s amazing how quickly a life can fall apart.

“Will you think of me tonight?” Salma asks, her voice going low and raspy. “When you’re fucking her?”

“I always think of you.”

He laughs carelessly, but then he turns towards the door. The laughter dies on his tongue when he sees me.

Salma follows his gaze. Then, in perfect unison like some silly cartoon, their jaws drop.

She’s the first to speak. “Fuck,” she gasps.

I stare at both of them for a few moments. No one says a thing. A million different responses whirl sharply through my head, but I choose none of them. Silence says more than I ever could.

Instead, I turn and retrace my footsteps, storming back to the first floor. I hike up my ridiculous skirts as I practically sprint across the lobby and rush right out the massive doors of this awful, pretentious, nightmarish yacht club.

My right hand keeps tingling and shaking, but I dismiss it as I abandon my heels on the boardwalk and step out onto the soft sand of the beach.

I keep running and running until my breath comes in short, painful gasps. Then I stop and flop my ass down. As soon as I

do, I know that it will take a miracle to get me back on my feet again. Bury me here for all I care.

The sun is setting in the distance. In another life, I would have been on an obnoxiously large yacht, toasting to my new life with my new husband.

I finally look down at my shaking hand and realize that it's not shaking at all. I've been squeezing the bejeezus out of my phone this whole time and it's vibrating.

I turn it over. My mother's name is emblazoned on the screen for two seconds before the call cuts out. I check my notifications.

Seventeen missed calls.

Eleven from Dane. Three from my mother. One from my father.

I ignore all their names and pull up a number I haven't called in over five months. I know he knows what day it is. I also know that he'll pick up.

"Jessa."

"Chris," I whisper, hating the sob in my throat.

"Jessa," he says again. Softly. It's as though he knows exactly what's happened. But then, how could he?

"You were right about him," I admit. My voice wavers, but it doesn't crack. I won't let it.

He doesn't laud it over me. He doesn't berate me. He doesn't even seem to take pleasure in the fact that he was right. Most touching of all, he doesn't ask me any questions.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't want to be right."

"I know." And the truth is, I really do.

"Come see me," he says.

"I will. I just... need some time first."

"Take all the time you need," he says, the words soaked through with sincerity. "I'll be here."

I hang up and stare at the bright orb of fire in the distance. A thin stretch of storm clouds hangs over its face like a veil.

I should probably be crying, but I can't find the energy. I don't want to waste tears on either of them, anyway. They've stolen enough of my energy for one lifetime.

I don't see the stranger until his shadow looms over me, blocking the rest of the sun. A sin I'm willing to forgive because, for one insane moment, it feels like he's replaced it altogether.

It's not just his impossibly imposing size or his square jaw. It's not even his effortlessly tousled hair or his impossibly gray eyes.

It's the way he's looking at me.

There's no sympathy or pity there. Just mild curiosity, and even that doesn't quite capture it. There's arrogance in his face, the way you'd call a prince arrogant. A kind of certainty and calm that says nothing in this life can touch him.

"Should I keep walking?" he asks. "If you'd prefer to cry in peace, that is." His voice is deep. Chocolatey, velvety, but with an unmistakable rasp at the edges.

I frown. "Probably."

He smirks and pulls out a flask from the inside of his coat. "Here," he says, offering it to me. "This should help."

I don't think twice before accepting the flask and taking a big swig. I probably should have, though. The burning bite of whiskey scorches my throat on the way down.

"Jesus Christ," I gasp.

"It goes down easier the second time."

I meet his eyes for a moment and then raise the flask to my lips again. "Hm," I say, still cringing against the burn. I take a second sip. "You're right."

I hand back the flask. He accepts it without a word.

"You're not dressed for the beach," I point out. He's wearing a crisp button-down shirt with black pants and leather dress

shoes. All of it looks ridiculously expensive. But he doesn't seem to mind the fact that his feet are sinking into the sand.

He seems amused by that. "Neither are you."

I laugh. Somehow, I forgot about the wedding dress.

"It's a long story," I say. "Actually, it's not long at all. It's just sad."

"I'm the maker of sad stories."

That catches my attention, but I don't ask what he means. I just push myself clumsily to my feet. Mostly because my neck is hurting from craning to look up at him.

He's even more beautiful up close. The intense way he watches me is more than a little bit unnerving, which is probably why I start babbling.

"I've catered at least a dozen dinners at this stupid fucking club," I say. "Not sure I can stand to come back now."

"Admitting defeat is never the answer."

I raise my eyebrows. "You'd keep catering?"

"I'm the one who hires caterers, not the one who works for them."

"Are you offering me a job?" I joke bitterly.

He cocks his head to the side. "If you want it."

I frown when he blinks. He's not joking. "Excuse me?"

"You see that yacht over there by the far right dock?" he asks. I follow his pointing finger to see the biggest boat by far. It's a glistening hull of purest white, catching the setting sun and the faceted sapphire reflection of the water below.

"*The Medusa?*"

He nods. "She's mine. And I'm in need of a caterer."

I stare at him in shock. "You're serious?"

"Yes."

His gray eyes are hypnotic. A shiver passes through me, but I'm not sure if I'm hot or cold.

“When?” I manage to croak out. “When are you leaving?”
He smirks. “Right now.”

ANTON

“I don’t even know your name,” she says, looking at me sideways.

Her eyes are an unusual hazel, the light green and caramel brown mixing into a kind of beautiful golden honey.

Sobbing in the sand in a wedding dress is what caught my attention. But her eyes are what held it.

“Tell me yours and I might return the favor.”

“Jessa,” she tells me. “Jessa Gilmore.”

“Jessa,” I murmur. She tastes good on my lips. “I am Anton.”

If she notices that I’ve left out my last name, she ignores it and looks out toward *The Medusa*. My yacht is sitting pretty at the edge of the dock, ready to set sail.

“That’s a nice boat,” she remarks.

“Some men would take umbrage at that word.”

“Boat?” she asks.

I shake my head. “Nice.”

She smiles. Her eyes flash golden, the same shade as her hair.

“Not that you asked,” I continue, “but I pay my head chefs seven thousand dollars a night.”

Her jaw drops. “I must’ve misheard you.”

“Depends on what you heard.”

“Seven thousand dollars for *one night*?” she bleats. “Is that true or is this just pity?”

“I’m not the pitying kind, Jessa. I pay well, but I expect you to earn it.”

“I can cook,” she says, her tone growing proud and defensive.

“Excellent. The staff will already be on board,” I tell her. “The menu is more or less complete, but according to the ingredients at your disposal, you could change what you like.”

She takes that in. “If you have all of that ready, why don’t you already have a chef?”

“He canceled at the last moment,” I lie seamlessly. “Family emergency, apparently. The sous chef was going to take over, but the girl is not as experienced as I prefer.”

“You don’t know what kind of experience I have,” she points out.

“I have an instinct about these things.”

I can tell she wants to question my logic, or lack thereof. But she also doesn’t want to talk herself out of the possibility of escape.

She keeps looking back over her shoulder every few minutes like she’s expecting to see someone running after her.

“Clock’s ticking, Jessa,” I say softly. “You need to make up your mind. Coming or going?”

She chews at her bottom lip as she thinks. I take the opportunity to survey her without shame.

The neckline of her gown scoops down, revealing the tops of her generous breasts. The tight bodice tapers at her waist before flaring over her hips. She’s sin in white, with ocean foam and soft pearls of sand clinging to the hem. A fucking vision.

Over her shoulder, I notice my brother, Yulian, striding down the dock toward where we’re standing on the shore. He raises his eyebrows the moment he sees the woman at my side.

“You’re not going to ask me?” Jessa says abruptly.

“Ask you what?”

“About what happened,” she says, gesturing to her dress as though she’s asking for my opinion.

“Do you want me to?”

“I... I don’t know yet.”

“Then no, I’m not.” I start walking to the boat. After a moment, she follows. Yulian meets us halfway.

“Well, well, well, what have we here?” he asks in a cheesy cartoon villain voice.

Jessa looks between us in confusion before it clicks. We look too much alike to escape the obvious conclusion that we are, in fact, brothers.

“This is Yulian,” I tell her. “My right-hand man.”

“And brother,” Yulian adds.

“The only job he can’t be fired from.”

Yulian smirks but keeps his eyes on Jessa. “Don’t let the grumpy bastard fool you. He loves me.”

She smiles nervously, still glancing back and forth between the two of us. I understand her hesitancy—we’re not the most approachable duo.

I’m six-four and lean with muscle earned the hard way. Yulian is only two inches shorter, but he still spends hours in the gym to make up for the difference.

“Jessa is the new head chef for tonight,” I explain to him.

Yulian gives me an intrigued smile. “New head chef? Well, that’s something.”

“Is it a problem?” Jessa asks immediately. “Because if it is, I don’t need to be here.”

“No, no,” Yulian says in a hurry. “It’s not a problem at all. I’ll go and inform the staff now.”

Yulian retreats back up the dock and disappears into the yacht. I turn to Jessa and offer her a hand to help her transition from

boardwalk to boat. Her fingers tremble when they make contact with mine.

The moment we're onboard, she wrenches her hand back like I've burned her. I ignore it—for now.

"Come with me," I say, taking her below deck. "I'll find you something comfortable to wear for the night."

Her golden eyes scan the yacht, taking stock of everything as we walk. She looks impressed, but there's an air of caution about her, too. She's clearly never accepted an offer like this before.

Hell, I've never made an offer like this before.

I walk her to one of the bedrooms. Inside is a wardrobe filled with spare clothes.

"Jesus, it's even bigger than I thought," she mumbles.

"Even the smallest spaces can be manipulated to look big," I say.

"I'm a little sick of being manipulated today, actually," she replies bitterly.

I let her words hang in the air for a moment as I peruse the options hanging in the wardrobe. "I'm assuming you're talking about the man you were supposed to marry," I say casually, pulling out a simple white dress.

It activates a sense memory the moment I touch it. *The cotton between my fingers as I shove her away from me. The feeling of her pulse, warm and frantic, underneath my—*

No. I ruthlessly yank myself back to the present.

"Dane," Jessa fills in, distracting me. "That's my fiancé's name. Ex-fiancé, rather."

I push the white dress aside and opt for another, less practical option. One that doesn't trigger an unwanted rush of things I've spent a long time suppressing.

The blue slip dress in my hand will do just fine for this little *kotyonok*.

“I walked in on him with my maid of honor.”

I shake my head in disgust. “Could he get any more cliché?”

“Right? It would be laughable if it wasn’t so devastating.”

“Is it devastating, though?”

She seems confused by the question. “What do you mean? Of course it is. I was supposed to marry the man.”

“And now, you don’t have to spend the rest of your life tied to a cheater,” I point out. “Or with a shitty friend.”

“Yeah, but there’s an alternative scenario I thought I had locked up,” she says, her piercing eyes fixed on me now. “One where my fiancé isn’t a cheating bastard and my best friend isn’t a backstabbing bitch.”

“That’s not the reality you’re living, though. No matter how much you try to fight it.”

She sighs. “No, I suppose not.”

I hand her the blue dress. She accepts it mutely, but the moment she actually studies it, her eyebrows knit together.

“This is beautiful.”

Yeah. That was probably her one redeeming quality. The woman who bought this had good taste.

“It should fit. It’s just something to wear underneath your chef’s whites,” I tell her.

She eyes the dress skeptically. “Is it really okay if I wear this?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Doesn’t it belong to someone?”

I turn towards the door so that she won’t see the black expression that flickers across my face. “Not anymore.”

Then, without bothering to wait for an answer, I stride out of the room, leaving Jessa stranded behind me.



The moment I get above deck, Yulian is in my face, a shit-eating grin on his face. “She’s pretty.”

“Did you take care of Anatoly?” I ask.

Yulian smiles. “He just disembarked. He wasn’t too thrilled, but when I handed him the paycheck he didn’t earn, he got over it.”

“Money usually has that effect.”

“I’ve informed the kitchen staff of the change in command, too,” Yulian adds.

“Good.”

I walk towards the cockpit. Yulian trails behind me. “Can she even cook?”

“We’ll find out, won’t we?”

“Jesus, bro,” he says with a laugh. “This is a lot of effort to go to for a quick lay.”

“Who said anything about sex?” I ask.

He arches an eyebrow. “Why else would you offer that hot mess a job? Especially tonight when there’s business to be conducted. Anatoly may not be the prettiest to look at, but the man knows how to be discreet.”

“She’s here to cook,” I point out. “She doesn’t need to know anything more about what happens onboard.”

“She doesn’t look stupid, *sobrat*.”

No, she does not. I’ve noticed that, too.

“She’ll be below deck the whole time,” I say dismissively. “And at the end of the night—”

“Oh, you don’t need to tell me what’s going to happen at the end of the night.” Yulian interrupts me with a suggestive smile. “Just for the record, I don’t disapprove. It’s about time you quit moping around like a kicked dog and did something for yourself.”

I roll my eyes and push him aside. Laughing, he heads below deck to take care of the last minute chores before we push off.

When the captain comes down to ask me if we're ready, I give him the go-ahead.

The engines fire up. Water churns, white and relentless at the tail of the boat. I take a seat on the bow and gaze out at the horizon.

Darkness paints the sky as the sun disappears. In a little while, a smaller vessel will bring the Meninsky clan out to meet *The Medusa* in international waters. But until then, I've got two hours of sky and sea.

And an erection that I can't seem to get rid of.

JESSA

“He’s a looker, ain’t he?”

I give a start of surprise and turn to the petite brunette in the kitchen with me. I’ve already forgotten her name, but she’s looking at me with a little bit of amusement and a lot of understanding.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I answer lamely. It takes more willpower than I’d like to admit to keep from looking back towards the kitchen’s long rectangular windows. We’re below deck, but the windows open out across the floor of the yacht’s upper deck, enough for me to see glimpses of what—or rather, who—I’m trying not to gawk at.

“It’s okay,” she laughs, not buying my lies for a second. “I’ve been there myself. I don’t blame you for looking.”

“I’m just intrigued, is all,” I say as I blush hot. “He’s... strange.”

“That’s not the word I would use to describe him,” she says. She picks up a knife and starts dicing onions for the soup I’m preparing.

“What word would you use?”

“Dreamy,” she says with a giggle that betrays her age.

She can’t be more than twenty or twenty-one. Young enough that she can lust after Anton without stopping to consider whether that kind of thing is a good idea.

I smile. “I’m just here to cook.”

“And I’m here to chop vegetables and carry dishes,” she retorts. “But a little eye candy never hurt anyone.”

“Which one are you talking about?” another girl chimes in. “The hot younger brother or the even hotter older brother?”

She’s maybe a decade my senior. A chatty blonde with a mischievous smile and sharp eyes. I’ve forgotten her name, too. My brain is a little flustered right now, for more than one reason.

“You know Anton is more my type,” the brunette says. “He’s taller and he’s lean but still muscly, you know? Also, he’s got those gray eyes. To die for.”

The blonde snorts. “You’re a sucker for the whole ‘dark and broody’ thing.”

“And? What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s the quiet ones you’ve got to watch out for.”

I should probably remove myself from the chatter. Just find a quiet corner to put my head down and work. But the truth is that, deep down, another part of me wants to be here, soaking up every little tidbit I can about the broody older brother who seems to have every woman on land and sea alike eating out of the palm of his hand.

“Not necessarily,” I hear myself saying. “My fiancé wasn’t quiet at all. In fact, he was the life of the party. And he turned out to be a complete dirtbag.”

Their eyes fall on me and I wonder why I spoke at all.

“Well, it’s not, like, an absolute rule,” the blonde mumbles awkwardly.

The brunette is more direct. “What did he do?”

“He cheated,” I answer, mostly because I feel the need to say it out loud. “With my best friend. In fact, I’m pretty sure he’s been cheating consistently for as long as we’ve been together.”

“Jesus... when did you find out?”

“On my wedding day. Today.”

She winces. “Fuck. I’m so sorry. That’s rough.”

My eyes flit back to the rectangular windows. Anton is sitting in the same spot he’s been in all night. He’s got one leg cocked at an angle over his other knee, arms spread out over the white cushioned sofa.

Only a certain kind of man can look quite so relaxed and on guard at the same time. Like he’s fully aware that the entire world is at his fingertips for the taking.

“You deserve a medal for being here at all,” the blonde says.

But what she really means is, *What’s wrong with you?* She’s looking at me as though I have some sort of terminal illness.

“Not really. Cooking always calms me down. I feel positively peaceful right now.”

I notice the two women exchange a look, but their opinions barely touch me. No one can. I’m marooned on a desert island, emotionally-speaking.

Or at least, I’d like to be.

Probably why I’ve been ignoring my phone since the moment I set foot on *The Medusa*. It’s resting on the corner of the spice shelf over the stove. I’m vaguely aware of the display light flashing with new notifications. But I have no interest in checking any of them.

“I’m changing the main course up a bit,” I announce, taking advantage of their shock. “We’re still going to use the fish, but I’m going to pan fry instead of sous vide. We don’t have the time to waste.”

“Whatever you want, chef.”

“One more thing,” I say, unable to avoid it any longer. “Can you repeat your names for me again?”

“Molly,” the brunette says.

“Lisa,” answers the blonde.

Neither woman seems to take offense, thankfully.

I nod. “Lisa, I’m going to need you to watch the onions. Tell me when they turn golden brown. Molly, keep an eye on the sauce while I pinbone the fish.”

I leave them to their tasks and move around the kitchen, checking to make sure all three courses are moving along. I was told dinner needed to be served at eight o’clock and we’re already at half past seven, so I need to keep things moving.

Two of the other staff look up at me with interest—and some wariness mixed in, too—when I step over to their station.

“Can you chop those scallions a little finer, please?” I ask the skinny bald one.

“Yes, chef.”

“Andy, right?” I check.

“Anders.”

“Right, sorry. Anders.”

He points at the other man. “And this is Cory.”

I nod towards the plump, older man. He seems to prefer quiet while cooking. I’m of the same mind.

“Cory,” I say, “I’ve decided to make penne instead of ravioli. But don’t worry, we’re going to use the same dough.”

He nods deferentially and opens his mouth to say something when we hear footsteps on the gleaming mahogany stairs that lead down to the kitchen.

Yulian stoops down and peers through the door. His eyes find me instantly. “Chef Jessa, you’re wanted on the deck.”

I blink in surprise. “Me?”

He nods. “You.”

I want to refuse. There’s too much to do and there’s a lot of money on the line. But I don’t want to disappoint anyone, either. Least of all Anton.

Something tells me he’s not the kind of guy who likes being disappointed.

I move over to the stove and lift the lid on the stock pot. Steam pours out, followed by the delicious, brothy smell of the soup.

I turn down the fire and look at Molly. “Leave it to settle for ten minutes then ladle out two spoons into each soup bowl. Once those onions have caramelized, sprinkle one tablespoon over each of the soups. Got it?”

“Got it, chef,” she says with a crisp nod. But her eyes keep drifting to Yulian.

I don’t bother removing my chef’s whites as I head upstairs behind Yulian. “Was there something wrong with the canapes?” I ask, feeling suddenly nervous.

I’d meant to only send up two different kinds of canapes, but I ended up making four. There was so much fresh seafood and so many choices. I have a tendency to overdo it. Maybe I bit off more than I could chew and compromised the quality.

“The canapes?” Yulian asks, throwing an amused look over his shoulder. “Hardly. Those were the best damn things I’ve ever put in my mouth.”

“Oh. Right. Thanks.”

Feeling slightly more confident after that brazen praise, I let him lead me through a darkened nook before we finally resurface.

The ocean looks eerily calm as I step up into the fresh air. A flat plane of dark glass. But it’s not enough to hold my attention when I set eyes on Anton. He’s leaning against the railing of the yacht now, holding a thin flute of champagne.

“Thanks, Yulian,” Anton says, giving his brother a dismissive nod. “That’ll be all.”

“I’ll be below deck if you need anything,” Yulian says before immediately disappearing.

I look around, taking note of the fact that we seem to be alone. Then I remember the kitchen windows and look back.

Molly and Lisa are both openly staring at me through the slim pane of glass like we’re on a reality TV show. When I turn back to Anton, he gives me a lazy smile and starts walking

around to the other side of the yacht, away from the curious eyes that follow us.

“You have admirers below deck,” I tell him, mostly to break the silence.

“Does that include you?”

I blink. Cat’s got my tongue, apparently.

He saves me by laughing. “Your canapes were extraordinary, Jessa,” he says. “The best I’ve ever eaten.”

Warmth floods through my body instantly. “Thank you,” I mumble, eyes downcast.

“Your talents are wasted doing corporate catering and one-time gigs. You should be the head chef of your own restaurant.”

I rest my hand against the cool metal railing. “That’s the dream. But it’s not a realistic one, unfortunately.”

“Money problems?”

“Isn’t it always?”

“For some,” he says with a shrug of his shoulders. “Less so for others.” Then he offers me the flute of champagne in his hand. “Have a sip.”

“Oh, it’s fine, I—”

“Have a sip, Jessa.” It’s not a question.

Like I’m hypnotized—and hell, maybe I am—I find myself accepting the glass and placing my lips against the exact same spot his had rested only a few seconds ago.

I tilt it back. The rich liquid slides down my throat like silk.

“Whoa,” I breathe, staring at the glass in my hand.

“1959 Dom Perignon. Good, isn’t it?”

I nearly choke on my next breath. It takes everything I have not to bleat out, *You must be fucking joking*. Because if I remember my wines course from culinary school correctly, a 1959 Dom Perignon champagne runs a casual forty-something grand per bottle.

Who the hell is this guy?

Swallowing back my million and one questions, I just squeak, “Yeah. Incredible.”

He nods. It seems like he blinks less than most normal humans. I find myself wishing he’d do it more, if only to give me a break from the piercing intensity of his stormy gray eyes.

“It gets claustrophobic down there sometimes,” he remarks. “I thought you might need a little breather.”

“Do you do that for everyone on your payroll?” I ask.

“Just the ones that interest me.”

“Hate to disappoint, but I’m not that interesting,” I say, trying to cover my blush with another sip of the champagne.

“I disagree,” he says. “In fact, I might be almost as interested in you as you seem to be in me.”

This time, I do actually choke. “What makes you say that?” I ask when I regain my composure.

“For starters, you’ve spent most of the night thus far staring at me through the kitchen windows.”

At this point, there’s no way I can stop the embarrassed blush from ravaging my cheeks. I hand the champagne back to him only because I think I might break the glass if I hold on to it any longer.

“No, that was... That was just absent daydreaming.”

He smiles. “Why deny it, Jessa? Why deny yourself what you want?”

I look down and fidget. “I’m sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable.”

“You couldn’t if you tried,” he demurs. “But I should warn you: staring at me too long will get girls like you into trouble.”

My heart thunders frantically against my chest. “What kind of trouble?”

“The kind of trouble that involves moonlight and champagne,” he says with a smile that makes my insides clench. “The kind

that swallows you up before you even know it's happening.”

He dangles his hand over the edge of the yacht. I watch as he releases the half-empty flute. The glass falls into the ocean. A few thousand dollars' worth of champagne guzzled greedily by the black waves.

“Why did you do that?” I gasp.

He smiles. “I wanted my hands free.”

“For what?”

“For this.”

He turns and grabs me. And before I can make sense of what is happening, I'm being kissed.

Anton's hand falls to the small of my back and he pulls me against his body. His body is rock hard underneath the thin fabric between us.

And it's not the only part of him that's rock hard.

The cautious side of my brain starts blaring with a thousand alarm bells. But I can barely hear any of it over the scream of my desires. Desires I never even knew I had.

When his tongue slashes across my lower lip, I shudder and part my mouth for him.

When his hand lands between my legs, I melt instinctively.

He pulls back just enough so that he can speak. “Do you want me to stop, *kotyonok*?”

“No,” I say, the word wrenching itself breathlessly from my lips. “Never.”

JESSA

At some point, I'm kissing him back. The cold wind whips around us, but I'm on fire.

"Anyone could see," I whisper, looking around the bow of the yacht in alarm.

"Let them fucking see," he growls in my ear before his lips leave a scorching trail down my neck.

He rips open the jacket of my chef's whites and circles my right nipple through the flimsy material of the blue slip he dressed me in. I press my body closer into his warmth and am rewarded with the hardness of his cock against my thigh.

He twists me around suddenly so I'm facing the ocean. I have no choice but to grip the railings as his hands rip my pants down to my knees.

"You're a work of art, do you know that?"

"I bet you say that to every woman you seduce," I say breathlessly.

I can hear his chuckle in my ear. "Never out loud."

Then I feel his cock against my ass and I lose all sense of self-consciousness or wariness. Suddenly, it doesn't matter that we're out in the open and anyone can catch us.

It doesn't matter that I've known this man for less than twelve hours.

It doesn't even matter that I lost my fiancé and my best friend in one fell swoop today.

All that matters is the distraction he offers me and the intense pleasure that comes with it.

His hand slaps my ass cheek and I double over with a gasp, the cold metal railing biting into my stomach. I grip the railing and spread my legs.

“Eager, eager,” he whispers in my ear.

“Would you rather I tease you more?” I threaten with a laugh.

He nips at my neck. “Just walking around like you do is a tease.”

Then he pulls down my panties and I feel his cock against my bare ass. I hold my breath, wondering if this is going to be a decision I regret later.

Then I think about how this day started. And about how this day was supposed to end. I think about Dane and Salma.

And I realize there is nothing to regret.

“Fuck me, Anton,” I gasp. “Please... just fuck me.”

I’ve never asked a man to fuck me before. But I’ve also never had my fiancé cheat on the day of my wedding before.

It’s time for a change.

I deserve to have a man like Anton fuck the sadness right out of me. He seems inclined to agree.

He pushes into me a second later, and I gasp. It’s so different than it ever was with Dane. He’s so much bigger. He fills me up, knows exactly how to use the hammer between his legs.

“Fuck...” I moan.

“Breathe, *kotyonok*,” he croons in my ear. “It takes a moment to get used to.”

I bite down on the inside of my cheek as the pressure builds. He pushes deeper inside me and I scream. He wraps one arm around my waist and with his free hand, he massages my breasts.

He rocks against me gently, easing into me as he nips at my neck and ear. I wanted to be more of an active participant, but

the sensations coursing through my body are too overwhelming. I'm forced to stand there, bracing myself for the onslaught I know is coming.

Because I know instinctively that Anton is not the kind of man to go slow and gentle indefinitely.

It only takes seconds more for him to prove me right.

He pinches my nipples and starts thrusting into me harder. I cry out as he fills me, pushing me to the brink and then pulling me back just before I crash.

As he fucks me, his hand slides down my stomach and cups my pussy. He starts playing with my clit as he slams into me.

I can only stare up at the star-speckled sky as a delirious tear squeezes from the corner of my eye. I can't even wipe it away because I'm holding the railing for dear life.

Pleasure builds in my center, a raging inferno I can't control. I try to stave it off, try to swallow the scream that is rising in my throat. But I'm helpless against the force of it.

The orgasm roars through me, destroying everything in its path.

I've never had an orgasm so intense before. I'm so lost to the sensation that I don't even notice Anton is coming with me.

My body is still shaking and clenching when he slips out of me. My dress falls back down over my hips, giving me some small amount of modesty. I turn around slowly, but I make sure to keep a tight grip on the railing so I don't fall. My legs are pure jelly.

Anton gives me a knowing smile as he pulls his pants up, but I look down and catch sight of the massive cock between his legs.

"Jesus," I exclaim, unable to hold it in.

He laughs. "Why do you think I took you from behind? Women tend to get nervous."

Fresh tingles run up my spine, but I manage to hold off the blush. "Oh. Uh... thanks, I guess."

Chuckling, he gestures to the reclining chairs off in the corner of the yacht. “You need to sit down.”

“I really should be getting back.”

“Why?” he asks with a smirk. “The boss won’t mind.”

I bite my lower lip, realizing that for the first time in my life, I’d rather stay here than head back to the kitchens. And since it is a first, I decide to live in the moment. To savor this new feeling.

I walk over to him, embarrassed about the fact that my legs are still wobbly, and take the chair on the right. He sits down next to me, all confidence and ease.

I glance around the deck, realizing that my chef’s whites are on the wooden deck, flapping around in the wind.

“Well, that’s embarrassing.”

“Why?” he asks, looking genuinely curious.

I frown. “I’ve never... um... lost control like that. I’ve never done anything so impulsive or reckless in my life.”

One corner of his mouth goes up in a sexy smile. “Sounds like you haven’t been living at all.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“What would you say?”

I think about it for a moment. “I’ve been... responsible.”

“I rest my case.”

I snort with laughter and then instantly color with embarrassment at the less-than-ladylike sound. “I’m guessing you do that kind of thing often?”

“Fuck women on the bow of my yacht?”

I nod.

His answer doesn’t come as fast as I assumed it would. In fact, there’s a moment where his expression ripples. Is that anger I see? Or resentment?

Whatever it is, the emotion is negative. That much I'm certain of. It makes me doubly regretful for asking.

"I'm sorry," I say quickly. "It's none of my business."

He shrugs. "I know it's easy to assume things about me, but not every assumption is true."

I nod and drop the subject. When the silence stretches on, I start to feel like somehow I'm intruding on his space. Like the invitation he extended to me has now been rescinded.

"Should I go?"

"I don't see why you would."

I'm surprised by how relieved I feel when he says that. I lean back against my lounge chair and stare up at the stars. The wind off the water is biting, and I want to go retrieve my uniform. But I don't want to disturb the fragile sense of comfort that sits between us now.

"They'll be wondering where I am," I blurt out. "Everyone at the wedding, I mean."

"Probably," Anton says with a nod.

"I don't know how to deal with... everything."

"Then don't."

I turn to him. "What do you mean?"

"Why do you owe them anything?" he asks. "You're the hurt party in this. You don't owe anyone any explanations."

"Maybe not Dane and Salma. But what about everyone else?"

"Fuck everyone else."

I nod like that's something I could believe in, but in all honesty, it feels impossible. I try to imagine what my life would look like if I could think that way. If I could worry about myself and no one else. More and more, it seems like the right way to move through the world.

"Can I tell you something I've never told anyone before?"

He nods solemnly.

“My father cheated on my mother,” I say. “When I was fifteen. She stayed with him.”

He just looks at me, not judging, simply observing.

“I don’t know why I just told you that.”

“Maybe you’re trying to tell me that you didn’t want to be like your mother,” he suggests.

“I don’t,” I agree. “I just... I don’t want to make the same mistakes she did.”

“You didn’t make the mistake, Jessa,” he says confidently. “He did.”

“What about you?” I ask. “Do you make mistakes?”

Anton laughs. “Do I look like I ever do anything I don’t intend to do, Jessa?”

I blush. “No,” I say. “I guess not.”

There’s something about him that I can’t quite put my finger on. He’s confident and brash, though I can see the broodiness Molly mentioned, too. But up close, it’s clear that it goes deeper than that.

Anton isn’t just broody in, like, a James Dean or Adam Driver kind of way. It’s more. There’s a darkness inside him, vast and untouchable.

That terrifies me.

“Everyone in the kitchen will be wondering where I am,” I mention.

“Let them wonder.”

That seems to be his response to everything. Anton doesn’t owe anyone anything. It must be nice to feel so un-indebted.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Why did you stop to talk to me at the beach?” I ask.

He shrugs. “You intrigued me. It’s not every day you see a beautiful woman in a wedding dress sitting by the beach

looking completely miserable.”

All of that, and my mind catches on the word “*beautiful*.” “*Pitiful*” is more like it. For all I know, he’s reading off a script he’s used to scoop heartbroken brides off the beach again and again.

“Why did you offer me a job, then?” I ask. “You didn’t have to do that. You didn’t know anything about me.”

“I trust my instincts. They’re good. Usually.”

I stop short, taking note of the dry voice and dark expression with which he adds the last word. “Usually?”

He gives me a belated smile. “Sometimes, recklessness has consequences.”

I feel a little shiver run down my spine. This time, it has nothing to do with the cold. His words make me wonder.

Is he offering a lesson... or a warning?

ANTON

I can tell by the way Jessa is watching me that, this time, I'm the one who has intrigued her.

But she is so far from the world I occupy that it feels cruel to drag her into it. Bringing her on board tonight will have to be the extent of my self-indulgence.

"Have you ever been engaged?" she asks, fishing for more information. "Or married?"

"Once," I say without specifying which. "She's gone now."

"Gone?"

"She died. A few months ago."

"Oh," Jessa gasps. "I'm so sorry. How, uh... how did she pass?"

It's almost amusing how delicately she's trying to tiptoe around the subject. As if I'm not intimately familiar with death.

"She took her own life."

She pales. Her plump lips part. It's enough to make me hard all over again. "Oh God," she breathes. "I'm so sorry."

I wipe my face of any and all expression. "It is what it is."

"That must have been devastating."

I glance at her. "Do I look devastated?"

The question takes her back. Or maybe it's the coldness in my face when I say it. For a moment, I think I've succeeded in

frightening her.

Then she surprises me.

“You seem like the kind of man who doesn’t express your emotions no matter how deeply you feel them.”

I chuckle. “Interesting analysis.”

“Am I right?” she asks. Her golden eyes catch the moonlight as they turn to me.

“Trying to figure me out, are you?”

She nods. “I just want to know if you’re as scary as you seem.”

I smile. “Scarier.”

She considers that for a minute and then grins. She thinks I’m kidding.

If only she fucking knew.

“Would you beat up my fiancé if I asked nicely?”

I smirk in amusement. She’s flirting with me. “I’d beat up your fiancé even if you asked me not to. Simply for the pleasure of it.”

A little bubble of laughter escapes her lips, and I wonder if the two sips of champagne she had have somehow gone straight to her head.

“I have to stop saying that. *Fiancé*,” she says, wrinkling her nose. “He’s not my fiancé anymore. He’s my ex-fiancé.”

“Does he know that?”

“Well, he’d be a damn fool if he didn’t at this point.”

“Seems to me that’s exactly what he is.”

“I don’t know,” she replies, looking forlornly up at the cloudy sky. “It kinda feels like I’m the fool in this scenario.”

“Because you didn’t realize he was cheating on you?”

She looks at me. “I saw them today, Anton. I saw them together. The way they talked to each other when they were

alone. The way they touched. This affair has been going on for a while. And I never suspected a thing.”

“You trusted them.”

She nods. “I did.”

“But you won’t make that mistake again.”

“With them?” she asks.

“With anyone.”

She frowns. “I don’t want to be that way, though. I don’t want to be the kind of person that never gives anyone a shot because of two assholes in my past.”

“Take it from someone who knows,” I advise her. “Most people are assholes. Save yourself the trouble of giving every single person a chance.”

“That’s never been how I live my life.”

“Time to adopt a different philosophy, wouldn’t you say?”

She looks at me skeptically. “Who broke you?”

“I’ve never been broken, Jessa,” I tell her. “That’s the whole point.”

A gust of ocean breeze washes over us and she shivers in her thin dress. I pull off my coat and guide it around her shoulders.

She’s about to decline, but the moment the thick fabric falls over her arms, she sighs with relief. “Wow, I needed that more than I realized.”

She slides her hands into the arm holes and the fabric swallows her whole. She has to push the sleeves up to make her hands visible.

“Thank you.”

I nod and pull out the cigar I’ve been hanging onto all night. She watches as I light it and bring it to my lips. The scent of vanilla wafts off the tip and she closes her eyes for a second.

“Mm, that smell.”

“You like it?”

She nods. “Yeah. It’s rich. Sweet. Like vanilla for a crème brûlée.”

“Any chance that’s what you’re making for dessert tonight?”

She smiles. “Sorry. There was too much chocolate in the pantry for me to ignore.”

“Chocolate,” I scoff. “That’s Yulian’s doing, no doubt.”

“You can’t blame him. There’s nothing like chocolate to cure a bad mood.”

“I prefer sex.”

Her cheeks flush with color and she avoids my eyes. “Is that why you called me up here? You were in a bad mood?”

“I just needed a distraction,” I tell her. “As did you.”

Again, perhaps it’s cruel to be so blunt, but I don’t want her assuming that this is anything more than it is. Once this yacht is back in the marina, I plan on sending her back to her life.

What’s left of it, that is.

“I suppose you’re right about that,” she mutters to herself.

“Do you feel guilty?” I ask.

She looks surprised by the question. “Not in the slightest.”

I smile. “Good.”

Suddenly, I hear Yulian clear his throat and turn to see him walking towards us. He looks mildly surprised to see the two of us fully dressed. Then he notices Jessa’s chef’s jacket discarded to one side of the bow and grins knowingly.

“Sorry to interrupt this intimate little rendezvous, but we just caught boat lights,” he tells me.

I nod and get to my feet. Jessa follows suit. “What does that mean?”

“I have some colleagues coming on board to discuss business. Their vessel is approaching.”

“Oh,” she says. Then she seems to realize that that’s her cue.

“You’re going to want dinner.”

“That would ensure your check at the end of the night.”

She gives me an embarrassed smile. “Right. Okay, um, I’ll just be... going then.”

She walks around me and then picks up the pace as she passes Yulian. The fucker does not take his eyes off her as she moves past him. As surreptitiously as she can, she grabs her chef’s coat on the way out.

The moment she’s gone, Yulian turns to me. “You lucky fuck.”

“Where’s Lev?”

Yulian ignores me. “How was she?”

“None of your damn business.”

“Ooh, so it was good? I had a feeling.”

“Is the oval room ready?” I ask curtly.

Yulian gives me a long-suffering sigh. “You’re no fun. You haven’t been since Mari—” He stops short when he notices my dagger-like expression. “Yes, Anton, the room is ready.”

“Send them down when they arrive,” I order.

I storm past him impatiently and head to the oval room below deck. I have to resist the urge to stop by the kitchen just so that I can sneak in another glance at her.

My fascination with Jessa should have waned after the fuck. That’s always the pattern.

But instead, I find myself even more intrigued by her.

The oval room is cozy, but it’s functionally arranged with two sofas facing each other around a central table. The layout promotes a sense of equality, even ground... despite the fact that that’s never actually the case.

I sit down in the middle of one of the sofas and lay my second phone face down on the glass-topped center table. A few minutes later, the door opens and Lev walks in, leading three men.

Two are familiar to me. One is new.

I already know that Lev will have frisked all three of them, but I still give them the once-over. “Colleague” is a fickle term in my line of work.

So is “work.”

“Benyamin,” I say by way of greeting. “Thanks for joining me.”

Benyamin Meninsky, the leader of a cartel of Israeli weapons exporters, nods low, taking the center space in the sofa opposite me. His watery eyes ignore all else to stay focused solely on me.

His righthand man, Omer, plops down next to him, draping his arm along the back of the sofa and lounging like he owns the yacht. I’m well-accustomed to his false sense of bravado.

The one I’m interested in is the new face. He’s younger than I would have expected to see at a meeting like this. And he bears a striking resemblance to Benyamin.

“Introducing the boy to the family business, are we?” I guess.

“I’m no boy,” he cuts in before his father can.

I raise my eyes at the pale-faced youth. If he’s older than twenty-three, I’ll eat my fucking gun. He’s only now starting to outgrow the acne that clings to his jawline.

“A man would have known to keep his mouth shut,” I snap while his old man gives him a deadly side glare.

“Forgive the boy,” Benyamin says, doubling down on the word that had so offended his son. “Moshe is new to all this.”

I raise my brows. “You should have started him sooner.”

The boy, Moshe, looks like he’s teetering between anger and annoyance. He wants to be considered an equal, but he’s yet to earn his mark. From the looks of it, he has a long way to go still.

“Dinner will be ready shortly,” I inform them. “But I like to get business out of the way first. That way, we can all enjoy dessert.”

“As you wish, Don Stepanov,” Benyamin agrees.

“Excellent. Then let’s begin.”

Lev comes in and takes the seat to my right. Yulian hovers at the door for a moment before walking over to flank me on the left.

I lean forward, elbows on my knees. “What do you have for me, Benyamin?”

“A whole shipment of new weapons,” he says. His eyes flash greedily.

Omer glances at his boss and then back to me. There’s an unease between the two of them tonight. The boy isn’t helping matters.

“But...”

“I don’t like ‘buts,’” I growl.

Benyamin shrugs, not apologetic in the least. “There’s a forty percent increase from the last time.”

“Ten percent?” I say with amusement. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“Anton—”

“You’re owed a markup,” I say generously. “But forty percent is highway robbery.”

He exchanges a glance with Omer. I don’t miss the surge of communication that passes between them.

“What aren’t you telling me?” I ask.

“We’ve had to increase our profit margin,” Benyamin explains haltingly. “We lost a big client recently.”

“What’s that got to do with me or my Bratva?”

“We lost the client because of you,” he explains.

It only takes me a few seconds to connect the dots. Lev gets there two seconds after I do. “Rodion,” he says in a hushed voice.

Benyamin nods. “He refused to do business with me so long as I keep doing business with you. His allies have followed suit.”

“I think I more than make up for the loss,” I point out. “I give you a lot of business, Benyamin.”

“You give me half,” Benyamin replies. “But the other half is supplied mostly by the Ivanovs. I need their share to keep my business afloat.”

I recline in my seat and regard him carefully, making sure he can see the threat in my posture. “If the business is split fifty-fifty between me and the Ivanovs, then it comes down to a matter of loyalty.”

The boy pales. He gives his fear away by looking at his father. Now that I understand why they’re here, I’m surprised Benyamin brought him along at all.

He’s too green. Far too naïve for this. He reeks of fear.

“I’m here, Anton,” Benyamin protests. “I’m here talking to you, aren’t I?”

“Something tells me that Rodion made that decision for you,” I say.

“He’s mourning his daughter.”

“Her death had nothing to do with me.”

Benyamin looks uncomfortable. “That’s not what he believes.”

“He’s mistaken,” I say, my voice sharp enough to cut glass. “Are you asking me to prove myself, Benyamin? Are you saying my word isn’t enough?”

He’s still for a long time. Long enough that I’m able to count the individual beads of sweat on his forehead. Then he shakes his head.

“Of course not. I am, as always, loyal to the Stepanovs.”

I give him a curt nod. “Smart choice.”

He snorts. “You’re implying I have a choice.”

I smile. “And that right there is why I’ve always liked you, Benyamin. You get it.”

JESSA

From the moment I walk back through the doors after my “break” with Anton, all eyes stay riveted on me. No one wants to ask. No one is brave enough—or dumb enough.

Well, maybe one person.

“So,” Molly says, cornering me the moment I send out the last dessert plate, “what did he want with you?”

I look up, realizing that I’m standing at the center island and everyone else has formed a loose circle around me. Anders and Cory avoid my eyes disapprovingly, Lisa is enthusiastic for details, but the envy in Molly’s fisted hands is hard to miss.

“Nothing,” I mumble casually, wiping down the countertop. “He just wanted to see if everything was in order for dinner.”

Anders snorts loudly. “Right. Nothing sus about that.”

I frown. “Excuse me?”

“I’ve worked with Chef Anatoly a dozen different times on this yacht,” Anders tells me. “Not once was he called up to the deck during a dinner service. Matter of fact, I’m pretty sure he woulda gotten his ass kicked if he’d set one toe above board.”

I look around at the five of them. “Why does it feel like I’m being interrogated right now?”

“Oh, pish, ignore the clucking hens,” Lisa says, waving away my concern. “Those two just love that surly old goat Anatoly. Don’t pay them any mind. Typical men, unhappy when a capable woman is in a position of power.”

I glance at Cory and Anders to gauge their reaction. Anders is staring daggers at Lisa, but Cory is looking directly at me.

“You don’t want to get involved with someone like Anton Stepanov,” he warns quietly, for my ears alone. “The man is dangerous.”

“What did he want with you?” Lisa asks again.

“Nothing.”

I don’t even understand why I’m feeling this guilt. I owe these people nothing, right? We’re just crossing paths temporarily. In the very near future, we’ll be nothing but distant memories to each other. No obligations. No responsibilities.

But that’s not it. Maybe it’s not guilt after all.

Maybe it’s fear.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Anders drawls. “He wants to bang her. Maybe he already has.”

My jaw sets firmly. “Seriously, what is your problem? Even if that were true, it would be none of your business.”

“Oh my God!” Molly gasps. “Did you have sex with him?”

I ignore her completely. Thankfully, so does Anders. “Like Cory said, the man is dangerous. We may work for him, but it’s only so we can collect the fat paycheck at the end of the night.”

“Which is exactly what I’m doing, too.”

“Except none of us were invited above deck,” he points out.

I roll my eyes. “Jealous, are you?”

He shakes his head. “More like disgusted. Disgusted that women can be so easily blinded by a little charm and a handsome face.”

His bitterness is palpable. But if I look past that, I can see some genuine concern there, too. I’m not the only one who’s afraid of Anton.

“There’s nothing going on between us, okay?” I insist. “I took this job last minute because I needed a distraction.”

“I’m sure he gave you a good one,” Anders mutters cruelly.

“Anders,” Cory barks. The younger man falls silent almost immediately.

“That’s a neat trick,” I say to him with a grateful grin. “You gotta show me how you did that sometime. Does he sit and roll over, too?”

He gives me a tired smile back. “Just be careful, kid. Those men up there are involved in some pretty heavy stuff.”

I drum my fingers on the counter anxiously. “Listen, I’m not stupid. I know that Anton is no Boy Scout, but... he just doesn’t seem like the bad guy to me.”

“Oh Jesus,” Anders groans. “Is anyone else hearing this shit?”

“Did you guys talk?” Molly interjects. “What did you talk about?”

“Just, you know, life stuff,” I hear myself saying. “I talked about my cheating ex-fiancé and my backstabbing best friend. And he told me about the heartbreak in his own life. He’s not as scary as you all are making him out to be.”

“He told you about his wife, did he?” Anders asks.

“Anders, behave,” Lisa sighs. “Nothing was proven.”

“Don’t gimme that crap! Take one look at him and tell me you don’t think he did exactly what everyone says he did,” Anders spits.

I blink and look around for someone to explain something to me. “Wait, what am I missing here?”

“How did he tell you his wife died?” Anders asks.

I frown. “He said... well, he said she died by—”

“Suicide?” Anders interrupts. “I’m sure that’s what he said. ‘Murder’ is more like it. Her body turned up three months ago, and according to Marina’s daddy, Anton is the one who should be held responsible. His own wife’s blood on his hands. Some people are just sick and there’s no curing them.”

“We shouldn’t be talking about this,” Cory mutters, glancing towards the staircase.

I shake my head. This just doesn’t square with the man I spoke to on the bow of the ship. He was ruthless, yes, maybe even a little dangerous. But a cold-blooded wife killer? No, that can’t be right.

I stare at him with my mouth hanging open, aware of what a target I’ve made myself. I drop my voice and ask, “Are you being serious right now?”

“It wouldn’t be the first murder he’s committed.”

As I glance around the kitchen, I realize that no one here is arguing that fact. In fact, they all seem a little surprised that I seem so shocked.

“Do you even know who he is?” Anders asks, breaking the heavy silence.

“I... well—”

He rolls his eyes. “See what I mean? Blinded by a pretty face.”

“Can you stop being such a condescending ass for two seconds and just tell me who he is?” I snap.

“Anton Stepanov,” he says, speaking slowly like I might not understand otherwise.

“Am I supposed to recognize that name?” I drawl sarcastically. “I let my Financial Times subscription lapse, unfortunately.”

“He’s not a businessman, Jessa,” Anders says impatiently. “He’s a fucking Bratva don.”

“Bratva?” I parrot like a moron.

“Bratva,” Anders repeats again. “As in the Russian version of the mafia. The significantly more hardcore version.”

I shudder as Anton’s cryptic words float through my head. *I’m the maker of sad stories.* That’s what he told me.

I’m starting to understand what he meant.

But when he was in front of me on the beach actually saying it, it was too easy to get lost in those gray eyes of his.

Maybe Anders was right—maybe a pretty face is all it takes to distract me. It sure made me believe Dane was a good guy. It made me miss the obvious fact that he and my best friend were fucking for years right under my nose.

I feel my stomach twist, but if I give myself over to defeat, I know I won't be able to pick myself back up again. So I swallow the bile rising in my throat and get my shit together.

"It doesn't matter what he is," I say with as much force as I can muster. "Because after tonight, I'm never going to see him again. I plan on collecting my paycheck and disappearing."

Anders gives me a disbelieving look. "I hope, for your sake, he lets you disappear."

"Why wouldn't he?" Molly asks, her tone turning sour. "It's pretty obvious he already got what he wanted from her."

I barely feel the sting of her words. I'm a little busy still processing the whole Bratva don-slash-murderer part of the equation.

"We need to clean up," I say in a shaky voice.

"Sure, but—"

"Silently," I hiss.

She throws me a sharp glance, but follows the order. Thank God for the kitchen hierarchy.

I return to wiping down the counter. One swipe at a time, taking away grease and crud and leaving clean, shining steel in my wake. It's pleasing work. Makes me wish I could fix my whole life like this.

But even as I try to unclench, it takes all I have not to throw up right on top of all those acres of countertop.

Keep breathing, girl, I tell myself. When you get back to land, you'll start a whole new life. Things will be okay.

For a little while, I even believe myself.



By the time the kitchen is sparkling clean, I feel slightly more composed. The panic has given way to uncertainty. Of course the staff of a rich man would gossip, right? I've been in enough kitchens to know just how much. People who work in hospitality talk like old birds at a nursing home.

More often than not, the gossip is blatantly false or at least grossly exaggerated. So is it really fair to take the word of four strangers over a man I shared a real and deep conversation with?

No. I have to trust myself.

Though God knows my track record in that department is looking a little bit spotty as of late.

I remove my borrowed chef's whites and stow them back in the little storage cupboard where I got them. I pull out the thick black jacket he lent me earlier on the bow of the ship.

Would a murderer really have done that? I think to myself triumphantly. *Check and mate, Anders.*

A part of me registers that I'm being naïve. Registers it loud and insistently, actually, like a red alarm screaming *IDIOT-IDIOT-IDIOT!*

But a larger part of me wants to prove the staff wrong. For no other reason than to assure myself that I'm not just a terrible judge of character who picks all the wrong men.

My phone is lying on a shelf next to the jacket. I don't even bother checking the screen as I slip it into the right pocket of the slip dress. Then I take the jacket, fold it over my arm, and turn to find Cory watching me. His eyes land pointedly on Anton's jacket.

"Goodnight, everyone," I say, pointedly ignoring everyone's gaze as I walk past them towards the exit.

"Where are you going?" Molly asks. "We haven't even docked yet."

"Just need to get some fresh air," I tell her.

But the moment I step out of the kitchen, I ignore the steps that will lead me up to the deck. Instead, I turn the corner and

head towards the room that Anton led me to when we first boarded. My wedding dress is still there. I'm not sure I want it, but I'm also reluctant to just leave it behind.

As much as I want to start clean, some things are hard to part with.

I'm lingering outside the door, about to step inside, when I hear the creak of a door not far off.

Instinct pushes me into the room to avoid whoever is heading my way. I close the door with a soft click, just as footsteps thump past in the hallway. When they're almost gone, I open the door a tiny crack and stick my head out.

I see a shadow disappear up the stairs.

Then I hear voices.

"We've gone through the entire night without talking about any heavy weaponry," Anton says.

I find myself creeping forward despite my better judgment. I'm no lawyer, but "heavy weaponry" sounds like it might not be legal, strictly speaking.

"We're not selling anymore," replies someone I don't know.

"Is that so?" Anton says in a dangerous growl. "That's not what my reports say."

"Reports...?"

"Benjamin, we've been doing business now for how many years?"

"A long time, Mr. Stepanov."

"That's right. And we've had a good working relationship, wouldn't you say?"

"Of course, Mr. Stepanov."

"So why do I get the feeling that something has changed?"

"N-nothing has changed." But even I can tell that he answered much too fast and much too shakily.

"Your son's face says differently," Anton remarks. The threat in his voice is undeniable.

“My son is... young. He is learning. He doesn’t know how to conduct himself at these meetings yet.”

I turn to the left slightly, putting myself just behind the ajar door. Enough so that I can peek into the room.

The first person I see is Anton. He’s facing the door, taking up most of the sofa he’s sprawled across. Opposite him are three swarthy men, all of whom look small and hunched in comparison. Another man stands to Anton’s right, but his face is out of my line of vision.

Even from where I’m standing, I can feel the tension in the room.

“I don’t know why you’re letting him call the shots,” one of the trio whines. His voice is not quite as deep as the others. “I don’t know why you’re letting him talk to you like this.”

“Quiet, boy.”

“No! The whole fucking night, he’s been talking down to you.”

“Your son has a lot to learn indeed,” Anton observes. He looks vicious. I shudder involuntarily.

The man in the middle nods, and even from behind, I can sense his fear radiating from him. “He does.”

“Tell me, boy,” Anton says. “What is it about me that you disapprove of?”

The boy in question turns to Anton. When he speaks, it’s with a nasty undercurrent of disrespect. “Everything. Our other business partners know how to treat us with respect.”

“Respect is earned.”

It sounds like Anton is leading the boy right into a trap, but he’s too incensed to see that. “Respect is *owed*. Rodion Ivanov knows how to treat us.”

The room goes quiet and I know immediately that the boy has made some terrible mistake. I shudder again, and this time, it doesn’t stop. Keeps me in its icy claws, shaking me everywhere.

Something bad is about to happen. I can feel it.

“The boy, he doesn’t know what he’s—”

Anton holds up his hand. The effect is instant—a hush falls over the room.

“You came here claiming that you no longer had anything to do with Rodion Ivanov,” he snarls.

“That... that’s true.”

Anton turns to the boy. “Is it true? Don’t lie to me, boy.”

The boy doesn’t say anything for a long time. He might as well have fallen to his knees and confessed through tears. I don’t know the first thing about what’s happening and even I can tell that what he said is true.

Anton nods once and gets to his feet. Everyone else follows suit.

“You’re playing both sides, Benjamin.”

“That’s not—”

“It’s a dangerous game.”

“I’m not—”

The phone lying on the table between the two sofas rings, interrupting him. Anton answers wordlessly. Ten seconds later, he hangs up without saying a word.

“My men just checked the guns you sold us,” he says. “Pity for you all.”

The three men stiffen, but they’re as good as dead.

“Anton, wait!”

Anton’s eyes narrow as he raises his arm. I feel a spike of terror rattle through my body. The gun in his hand is unmistakable, but my brain is still trying to make sense of it all.

Maybe it’s fake. Maybe it’s a taser. Maybe it’s a threat, just a scare tactic. There has to be another explanation.

But then he pulls the trigger.

There is no sound, but the man in the middle drops to the floor.
Blood puddles around his body.

And God help me...

I scream.

ANTON

That scream.

Fuck.

I set the gun down and watch with my teeth clenched so hard they might shatter as Lev drags Jessa into the room.

Why the fuck did it have to be *her* eavesdropping? It could've been any of the dozen other busybodies on board snooping at my door. They would've been so easy to kill and dump overboard.

But her?

It will pain me to do what I must.

Yulian appears at the door looking flustered. "What happened?"

"This is why you don't step out of important meetings for stupid phone calls," I growl. "Clear everyone out."

The Meninsky boy is staring down at his dead father as though he can't quite compute what he's seeing. Omer is the only one who seems to have his bearings intact. He doesn't spare a glance for his murdered boss. He's looking at the man in charge.

He's looking at *me*.

"Anton, listen, I had no idea the weapons were tampered with," he begins.

"Did the boy?" I ask.

Omer glances towards the shell-shocked kid. “I don’t know.”

My eyes flit to Jessa. Lev has a hand clamped on her arm like cuffs. From the look of her pale, stricken face, he might be the only thing keeping her standing.

Goddammit. As much as I need to sort this shit out, I need to deal with Jessa first.

“Clear the room,” I order both Lev and Yulian again. “I’ll deal with these traitors later.”

Everyone starts to stomp towards the door, but then I call out, “Wait.”

They all freeze and look at me. I jut my chin at Jessa. “She stays.”

All of us hear the sound of her swallowing hard past the knot in her throat.

Lev drops Jessa’s arm and moves towards the Meninsky boy, Moshe. His eyes glaze over, his chest rising and falling rapidly. He doesn’t fight. Neither does Omer.

“Should I send in the team?” Yulian asks, glancing towards Benjamin’s body.

I nod and he disappears, leaving Jessa and me alone.

She’s clinging to the jacket I gave her earlier in the night like it’s a life raft. Her skin is bleached white with fear and her hands are shaking badly, but I can’t help admiring the clench of her jaw. She’s steeling herself up for whatever comes next.

Brave little *kotyonok*. What a shame that I can’t keep her.

“You were looking for me,” I say. It’s not really a question. “Did you find what you were after?”

She opens her mouth, but her voice comes out in a garbled squeak. She looks down at her feet in embarrassment and takes a breath that doesn’t quite seem to do the trick.

“I... I was trying to return your jacket,” she mumbles.

I extend my hand and she flinches back. Gently, I pluck the coat from her grasp. “How thoughtful of you.”

Her eyes flicker past me to the man on the floor, which makes my upper lip curl in anger.

“I assumed you were a smart woman,” I snap harshly.

Her eyes flash to my face. “W-what?”

“A smart woman would pretend that there’s nothing to see.”

She takes a shuddering breath. “A smart woman would never have come aboard this yacht.”

I smile. “Perhaps not.”

She draws in another labored inhale, then asks, “So it’s true? You’re a... you’re a Bratva don?”

“The kitchen staff talks,” I mutter. “Far too much.”

Jessa gnaws at the inside of her cheek. “That was all they told me.”

“Somehow, I doubt that.”

She nods fervently. “It’s true. I pieced the rest together myself.”

“Was that before or after you came for me?”

Her breathing is getting heavier. Her fingers keep twitching every few seconds but I doubt she even notices.

“My friend knows where I am,” she blurts out. “I told him I took a job on a boat called *The Medusa*. I told him I’d call him right after. If anything happens to me, he’ll know where to send the police.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Was that your first time threatening someone?”

“I’d call it more of a warning.”

“Not much difference, when it comes down to it.”

She glances towards the dead body again. She mumbles something under her breath that I don’t manage to catch.

“What was that?” I press, inching closer to her.

“‘*The maker of sad stories*,’” she repeats, louder this time.

“That’s what you told me you were, back on the beach.”

“I don’t lie.”

“You’re honest, but murder is okay?”

“Every man has his principles.”

“Then yours need some serious work,” she spits. “Who was the boy?”

I arch an eyebrow. “You’re really asking for more information?”

“He was the man’s son, wasn’t he?” She pushes on as though I haven’t spoken. “You killed the man in front of his own kid.”

“The boy needed a reality check. He will thank me one day.”

She shakes her head in disbelief, in amazement. “How could you be so cruel?”

“There’s no room for kindness in my world.”

“You could make room,” she insists. “It seems like you run this world, anyway.”

I smile. “I’m glad you noticed.”

“I’m not impressed, you know.”

It’s amusing watching the evolution of emotions on her face. She wears it all so clearly, so obviously. Fear and shock give way to anger and indignation.

The woman is certainly not a coward; I have to give her that. She’s standing opposite me and holding her own despite what she’s just seen. Despite the fact that the gun I used to kill a man is still warm on the table.

“You were impressed earlier in the evening,” I remind her with a chuckle. “When you were screaming your pleasure at the sky.”

Her anger gets more pronounced. “I didn’t realize what you were.”

“Which is what, exactly?” I ask.

“A cold-blooded murderer.”

“You have an odd way of bargaining for your life,” I say with amusement.

“Is that what I’m supposed to do now?” she asks. “Beg?”

I shrug. “It couldn’t hurt.”

She looks lost for a moment, caught between her pride and her desire to live. I give her the space to think, because she’ll only get one chance at this.

As her gears whirl, I find myself contemplating the two alternatives at my disposal. The first is easy—slice her throat and dump her body into the ocean. No fuss, no clean-up necessary. The second is far messier. Letting her live but making sure she keeps her mouth shut.

One gives me peace of mind

The other gives me homework.

The decision should be easy. God knows I’ve made the same kind of choice again and again in the past, and I’ve always chosen the route of cleansing violence. And yet I find myself reluctant now to do what must be done, and I don’t have a fucking clue why.

Strange.

“I won’t go to the cops,” she whispers. “I swear.”

I laugh. “What assurance do I have of that?”

“Why would I get involved in this?” she asks. “All I want to do is go back home and pretend this day never happened.”

“I’d rather you not pretend. I’d rather you just forget.”

“Don’t you think I’m going to be working towards that the moment I get off this godforsaken boat?” she demands. “Do you think I want to have nightmares for the rest of my life?”

Her eyes glance towards the body on the floor again. It’s the most human reaction there is. The need to look at something that horrifies you. The need to try and make sense of something you don’t quite understand.

“Please,” she whimpers. “Just let me off this boat.”

I sigh and reach forward to pluck the gun from the table. “I wish it were that simple, Jessa. But unfortunately, I’m not in the habit of losing sight of my wild cards.”

“I’m not a wild card, I swear!” she protests. “I’m just... I’m just... average. Normal. I just want to pay my rent and go to work and keep my head down. I don’t want this drama. God knows I have enough in my own life.”

I take a step closer to her. “You can see how that would be difficult for me to believe?”

“Oh, right,” she seethes, nostrils flaring. “I forgot. Your motto in life is ‘don’t trust anybody.’ And given what I’ve seen here today, I’m starting to understand why.”

She had a moment of shock, but she is recovering remarkably fast.

“What are you smirking about?” she snaps.

“I’m not.”

“Is that the face you make right before you kill someone?”

I chuckle. “I hope not. It would be a shame to kill you.”

“Jesus,” she breathes, exhaling sharply. “Did I really think of you as this charming guy only a few minutes ago? How could I have gotten it so wrong?”

“You didn’t get anything wrong,” I tell her. “I am charming when I choose to be.”

She takes a step back, eyes riveted on mine. “You’re a killer.”

“I am also that when I choose to be.”

She swallows again, the sound echoing throughout the room. Once more, her eyes stray to the body. Most of Benjamin’s blood is soaked into the carpet. I’ll have to get the whole thing torn up and reupholstered. The stench of death is impossible to erase.

“Why did that man have to die?” she whispers. She says it almost hopefully, as though she’s holding out for a justification that’ll absolve me and maybe relieve some of her guilt.

“He betrayed the Stepanov Bratva,” I say calmly.

“Your Bratva?”

I let my silence speak for itself while she processes. “Do you have proof he betrayed you?”

“I wouldn’t have pulled the trigger if I didn’t.”

“Something tells me that men like you pull the trigger first and look for the evidence later.”

I regard her with amused curiosity. “And you have a lot of experience with men like me?”

“My dad is a cop. Well, was a cop. He retired.”

“The streets were too mean for him?”

“Something like that.”

I nod, regarding her carefully. She’s got some steel in her. I’ve been in circumstances where things have gone south and there have been innocent women present. When business goes bad and guns come out and someone ends up on the floor with their brains on the carpet.

And every single time, the women fucking lose it.

Tears and screaming. Vomit, on occasion. The rare fainting spell.

But Jessa’s hazel-gold eyes are clear, steady. She’s overwhelmed and anxiety-ridden, but she’s holding her fear back, reining it in. Admirable.

“Are you going to kill me?” she asks in a small voice that wavers but does not crack.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t.”

“I already have.”

“Try again.”

I step towards her and pin her against the wall. Up close, I sense her every movement, her every sensation, her every thought. I feel the gasp trapped in her chest and the frantic pounding of her heart. I taste her fear.

“I’m more afraid of you than I am of the police,” she whispers. “How is that for a reason?”

I like that answer, but I don’t let her see that. Perhaps I can find a way to keep her. The way her eyes are dilating, the way her lips part softly—it has my mind pivoting in a new direction.

“Anton,” comes a voice from the hall.

I curse under my breath and step away from Jessa. Lev is standing at the open door, his brows knitted together in a furious downward V. It might concern me if it wasn’t for the fact that he always looks that way.

“What?” I snap.

“The clean-up team is here,” he tells me. “And we need you above deck.”

I push down my annoyance and nod. “Send the team in. I’ll be right up.”

“You’re going to leave me here alone?” Jessa gasps, looking more alarmed to be left alone with the dead body than to be trapped under mine.

“You won’t be alone,” I assure her. “Just keep out of their way.” Then I follow Lev out of the room.

He doesn’t say anything until we’re on the narrow staircase that leads up to the bow. “What are you doing?”

“Managing the situation.”

“That’s the craziest management philosophy I’ve ever seen.”

“If you have something to say, I’d rather you just say it, Lev. Without all the fucking dramatics.”

He twists around on the staircase and blocks me. Lev is a tall man in his own right, but even still, we’re eye-to-eye despite the fact that I’m two steps below him.

“She saw you kill Benyamin,” he points out in that teacher-saying-something-obvious voice I despise so much.

“I’m aware. I was there.”

“So why is she still alive?” he hisses.

I shrug. “Because I can control her.”

“I hate to break it to you, but your cock isn’t a magic wand. She’ll have to take it out of her mouth eventually, and when she does, she’s gonna sing like a bird. Don’t be naïve, man.”

I narrow my eyes. “When have I ever been naïve?”

“I know you, Anton,” he says, lowering his voice a little. “The only reason you brought this chick onboard is because she interested you. How many times has a woman caught your attention in your entire adult life?”

I open my mouth to answer, but he keeps going before I can get a word in.

“Never,” he says firmly. “But for whatever reason, you like this girl. And it’s clouding your judgment. That’s the only reason she’s still breathing.”

I put my hand on his throat and shove him hard against the elevated wall, taking care to cause as much pain as I can before I release him.

“I don’t have to justify a goddamn thing to you. She keeps breathing until I say so,” I say harshly, making it clear that his lecture is over. “Is that clear?”

Lev sighs in defeat and nods. “The boy is losing his shit upstairs. He tried to throw himself into the ocean.”

I nod and back away. “Next time, let him.”

JESSA

I turn my back to the body and stare through the window out across the water. The ocean is supposed to be relaxing. Nature's white noise. But I feel like I'm going to hyperventilate.

Then four men walk in.

I turn to look at them, but their features slip through my mind like sand through a sieve. The only thing I can fixate on is that they're all wearing thick, dark gloves.

They ignore me completely as they set down two hefty briefcases. Inside, I see a selection of jars and bottles along with scrubbers, towels, and what looks like a handheld power washer.

The men unpack it all and begin their work of making a murder disappear.

I have no doubt that once they're done, it will be like nothing ever happened. The yacht will be what it always has been, the same thing Anton is: a beautiful façade for horrible things.

I know better than to ask them for help. Men like this don't rescue damsels in distress. The exact opposite, actually. No doubt that if I so much as open my mouth, every word will be reported back to him.

I may not have made many smart decisions today, but I'm not completely brainless.

I pivot back to the window, though my morbid sense of curiosity has me glancing back towards the cleanup crew

every few seconds. It's only been a few minutes, but the blood has already vanished. Part of me wishes I'd watched them work—if only so I don't drive myself crazy wondering whether all this was real or just part of some twisted nightmare.

Suddenly, my knees start to buckle. Chris used to call me a delayed responder. My physical response to trauma takes a few hours to settle in. When I found out about my dad cheating on my mom, I was fine for half a day, then I promptly keeled over in a crosswalk and almost got smushed into a pancake by a dump truck.

I grip the arm of the sofa behind me and limp over to it, sinking down before I can completely collapse. I rest my elbows on my knees and support my head in my palms. I shut my eyes so tightly that I begin to see weird shapes floating and spinning amidst the darkness.

Only when those shapes start taking the form of dead men do I wrench my eyes open again.

The thing that first catches my attention is the cell phone sitting on the glass-topped table in front of me.

Anton's phone.

I glance up to see if anyone else has noticed me noticing it. But all four men are engrossed in their grisly task. It's like I don't exist to them.

My heart hammers hard in my chest. I could pocket the phone. That way, I have some insurance that Anton will honor his word if he agrees to let me live. Otherwise, what's to stop him from letting me go back to my life and then “accidentally” choking on dinner alone in my apartment or, *whoops*, slipping and falling over the edge of a ten-story balcony? It'd be so easy to make me disappear.

But if I have something precious of his hidden somewhere safe, that's a lifeline. That's hope.

That's the best I can ask for.

My eyes flit from the men to the phone, from the phone to the men, back and forth and forth and back. I chew at my lip until

I taste blood. At any moment, Anton could walk through that door and the opportunity will have slipped past me.

Do it. Act now, Jessa. Don't be a coward.

Before I can second-guess myself, I surreptitiously slide the phone off the table and stuff it into my pocket. The material of the dress is thin and I can't help fearing that Anton could spot the bulge from outer space.

It's too late to turn back now, though.

I keep my eyes rooted on the floor between my feet—until a dead man's face floats up in front of me.

I bite back a scream when I realize the cleanup crew is lifting the body off the floor and hauling him away with grim efficiency. That blood, so much blood... I shudder. I wish I knew of a prayer or a mantra or something spiritual I could whisper to myself on his behalf.

But if I ever believed in a merciful God, that faith disappeared when I walked in on Dane and Salma.

The moment they disappear through the door, I pull out the phone and stash it inside my bra instead of my pocket. Just as I pull my hand out, someone walks through the door. Oh God, of course it's—

I stop short, realizing it's not Anton at all. It's his brother. They do look remarkably alike, though.

“Not quite the night you envisioned, huh?” Yulian asks with the easy smile that seems permanently attached to his face.

“Is that how they tell you two apart?” I ask coldly.

“Excuse me?”

“He never smiles and you smile too much.”

That takes him back a little, but somehow, I can see from the little twinkle in his eyes that I've impressed him. “Well, damn. Feisty.”

“Don't.”

“You take offense?”

“It’s condescending.”

He looks confused for a moment. “State your case.”

I roll my eyes, but I take the bait anyway. “Men are never ‘feisty,’ are they? They’re ‘tough’ or ‘strong.’ But women? We’re all ‘feisty little bitches’ to you, or else we’re submissive dolls who roll over and play fetch when you say so. No other choices.”

Yulian strokes his chin. “Hm. I feel like you’re wrong, but I don’t have the brain power to refute you right now. What’s your preference on compliments, then?”

“I don’t think I’m gonna be particularly flattered by anything anyone says to me tonight,” I drawl. “Least of all you.”

“Fair enough. Definitely not feisty, though. Absolutely not, nuh-uh.”

He’s definitely got charm, I’ll give him that. But the constant grin on his face is disconcerting. I can’t be sure he means anything he says.

But that’s probably true of everyone on this yacht—Anton more than anyone. They’re all thieves, liars, killers.

And I’m the fool who strode onboard with my eyes wide shut, just so gosh-darn grateful for the opportunity, thanks so much for having me.

“Why are you here?” I ask, doing my best to sound unconcerned. “Did he send you down to finish up his dirty work for him?”

His smile only gets wider. I’m not sure if the effect is better or worse. “Oh no, for sure not. Anton loves his dirty work. Especially when the dirty work has legs like yours.”

I suppress a shudder and glare at him. “I’ll tell you the same thing I told him: I just want to go back to my life.”

“And my brother agreed to that?”

“No, not in so many words.”

“Yeah, didn’t think so. That’d be very out of character.”

“You could just let me go and tell him you killed me?” I suggest.

Yulian shakes his head. “I don’t lie.”

I roll my eyes. “Jesus. Anton said the same thing before. You can murder, maim, and deal in illegal arms, but lying is off-limits?”

He laughs and rakes a hand through his thick hair. “It’s how we were raised.”

“And who raised you, rabid wolves?”

“Tsk tsk. So judgmental.”

“I tend to be a little harsh when I see someone get their brains blown out, yeah.”

He smirks at my sarcasm. “For someone who wants to be set free, you do spend a remarkable amount of time reminding everyone of how much dirt you know.”

I bite down on my tongue to keep more traitorous words from spilling out. “You won’t get away with this.”

He straight-up laughs in my face. “Which action movie did you steal that line from?”

A shiver surges through me. I’m starting to feel cold again without Anton’s jacket. Not that I would put it on again, anyway. It’s tainted now. Stained with blood both literal and figurative.

“Can I ask you a question?” I ask as Yulian slowly sidles closer to me.

“You can try.”

“What are my chances of getting out of here in one piece?”

He shrugs. “Higher than most other people’s chances would be. Like I said... those legs of yours. An ace up the sleeve.”

“Your brother didn’t look at my legs,” I say without thinking about the words coming out of my mouth. “His eyes stayed on my face.”

“Then he’s more subtle than I am. But no less hungry.”

I take a step back and he laughs with amusement. “Don’t worry. I’ve never forced myself on a woman and I don’t intend to now.”

“So this whole creepy, leering thing you’ve got going on is what—just entertainment for you?”

“You can tell a lot about a woman based on how she stands up to a man.”

“Why would you care either way?”

“Because I don’t think my brother will kill you tonight,” he says bluntly. “And maybe you’re right and your legs didn’t have anything to do with it. But he saw *something* in you he liked.”

“Let’s pretend that’s true. If so, you’re here to do... what?”

“Me?” He shrugs, pure nonchalance, like we’re nothing more than two friendly strangers chatting in a dog park or something. “Nothin’. I’m just curious.”

I frown. “Curious about what?”

“He has an... *interesting* track record with women. So if you caught his eye, then I wanted to see what the fuss was all about.”

This time, I can’t stop the shiver from traversing up my spine.

He doesn’t miss it. “Ah. so you’ve heard the rumors. That kitchen staff sure chatters a lot. For people who work on a boat, you’d think they’d be familiar with the phrase ‘*Loose lips sink ships.*’”

I swallow hard. My throat is suddenly parched. “Is it true?” I hear myself croak.

“That depends,” he says, “on which rumor you heard.”

I open my mouth to respond, but then I hear footsteps approaching. Somehow, I know it’s Anton. The fear I’ve managed to barely shove aside rises up in full force.

I wonder what will happen to me once they’re finished. Maybe I’ll just disappear forever, no trace left behind. Or maybe my

bloated corpse will wash up on some tropical shoreline, thousands of miles from where we are right now.

And what happens when you're dead? Is it just an eternity of blackness? Do I become a ghost, an angel, a memory, a wisp of wind?

As my heart races and my chest rises and falls, I can feel Anton's phone lodged in my bra. It strikes me a second later that if the cursed thing rings, I'm screwed.

But with his brother's eyes on me and Anton's footsteps approaching, there's nothing I can do about it now.

"Yulian," Anton growls when he storms back into the room.

He steps over the spot where the dead man was lying just a few minutes ago, but he doesn't so much as glance down. To him, the murder is already ancient history.

"Anton."

"Is there a reason you're down here?" he asks his brother.

"Just wanted to make sure she wouldn't make a break for it," Yulian says, giving Anton a wide smile. "But now, I can see why she has you so intrigued."

Anton steps forward, using the few extra inches of height he has over his brother to his advantage. "Stop fucking around and go take care of your business."

"You'd think the girl would have put you in a better mood," Yulian grumbles.

"Yulian," Anton snaps again. He sounds dangerous.

Yulian turns tail and leaves the room at once.

Then Anton turns his eyes to me.

I should be afraid to be alone with him again, but I find myself feeling, of all things, relieved. Yulian wears that smile that should put me at ease, but he has a way of staring that makes me feel like a lab rat under observation. Anton is different. Anton is one of one.

“Did you have to tell the whole damn boat about what happened?” I demand.

“I didn’t tell anyone.”

“So they just all magically know?”

“No. You told them,” he says.

“Like hell I did!”

He takes a step towards me and somehow, it feels like his stolen phone gets heavier between my breasts. “You’re the one who told the whole fucking boat. With your screams and moans and gasps.” He eyes me cruelly, waiting for a snappy retort.

I try to look defiant, but it’s hard when you’re blushing like I am. “Disposed of the body yet?” I ask. Mostly because it’s honestly easier talking about that than it is to discuss my vocal performance earlier in the night.

“As a matter of fact, I have.”

“Am I the last loose end you need to tie up?”

I’m terrified that he’s going to notice his phone is missing. If he does, it’ll only take him seconds to figure out that I’m the culprit. The boat just isn’t big enough to hide.

“Tying you up—now, there’s a thought,” he murmurs. His tone is pure sex and it’s nauseating what it does to me. For Christ’s sake, I just saw him murder a man in cold blood. But he drops the merest hint about bondage and suddenly, I’m a sopping mess for him?

No. *Hell* no. My body may be a traitorous bitch, but I’m never letting Anton Stepanov lay another finger on me.

“Please don’t kill me,” I whisper. “I have things I want to do, goals I want to reach. I have a life to live.”

He nods. “And you understand that causing me problems is going to affect the life you want to live?”

I nod stupidly. “I do.”

He stares at my face so hard that I wonder if my skin is going to start melting. It certainly feels hot enough to do the trick.

“Well, then, as long as we understand each other.”

It takes me a moment to compute those words. “Wait. Are you serious? Does that mean you’re going to let me go?”

“Would you prefer I choose a different route?”

I want to feel relief, but somehow, the expected feeling doesn’t come. He’s still in my path, blocking my way out of the cabin. Still in my line of sight, blotting out the past and the future alike.

“No,” I whisper, letting my eyes fall. “I want to go.”

His answer is to step close to me. His scent fills my nostrils, sweet and rich and somehow dark, if that’s a thing that scents can be. He touches my chin with two soft fingers and forces my gaze to rise up and meet his.

“Can I trust you, Jessa?” he asks, unblinking.

I hold eye contact. “Can I trust *you*?”

He smiles. It’s a dangerous half-smile that promises all kinds of things I really would prefer for him not to name. “You keep your mouth shut about what happened here tonight, and you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

“What happened here?” I ask innocently.

He chuckles and nods. “That’s a good girl.”

I blush. On paper, that’s demeaning as hell. But in this room, with this man and his touch and his heat and the threat he poses by simply existing...

It’s the hottest thing I’ve ever heard.

Now, let’s hope I never hear it again.

He lets his hand fall and steps to the side. The escape path is clear and the voices in my head are screaming for me to make like The Flash and get the hell outta here.

I can still feel his cell phone lodged between my breasts. Is it smart to take it? Is it stupid?

No, I tell myself firmly. *It's the right thing to do.* I have no reason to trust the man. His word is certainly not enough for me. Not anymore.

I swallow my doubts and head towards the door.

“Oh, and Jessa?”

My heart sinks for a second, but I glance back at him over my shoulder. “Yes?”

“I’ll be dropping by at some point,” he informs me. “Just to see how you’re doing.”

I’m under no illusions as to what he really means. “You don’t know where I live.”

“1301 Henning Street. Somerset Villas. Apartment Thirty-Four.”

The knot in my throat doubles in size. I suck in a desperate breath. “Got it,” I tell him as calmly as I can muster. “Can’t wait.”

“Goodnight, Jessa,” he says. “You really are a brilliant chef. Here.”

I stiffen when he reaches into his shirt pocket—*it's a gun, he's going to kill me, this was all a sick game oh God oh God oh*—

But then he pulls out a piece of paper. He unfolds it as he hands it to me, revealing my paycheck for the night.

“Oh. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” he says. “You earned this.”

I take the check from his extended hand and slip it into the empty pocket of the dress. “Um... the dress—”

“Keep it,” he says. “It suits you better, anyway.”

I frown. Is he comparing me to the wife he lost? A.k.a., the one he possibly murdered? Despite what I’ve seen tonight, it surprises me that I’m still unwilling to believe that he’s capable of killing the woman he exchanged vows with.

Although, come to think of it, I could probably waterboard Dane and feel no type of guilt about it.

Heartbreak is a funny thing like that.

“Just so you know,” I tell him, “I’m not taking any more yacht jobs. For you or anyone else.”

He smirks. “I can’t see why you would.”

I turn and head out the door as fast as I can. I half-expect to be stopped when I reach the main deck, but Yulian and the other one—Lev, I think his name was—both step aside to let me pass.

There’s no sign of anyone else. Not even the staff I spent most of the night cooking alongside. They’ve probably disembarked, laughing about the idiot chef who fell in way over her head, and heading back to their homes for a night of dreamless sleep,

I envy them.

After the day I’ve had, I may never sleep again.

I walk fast, my heels hitting the wooden dock so hard that it reverberates along the boardwalk. I don’t turn around or look back until I’m out of the marina and standing on solid ground.

When I finally dare to glance back, *The Medusa* is nothing more than a dark shape in the distance. I can’t even pick out individual figures, though I know they’re there.

Watching me.

I duck my head and hurry down the sidewalk, past the beachfront houses and apartments. Laughter and music filters through a few windows, the sounds of carefree people enjoying their lives. How nice that must be.

I leave behind the sand and sea and head to the main road. While I wait for my rideshare to arrive, I scroll through my list of texts and missed phone calls.

The last call from Dane came in about three hours ago. Salma also called once, which makes me snort. As if I actually would have answered. That bitch can rot in hell for what she did.

Despite my better judgment, I pull open my conversation threads and press on Dane’s icon. He’s sent me twenty-seven

unanswered messages.

I scroll down to the first one. It was sent right around the time I met Anton on the beach.

Baby, u cant know how sorry I am. this is so fucked up. im so fucked up.

If you'd just pick up ur phone, if u could just come back here, we can talk this out.

I love u baby.

Please believe me, I never meant to hurt u. It was one moment of weakness. And itll never happen again. i love u.

I want you to be my wife. Remember our dream? Buying that house on Kinsey Road? Opening your own restaurant in Hudson Square? We planned a life together... remember that baby?

There are more, but I close the conversation thread in disgust. How had I ever fallen for that manipulative schmuck and his lies?

I won't make that mistake again. No more shmucks. No more lies.

Which is why I pull out my phone and dial the only person I know I can trust.

"Chris?" I say when he answers.

"Hey, Jess. I expected to hear from you hours ago. Is everything okay?" he asks breathlessly.

I take a deep breath just as I see my Uber turn the corner. "No," I tell him. "Not even close."

ANTON

I stare at the spot where Jessa's silhouette disappeared almost an hour ago.

I've taken a risk letting her leave, but I wasn't kidding about being able to control her. I don't usually have a problem controlling anyone.

Except, of course, the bitch this yacht was named after.

"Are you worried she's going to turn into another Medusa?" Lev asks, coming eerily close to reading my thoughts.

I turn to him, catching a sudden gust of sea air. "No. This one is different."

"Is that you talking? Or your dick?"

"Are you mistaking me for my brother?" I demand.

"I resent that," Yulian complains as he joins us on the upper deck. "Maybe my dick happens to be extremely smart, and that's why I listen to it."

I have less than zero desire to talk about Jessa or justify my decisions with either one of them.

"The body is gone?" I ask before I correct myself. "The bodies, rather."

"Gone," Lev confirms. "Moved to our incinerator across town. In an hour, there won't be anything left of Omer Solomon, Benyamin Meninsky, or his son."

“If the little shit had kept his head, he might have lived.” Yulian shakes his head as though he thinks the boy’s killing was a waste.

“His death is on Benjamin,” I say coldly. “The man decided to betray me and bring his idiot son along on the same night. It was a stupid move.”

“The worse move was choosing the Ivanovs over us,” Lev says.

I nod in agreement. “There aren’t many moves worse than that.”

“You really think that Rodion had anything to do with this?” Yulian ponders.

I glare at my younger brother, wondering how he could be so thick-headed. “The man has been a masterpiece in passive aggression since the funeral.”

Yulian flinches at my tone. “Exactly. *Passive* aggressive. This move is more, I dunno... active aggressive.”

“Except he didn’t move against us,” I point out. “Not obviously, at least. He had Benjamin do his dirty work so that we’d be stuck with faulty guns when the time comes.”

“‘When the time comes’?” Yulian repeats. “What is that supposed to mean?”

I ignore him. “There’s nothing to directly connect Rodion with the defective weapons or the fucked-up sale. He made sure that Benjamin would be the one in the line of fire. Literally and figuratively.”

“Rodion is nothing if not shrewd,” Lev points out.

“Which is exactly why we need to nip this thing in the bud.”

“How do you propose we do that?” Lev asks.

“I’ll need to meet with the man.”

Lev and Yulian exchange a dubious glance. Yulian speaks up first. “You want to meet with your father-in-law?” he asks.

“Why not?” I ask innocently. “I have nothing to hide. I didn’t kill his daughter.”

“You can see why that might be a smidge hard to believe...” Yulian warns.

I narrow my eyes at him. “What are you trying to say, brother?”

“It’s no secret that you and Marina didn’t have the best relationship.”

“The woman didn’t have the best relationship with anyone,” Lev chimes in. “Well... except maybe with you, Yulian.”

Yulian rolls his eyes. “We barely spoke to one another.”

“Which is why it worked, no doubt,” I say.

Yulian snorts with laughter. “My point is, you and Marina were at each other’s throats through most of the marriage. And towards the end...”

“You don’t have to remind me,” I say, cutting him off. “I know what happened. I was there.”

“She told her father everything,” Yulian says anyway, as if I’d never spoken. “Every fight, every disagreement, right to his ears.”

“The old bastard should have kept his nose out of my marriage.”

“He’s a powerful man, Anton,” Lev advises. “Powerful men aren’t in the habit of staying out of anything, whether it’s their business or not.”

“Don’t lecture me on the nature of power,” I snap. “I know very fucking well how it works.”

“Can I be honest?” Yulian asks, his expression growing wary.

Lev whistles under his breath. “Oh, boy.”

Lev and my younger brother are the only two men in the world who can get away with saying uncomfortable truths straight to my face. They know our respective bonds protect them.

But that doesn’t mean I have to be cheery about it.

“I’d rather you be silent. But I’ll take honesty if that’s the second choice.”

“When I saw her body that first time, after she was found...” Yulian says, “my first thought was, *‘Anton has started a war.’*” He shudders, obviously reliving the moment he stumbled across my wife’s lifeless corpse.

I don’t give anything away. “You thought I had her killed?”

“Is that so crazy?”

I scoff in his face. “You know I do my own killing.”

“You would have needed an alibi that night,” he says. “And you had one. You were with Lev on this very yacht.”

“I do my own killing, Yulian,” I repeat, staring him dead in the eyes.

He sighs. “I knew that. I *know* that. But I also knew how difficult things had gotten between you. I knew how tempted you were to—”

“You really think, if I wanted out, I would have killed the bitch? I would have sooner divorced her.”

“But shit was bad and you didn’t,” Yulian says.

“What point are you making, little brother?” I ask. “Get to it quickly. Because this is starting to sound more like an accusation.”

Yulian gives me an apologetic smile. “I’m just making the point that even I, as your brother, assumed you were the one that killed Marina. What is everyone else supposed to think?”

“I’m not going to defend myself to any other man on this goddamn planet,” I say. “But what I am going to do is make it clear that, if he insists on pushing this into a full-scale war, I’m prepared to fight.”

“Can we win?” Lev asks, looking to me for reassurance.

“We’re the Stepanovs,” I growl. “Of course we can win.”

“Benyamin turned,” Yulian points out.

“Benjamin and his son will be a stark reminder to everyone else of what disloyalty costs. In the meantime, we’re in the market for a new arms dealer. I want that handled ASAP.”

Lev sighs. “I’ll have a list ready for you by tomorrow.”

“That still doesn’t solve our bigger issue,” Yulian reminds me, even though I’m ready to put the subject to bed for now.

I rub the bridge of my nose. I’m starting to get a headache. “The allies,” I mutter. “I’m aware.”

“Exactly,” Yulian agrees, “the allies. Loyalties will be split down the middle. The Ivanovs are big players, too, brother. As big as us, whether you want to admit it or not.”

“The Ivanovs are a tired old shitshow run by a tired old man who’s kept his wrinkled hands on the reins for far too long,” I snarl. “It’s time for Rodion to give up his crown.”

“That crown was supposed to be yours,” Yulian says.

“Thanks for the reminder.”

“Isn’t it still?” Lev asks. “Rodion never publicly said anything, other than that his daughter’s husband would inherit the Ivanov Bratva. You are still his daughter’s husband. Technically. Well, technically-ish.”

“What’s past is prologue,” I say. “None of it matters now. All that’s left is what’s coming. And what’s coming is war.”

Lev looks more intrigued than Yulian does, which in and of itself is alarming. My brother has always been the bloodthirsty one.

“You have reservations about how this will play out?” I ask Yulian.

“The Ivanovs have a lot of allies, Anton.”

“So do we.”

“Ivanov has been around for a lot longer than us, Anton. He’s got a big ass Rolodex and who-the-fuck-knows how much cash squirreled away. Money talks, brother. You know that.”

I snort. “If he can buy the loyalty of any one of my allies, then he’s welcome to them. What’s left of them when I’m finished, at least. No, I want real men at my back. Not turncoats who’ll try to stab me the moment my concentration has shifted.”

Yulian looks like he’s about to keep arguing, but then he wisely falls silent. Good. The pounding in my temples is getting worse and I’m done explaining myself to them.

“We’ll prepare,” Lev says shortly.

I glance at my brother. “Yulian?”

He nods, respectfully enough. “I will do whatever you ask me to. I am the younger brother, after all.”

I grimace as he invokes our father. Those were his last words to Yulian on his deathbed: *Do whatever your brother asks of you. He is your don now.* He’d been too weak at the end for more than a few labored sentences.

Yulian sighs. “Papa would know what to do if he were here.”

I stamp down the annoyance, but I can’t stop the words from escaping. “Our father is the man who started this shit in the first place.”

Yulian’s eyebrows knit together. He hates when I say anything remotely negative about our father, but he’s far too old and experienced now to keep pretending the man was a saint.

“How do you figure?”

“Elevating the Ivanovs? Sharing power, assets, and business?”

I say. “It was a foolish decision based on a foolish friendship. How could he have been sure that his friendship with Rodion would translate to their sons or their successors?”

“He was counting on your marriage to Marina to seal the deal,” Yulian bites out. “I can’t see how you lay the blame for that debacle at his feet, brother.”

My eldest son. Rodion’s only daughter. The final link to join our two kingdoms forever.

I scoff in my head. As it turned out, it was more like the final nail in his own coffin.

“He was a fool,” I say bluntly. “A fool to think I could be distracted by a pretty face and miss the vile bitch that lurked underneath it.”

Yulian’s face sours, and I know I’ve gone too far for him. But I’m too pissed and too resentful to care.

“You married her,” he scowls. “You agreed.”

“I told him it wouldn’t work. He didn’t listen. He never did.”

“He knew what was best for us.”

“Except he didn’t,” I snap. “Clearly.”

I move towards the edge of the yacht, aware that Lev and Yulian are both watching me carefully. My thoughts are scattered tonight, caught between two fiery women who couldn’t be more different.

“I’m heading back home,” Yulian says in a strained voice a minute later. He gets to his feet. “It’s been a long-ass night. I need a drink, a blowjob, and ten hours of blackout sleep.”

I watch him saunter off the boat and down the dock, pretending like life is just fucking peachy. When I twist around, Lev is still watching me.

“You know it upsets him when you talk about your Otets that way.”

I shrug, unapologetic. “He’s put the old bastard on a pedestal. Reality is always a shock to the men who are unprepared to deal with it.”

“I remember your father,” Lev tells me. “I remember the way he was around you two.”

“No, you don’t,” I say firmly. “You remember how he was around Yulian, and you assumed that was how he treated me behind closed doors. It was not. I was his heir—I wasn’t offered choices; I was given orders. Yulian is lucky that I’m not as hard on him as our father was on me.”

“Yulian’s not your heir, though, Ant,” Lev points out. “Maybe you’d treat him differently if he was.”

I roll my eyes. “My brother is a lot of things, but a leader is not one of them.”

“I guess that means you’re having children one day, huh?”

I stiffen instantly. Some topics are off-limits, and Lev should know better than to ask. But I’m sick of yelling, sick of reprimanding. So I just sigh, “One thing at a time.”

He nods and leans back in his seat, white teeth flashing in the moonlight. “Amen to that.”

“My only concern now is quelling this storm before it breaks.”

“And what about the other little problem that disembarked a few hours ago?” Lev asks.

“That?” I scoff. “That is not a problem. That’s a little blonde distraction that I can handle.”

“I recall you saying the exact same thing about another blonde who ended up carrying your name.”

I narrow my eyes. “Sometimes, I forget that you have an elephant’s memory.”

Lev gives me a humorless laugh. “The difference is that you never looked at Marina the way you looked at that girl tonight.”

“And how did I look at her?” I ask, against my better judgment.

“Like you wanted to rip her to pieces just so you could see how she’s fit together.”

He isn’t wrong about that—I just can’t figure out why. Sure, Jessa was beautiful. Sexy. Interesting.

But I’ve come across many women who tick off the same boxes. They’re a dime a dozen in my world.

So what is it about this woman that has me so interested?

Hell if I know.

“Am I wrong?” Lev presses, as if he can sense my roving thoughts.

“The feeling was mutual.”

Lev raises his eyebrows. “Sounds like a problem to me.”

I exhale and push myself off the side railing. “Get some sleep, Lev. Tomorrow, we need to meet with new weapons suppliers. I have two names you can add to the list.”

“Give me their contact. I’ll set it up.”

“The numbers should be on my—”

I frown. My pants pocket where I keep my second phone is empty.

“On my phone,” I mutter. “Which should be in my hand right now.”

“What’s wrong?” Lev asks.

“Can’t find my phone.”

“Didn’t you have it below deck?” Lev asks. “During the meeting with Benjamin?”

Something itches at the back of my mind, a feeling I can’t shake that something is wrong. I stride downstairs into the first oval room on the right. The center table is empty, but my memory is clear: I put the phone down on the table.

Right before Benjamin showed his hand and I shot him.

Right before Jessa screamed and Lev dragged her into the room.

Right before I left her in here alone... with my phone on the table and a threat in her head.

“Fuck,” I growl, turning to Lev who is standing at the threshold of the door.

“It’s gone?”

“You were right,” I grimace. “She is going to be a problem.”

JESSA

“You’ve only been here two nights,” Chris argues. “That’s nothing. Please stay, c’mon. Are you gonna make me get on my knees and beg?”

I’m in his kitchen with the small bag of belongings I’ve acquired in the past few days. A sweatshirt and cotton shorts Chris bought for me at the store, a spare toothbrush from his medicine cabinet, and two phones—mine and the one I stole from the yacht.

I spent the first night at Chris’s place in a sleepless haze of panic and worry. For a while, I thought I might never sleep again. But then, almost as soon as the thought crossed my mind, I went stone-cold unconscious and woke up sixteen hours later.

Now, in the light of the day, everything that happened at the yacht club feels like just a bizarre nightmare. One I’m rather eager to forget.

“I’m feeling a lot better. I think I’m ready to figure this all out.”

“I’m not sure if you remember this, but there’s a bad dude after you, Jess.” His brown eyes are pained, filled with the same worried expression that’s been plastered on his face since the moment I showed up on his doorstep, tearstained and breathless.

“First of all,” I say, grabbing my stuff, “Anton is not ‘after’ me. He was just... threatening me. All bark, no bite.”

It takes everything I have not to laugh at myself. *No bite? Yeah fucking right.*

Chris looks at me incredulously. “‘Just threatening you.’ And that’s... better?”

“He was just trying to scare me,” I say. “But I don’t think he would have, like, done anything.”

“That’s easy to say when you’re standing here, far away from him, wearing Walmart shorts with Lola Bunny on them.”

“Hey, you bought these for me, so I think it says more about your taste than it does about mine.”

He sighs and rubs a hand over his face. “What can I say? She’s a hot rabbit.”

I smile at my best friend and hold out my arms to him. “Can I get a hug before I go?”

He crosses his arms across his chest. He must’ve been hitting the gym regularly since we had our little falling out, because he’s gotten quite buff. Well, compared to old Scrawny Chris, at least.

“Jessa, I just think you’re not taking this seriously.”

“Of course I am. But I can’t spend my life cowering in fear.”

“Which is a great philosophy in principle, but doesn’t exactly hold up when there’s, ya know, *legitimate shit trying to kill you.*”

“I have insurance,” I remind him.

He picks up Anton’s phone lying on top of the duffel bag. “This piddly little thing is not going to save you.”

“It’s the kingpin’s secret Bat Phone,” I say confidently. “He wants it back.”

“Exactly!” Chris says, getting more and more frustrated. “He definitely wants it back. Which means that if he wasn’t going to check up on you before, he absolutely will now.”

“And when he does, he’ll realize I’ve stashed it somewhere and if he wants it back, he can’t touch me.”

“How long do you think that little plan will work?”

I shrug. “I haven’t worked that part out yet.”

I head for the door, but Chris steps in to block me. “You’re being way too blasé about all this, J. This is not *Law & Order*. You are not Mariska Hargitay.”

I sigh. “I’m not being blasé, and I don’t even know who that is. I’m just being... realistic. I’m trying to manage this in a way that lets me get on with my life again.”

He frowns and squeezes the bridge of his nose, mumbling something under his breath that I choose to ignore.

“Look, I know I sound insane right now,” I concede. “But, Chris, what else am I supposed to do? My world blew up two days ago. I need to find a new normal. The thought of getting back to some kind of normal is the only thing that’s keeping me sane right now.”

His expression softens a little. “You’re better off without that motherfucker. Or, you know, maid-of-honor-fucker.”

I smile sadly. “You saw through Dane from the beginning, didn’t you?”

Chris nods. “I probably should have said something sooner, but the truth is I just assumed you’d realize what a scumbag he was and end things before I ever needed to say anything. And then it just got to be too late to butt in.”

“Well, you severely overestimated how smart I am.”

He shakes his head. “You were in love.”

“I thought I was,” I correct. “Not sure if that’s the same thing.”

“Either way, you figured it out before you walked down the aisle. I know that doesn’t sound like much of a consolation—”

“Actually, it does,” I say. “The timing was... uncomfortable, to say the least. But at least I don’t have to deal with a messy divorce. It’s cleaner this way.”

Chris nods. “Can’t argue with that.”

“I never did apologize to you,” I say quietly.

“Jess...”

“No, I’m serious,” I say, holding up my hand. “I need to get this out. Back when we got engaged, I was really upset at the way you reacted. And I said some things.”

He shrugs and runs his fingers through his hair. “You were hurt.”

“I was wrong,” I say firmly. “I should have listened to you.”

He waves his hand dismissively. “Water under the bridge.”

“You really forgive me?”

“Of course.”

“Even after all the months of silence?” I ask. “The fact that I didn’t even invite you to the wedding?”

“All of it,” Chris says confidently.

I shake my head. “You’re a better person than me, Chris Eckhart. I don’t think I could forgive a friend who treated me the way I treated you.”

“Yes, you could. And you wanna know why?”

“Why?”

“Because our friendship is real, Jessa. It’s not that bogus shit you had with Salma.”

I nod, barely holding tears at bay. “She was just a place-filler, you know. Because I couldn’t have you there.”

I walk forward and force a hug on him. He stiffens for a moment before he wraps his arms around me and hugs me back.

“I... I really wish you’d just stay,” he murmurs into my ear.

“I’ve disrupted your life for long enough,” I insist. “I can’t hide out here forever. And anyway, I don’t want you involved any more than you have to be. It’s bad enough I’m stashing the phone here with you.”

Chris presses the phone to his chest. “I’ll keep it safe.”

“I have no doubt,” I tell him, planting a kiss on his cheek.
“Thanks for everything, Chris.”

“Anytime. You know that.”

“I’m just gonna change out of these absurd shorts real quick and then I’ll be out of your hair.” I duck into his bathroom and quickly swap out the pajama set for the only other adult-ish outfit I have on hand, which is the blue slip dress Anton gave me.

I feel weird putting it on—as if I needed any more reminders of *The Medusa* or its owner—but I shove that feeling into the little black hole in my heart where unwelcome thoughts go to die.

Then I step back out. Chris is holding the front door open for me. I give him another peck on the cheek and head out, the little duffel bag he lent me slung over my shoulder.

I take the back entrance out of Chris’s building just to be safe and walk two blocks away before I call an Uber. It only takes fifteen minutes to get back home. When I see the familiar gray building, I feel a warmth spread through me.

Despite everything, it feels good to be back.

The forty-eight hours of distance from what happened on the yacht has done wonders to help calm me down. But as I step out onto the curb of my building, I realize that a lot of it had to do with the comfort of Chris’s company. Without him next to me, the city feels bigger and emptier and windier.

And lonelier.

A lot lonelier.

“Buck up, J,” I tell myself in a bad imitation of Chris’s calm voice as my eyes slide down the familiar street.

There’s no one around. A few cars with registration decals for the apartment complex parked along the street. A man walking his dog at the bottom of the shallow slope. A trio of pigeons bobbing and babbling beneath a street sign that reads *Henning Street*.

I shudder at the memory of Anton reciting my address to me. That feeling of being seen in every possible way. Stripped naked, made vulnerable.

It's a hard one to get rid of.

I shake my head and straighten up. Other than pigeons and pedestrians, there doesn't seem to be much going on. A typical Monday night in a quiet part of the city.

Nothing here to fear.

I let myself into the building and walk up the stairs to the third floor. It's dark at first, but the moment I step onto the landing, the sensors catch my movement and the lights turn on. It makes me jump and stifle a scream for reasons I can't quite explain.

Maybe I'm not as relaxed as I keep telling myself I am.

I put my head down, hustle to my door, and jam the key into the lock. It doesn't turn at first, but before I can worry, the rusty tumblers give way and I go stumbling into my apartment.

I close the door behind me, lean against it, and let out the breath I've been holding. It feels like it weighs a thousand pounds. The duffel in my hand falls to the floor with a soft thump.

My apartment is exactly how I left it. Small, neat, open swoop of living room melting seamlessly right into the kitchen. Down a short hallway, my bedroom and bathroom await, promising a hot shower and as much sleep as I can possibly get.

Usually, there would be mail stacked on the counter, an old coffee cup next to the sink, and my collection of polishes on the coffee table so I could paint my nails while I watch TV. But it's all tidied away.

I'd wanted to enter my new life as Mrs. Dane Dempsey with as little clutter as possible. Now, I'm just going back to what I've always had. Somehow, it's not as depressing as I feared it might be.

I sigh and start to head towards my couch so I can collapse face-first into a dreamless coma, but before I get far, I hear

footsteps right outside my door. I stop and turn my ear to the sound.

A second later, the door handle twists.

“Oh God!” I gasp, jerking back.

He’s here. I know it. Anton or one of his minions has been waiting for me. Why did I take that phone? Why did I think it was a good idea to steal from a Bratva don? Chris was right—he’s going to bust in here and slice me up and make me scream until I tell him everything and beg for his mercy and then he’ll —

“Fucking shite!”

I pause. That is definitely not Anton. The voice on the other side of the door is distinctly female and distinctly not-Russian. There’s a scraping sound that suggests that whoever it is is trying to force a key into my lock.

“Come on, dammit,” the slurred voice says again. I catch a whiff of an accent. Scottish, maybe?

I creep towards the door and take a quick look through the peephole. The image is cloudy, but I can make out the figure of a petite woman with dark hair. She looks innocent enough, although I swore to myself that I wasn’t going to listen to my instincts in that department for a long, long time.

I unbolt the door and open it. The woman almost falls right on top of me, but she manages to catch herself in time.

She’s around my age, give or take a year or two. Her hair is dark with faint highlights running through and she has big, blue-brown eyes that are hard to miss. She’s wearing a tiny, shimmery little dress and an extremely confused expression.

“Who the fook are you?” she demands, tripping over her words.

Not Scottish. English. And she reeks of alcohol.

“Um, I’m Jessa. Who are *you*?”

She frowns, studying me carefully. “What’re you doing in my apartment?”

“Pretty sure this is my apartment,” I tell her. “What’s your number?”

“Are you hitting on me right now?”

All the nervous tension inside me fizzles out, and I laugh.

“What’s your *apartment* number?”

“Oh,” she says, glancing down at the silver sequined purse draped across her body. “My key is in there somewhere... The number should be on it.”

“Jesus,” I murmur under my breath. “How much did you drink tonight?”

“None of your business, *Mum*.”

Ignoring that, I dip into her purse without her permission and pull out her key. “Ah, Number Twenty-Four. You’re one floor down from me.”

“Doesn’t make you better than me,” she mumbles. She pokes me in the chest before she clumsily plucks the key from my hand.

I smile as she turns to the staircase, tottering like a spinning top, and promptly trips on her own heels. She stumbles forward, giving me a completely-unmasked-for eyeful of the hot pink thong she’s wearing underneath her dress.

Rolling my eyes, I grab my own keys and lock my door before heading over to her. “Here,” I say, offering her my hand. “I’ll help you to your apartment.”

She frowns at me. “Really?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You’d do that?”

I shrug. “Sure would.”

“Wow,” she breathes, her expression softening for a second with that classic drunk-girl-in-the-club-bathroom-who-just-told-you-you’re-pretty sincerity before it contorts again. A sob bursts out of her. “That’s so nice.”

“Okay, easy there, cowgirl. No need to get emotional.”

“You know, you’re the first person who... who has been nice to me in this whole d-damn city...” She hiccups and fades into silence.

“I gather you’re new in town?” I ask as I help her down the staircase one slow step at a time.

She nods and snuffles at the same time. “I was sick of London, so I came to L.A. Turns out, it’s even worse.”

“Yeah, I feel like that’s common knowledge. Weather from heaven, people from hell.”

It takes a circus-worthy juggling act to get her door open while she clings to me, both hands wrapped around my neck pitiful. But somehow, I manage.

Her apartment is an exact mirror of mine, though there’s considerably less furniture. She doesn’t even have a couch. Just a big beanbag in the middle of a lonely patchwork carpet. I drop her on the bag and double back to lock her door.

It strikes me as I fill a glass with water and walk it over to her that an opportunity has presented itself. I can stay here and make sure this hot mess is okay and avoid spending the night alone in my apartment.

You know, just in case someone is actually watching me.

Feeling reasonably satisfied with that course of action, I kneel down in front of my new neighbor and offer her the glass of water. “Drink up.”

She wrinkles up her nose and tries to bat the glass away. “I don’t wanna.”

“Drink,” I tell her firmly. “You need something to wash out all that alcohol in your system.”

She gives me a dirty look but takes the water. “Water tastes funny here.” She glugs it, missing her mouth more often than not, and then hands it back to me. “I... I feel weird.”

“Have you thrown up yet?” I ask.

“Umm... maybe. Can’t remember.”

“Well, you might have a little bit more left inside you.”

“Oh God,” she huffs. “I hate throwing up.”

“I gotta say, you look pretty good for someone who drank the whole bar,” I laugh, taking in her immaculate makeup.

She gives me a lopsided smile and grabs my hand. Her nails dig into the skin of my wrist. “You’re really pretty,” she says, coming within two inches of my face. “Like, really pretty.”

“Thanks, that’s sweet of you to say. Although I think you’re a little too drunk to be a good judge of that sort of thing.”

“I’m drunk, not blind,” she says defensively. She releases my wrist and runs her fingers through my hair. “You’re so, so pretty. Is that natural blonde?”

I want to bat her hand away, but I decide instead to be patient. “Yeah,” I sigh. “It is.”

She nods and fingers her own dark locks mournfully. “I wish I had blonde hair.”

“There’s always time.”

She shakes her head. “Nah, you can always tell a fake blonde from a real one. Brunettes, too.”

I frown. “Not sure that’s true. I can’t ever tell.”

Her eyes stare off in the other direction. I assume I’ve lost her until she suddenly whips back around to face me, her eyes wide and fervent and super solemn, and asks, “Can we be friends?”

Her lower lip is quivering like her whole life depends on my answer to this question. I feel like I’m back in preschool, making the other little girls swear to be my BFF forever and ever.

“Um... sure?”

“I’m so lonely in this city,” she mumbles. “I’ve been here for weeks and I haven’t met anyone I like. You’re the only one I like.”

I hear the sound of a car growling down on the street. “Sure,” I tell her, getting to my feet and walking over to her curtained

windows. “We can be friends. How about you tell me your name first?”

I slide the curtain to the side and take a peek at the street below. The car has stopped across the street, but now, I can see that it’s just a taxi cab. And a few seconds later, a couple climbs out, lugging sleek suitcases behind them.

“My name is Freya,” she says. “Freya Lennox.”

I let the curtain flutter closed and turn to her. “I’m Jessa Demp—well, I was supposed to be Jessa Dempsey. But that’s a long story. Jessa Gilmore is what we’re sticking with.”

Freya’s smile is bright, spreading from ear to ear. “Jessa Gilmore,” she repeats clumsily. “Pleasure to meet you.”

JESSA

I feel the sun slanting across my body, heating a line across my shoulder and over my face. My eyelids are tinged orange with the early morning glow.

Which is weird, because my bed isn't directly in front of the window. And I always keep my curtains closed at night.

I roll over. My bed feels different in an unsettling kind of way, but I'm stranded in that place between sleep and consciousness. Maybe if I keep my eyes closed, I'll drift back to sleep.

Which sounds like a great plan.

Until memories from the last few days start to sneak in.

A tall stranger on a yacht. Gray eyes that draw me in and hold me. This feeling like he's got hooks in my chest, reeling me into him in a way I can't escape and won't escape and don't even want to escape, really.

When he kisses me, I tense, my body inviting him in.

When he twists me around and traps me between the boat and his body, a soundless gasp flutters from my lips.

I want to turn around and touch him, too, but he's got me cornered, pinned down, caged in his arms and his scent. I should be panicked. I barely even know this man.

But all I feel is need.

When I finally do manage to turn around, his arms are like steel girders around me. I look up and catch his silver eyes. He

leans down to me, his lips close enough to graze against my ear, and whispers—

My eyes flash open and I bolt upright.

“Good morning there, Sleeping Beauty!” a cheery voice calls from the kitchen.

I see someone move behind the fridge and a second later, she appears with a bottle of store-bought orange juice. “Not as good as the kind I buy back home, but it’ll do. You want a glass?”

“Freya?” I ask.

She smiles and nods. “And your name is... Jessie right? No, Jenny? Janine?”

“Jessa.”

“Dammit. I’m rather horrendous with names, I’m afraid.”

I rub the sleep from my eyes, though I don’t quite manage to shake off the half-conscious dream-slash-memory I just had. “I’m impressed you even remember that much.”

She gives me an embarrassed smile. “Yeah, quite sorry about that. I must not have made a very good first impression, huh?”

“Hey,” I say sympathetically, “we’ve all been there.”

“Drunkenly knocking down a stranger’s door because you think it’s yours?” she asks, pouring the orange juice into two glasses. “Somehow, I doubt it.”

She offers me a glass and I take it gratefully. “You might not handle your liquor well, but you handle your hangovers amazingly,” I tell her.

She looks positively put-together this morning. Between the two of us, you’d think I was the one who’d been ten sheets to the wind last night. She’s wearing a white mini-dress and a thin gold chain around her neck. Her dark hair has been slicked back into a high ponytail with a few strands left purposefully loose around her face.

She beams at me. “I know. My one true talent. All my friends back home hate me for it. I can drink my weight in alcohol and

still look like a daisy the next morning.”

“Now, that’s a gift.”

She laughs, but sobers up almost immediately. “I want to thank you.”

“Seriously, there’s no need,” I tell her, holding up my hand.

“No, there is,” she insists. “I was... emotional last night. I was lonely and I was stupid to drink so much.”

“No judgment. Like I said, we’ve all been there.”

She gives me a grateful nod. “Thanks, Jessa.”

An awkward silence follows. Before either of us remember that we barely know each other and get super weirded out by what’s happening, I say, “You mentioned last night that you moved here from England recently, right?”

She nods, her ponytail bouncing prettily. “Three weeks ago, to be exact. I lived in a cheap motel for the first ten days before I found this place.”

“It’s a good building. I think you’ll be happy here.”

She looks skeptical for a moment. “I don’t know. It’s not what I’m used to.”

“Then it’s just a matter of getting used to it,” I tell her. “Give yourself a couple more weeks.”

“You’re right,” she says. “And maybe I’ll try acclimating sober this time.”

“There’s nothing wrong with going out and indulging once in a while,” I point out. “But self-medicating with alcohol is never the answer. In my experience, at least.”

“Wise words.”

I shrug. “Yeah, I’m a whole lot better with giving advice than taking it.”

Freya grins mischievously. “Sounds like there’s a story there.”

I smile and blush, turning my face away from her. “A depressing one. But maybe I’ll save it for another day.”

She looks curious, but she doesn't push me to share with her. "How about some breakfast?" she asks instead.

"That sounds nice," I say. "I'm just gonna go back to my apartment for a bit. I think I need to change and shower. I'll be back in like twenty minutes."

"Perfect," Freya says. As I head to the door, she eyes my clothes with interest. "That's a beautiful dress, by the way. Where'd you get it from?"

I finger the silky fabric of the blue slip. I should burn this thing to a crisp, then burn the crisps. But for some reason, I'm finding myself reluctant to do that. "Um... it was a gift."

"Well, whoever gave it to you has great taste," she says.

I grin and head out the door, feeling guilty for reasons I can't quite put my finger on. I should have changed the moment I got back home, but Freya had shown up before I could do anything.

I get into my apartment and make sure the door is locked before I head into my bedroom. I remove the blue slip and lay it down on the bed.

It really is pretty. It makes me wonder about the woman who bought it. The woman Anton married. Was she as beautiful as her taste suggests? Was she as classy? As discerning?

"I don't care," I say out loud. It doesn't sound convincing, so I try again, emphasizing a different part of the sentence. "I *don't* care." Nope, still not good. "I *don't* care. I don't *care*. I *don't care*."

The last one is good enough.

I shower and change, then head back down to Freya's apartment. When I knock on the door, she trills out, "Come in, it's open!" in that melodic accent of hers.

Frowning, I let myself in. "Are you sure you wanna keep your door open like that? Anyone can just walk in."

She gives me an amused look. "Paranoid much?"

"Kinda," I admit, without telling her why.

She laughs and walks around her kitchen counter with two loaded plates in hand. “I’ve got bread rolls, sausages, and cheesy eggs. Fair warning, though: I’m not the best cook, so eat at your own risk.”

I take a plate from her and stare at the one lone beanbag on the carpet.

“Carpet or beanbag?” she asks me.

“Uh, carpet is fine.”

She nods and we sit down together. “Sorry about the lack of furniture. I just don’t know how long I’ll stick around. Furniture seems so... permanent.”

I raise my eyebrows and dig my fork into the cheesy eggs Freya has made. They look a little watery, but otherwise edible.

“Has California really made such a bad impression on you?”

“This is more my problem,” she says. “I left home because I needed a fresh start, but I’m not sure I put a lot of thought into where I was going. L.A. was just the first place that popped into my head.”

“I see.”

“How is it?” Freya asks as I chew.

I swallow the bland ball of food in my mouth. “Good.”

She giggles. “You’re a bad liar.”

“It’s not bad,” I chuckle. “Maybe a little more salt next time.”

“Damn it. I always forget salt.”

“I take it you don’t cook too much?”

She crinkles her nose, and I take note of how attractive she is. Her amber-blue eyes are striking, especially against her dark hair.

“Not really,” she admits. “Other people always did the cooking. So I guess I never learned.”

“Well, you will now. Or just live off Chinese takeout. No judgment either way.”

She gives me a grateful smile. “You’re really nice. Different than all the other people I’ve met in L.A.”

“Probably because I’m not a native. I moved here with my parents when I was seventeen. My dad retired. He wanted a change of pace.”

“Was it a hard move for you?”

“A little, but I was only a year away from starting college anyway. So I didn’t have to stick around too long.”

Freya regards me with interest, like she’s paying rapt attention to every single word I’m saying. “How come I haven’t seen you around before?”

“Oh, well... Long story.”

“Another one?”

“You remember?”

She shrugs. “I may look like a bad drunk, but I keep my wits about me. Do I get to hear this long story or do I have to beg?”

I open my mouth to politely decline. But as I do, I realize that the thought of reliving my nightmare so soon doesn’t really scare me the way I thought it would.

As I’ve learned, there are way scarier things in life than a cheating fiancé and a bitch of a best friend.

“So, three days ago, I was supposed to get married.”

Freya’s eyes seem to hit the roof of her forehead. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Wow. Okay, so the fact that you’re sitting here on the floor with me means that things didn’t exactly work out, huh?”

“Not quite.”

“Oh God. Don’t tell me he didn’t show?”

“He was in the building,” I say with a small sigh. “Holed up in one of the rooms... with my maid of honor.”

Her eyes widen and her jaw drops. “What?!”

I nod. “And based on what I saw, that wasn’t the first time they’d done that kind of thing.”

“Jesus. Darling, you’re a saint. I’d be in jail for double homicide right now.”

“It was a close call,” I admit with a laugh. “But I just wanted to get away. I spent the evening of my wedding day sitting on the beach in my dress, trying to figure out how I could have been so damn blind.”

Freya looks at me with deep, genuine sympathy. “God, Jessa. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I say, forcing a smile on my face. “I’m glad it happened that way. Better that than after I signed on the dotted line. Or after we had kids, moved in together, any of that.”

“Oh, fuck yeah,” she agrees. “It’s still sad, though. You didn’t deserve that.”

“I’ve got some bad karma, but not *that* bad,” I joke.

“You and me both. So, what did you do after that?” she asks.

I hesitate. I haven’t known her long enough to trust her with the rest of my story. “I called up a friend,” I tell her. “An old friend. Chris. And I went to his place. That’s where I spent the last two nights.”

“He wasn’t at the wedding?”

“We’d had a... falling out,” I admit. “He told me that I shouldn’t marry Dane, and I told him to go fuck himself.”

She raises his eyebrows. “Sounds like a real friend.”

“He is,” I say. “I was the stupid one for not listening to him.”

“I wouldn’t be too hard on yourself. Everyone does stupid things for love.”

This is the second time someone has given me a pass based on the justification that I’d been in love. But again, it feels wrong. The word doesn’t fit.

“Maybe,” I say. “But I don’t intend on making that mistake again.”

“Of course not,” Freya agrees. “Once you’ve been burned, nothing can ever wash away those scars.”

“Sounds like you’ve got stories of your own.”

“Oh, I do,” she says with a smile. “Maybe one day, I’ll tell you all about it.”

I raise my orange juice and we clink our glasses together.

“To unexpected friendship,” I say.

“Unexpected,” Freya agrees. “But the best things usually are.”

ANTON

I'm in the billiards room. The French doors that look out over the back lawn and pool are thrown open to let in a breeze, but it's a failed effort. No breeze to be found. Only the scent of freshly-mown grass and stillness in every direction.

Then a shadow passes quickly by the doors.

"Yulian."

I feel my brother's caution before he even appears in the doorway. He's steeling himself to face me. He knows he's fucked up.

But when he doubles back to the doorway, his expression is a carefully manufactured mask of calm.

"Come in here," I say as he hovers awkwardly by the threshold.

I lean against the billiards table as he approaches me, his expression turning sheepish. "Wanna play a game?" he asks.

I smirk. "Why? We already know I'd win."

"You'd cheat, you mean."

"I never cheat."

"That's not what Marina claimed when you were married." He says it with a smile, but it dies the moment the words leave his mouth. He even pales as he waits for my reaction.

"Care to repeat that?" I snarl.

His eyes flicker across the room, checking to make sure it's just the two of us. Then he sighs and slumps forward. "Sorry. I thought that would be funnier out loud."

He was never good at saying sorry. Even as a little boy, he hated having to ask for forgiveness. Which is what Otets made him do every time he mouthed off to me.

"He is not just your brother, but your future don," he'd say. "You will ask for forgiveness and you will take the punishment you're given."

I never punished him, though. I like to think it's what created the trust we now share. He knows I always have his back.

I wave away his apology. "I asked you to do something for me two days ago."

He frowns. "That's all I've been doing the last couple of days. Lev gave me the short list of weapons dealers yesterday and I've been vetting the list of candidates we could possibly replace Benjamin with."

"That's not what I mean."

He frowns. "Huh?"

"The girl, Yulian," I say impatiently.

"Oh," he says, his eyes widening with realization. "The girl."

"Her name."

"Jessa... Gilmore," he says at last, even though it takes him a minute to remember her last name. "Right. The girl."

"What does that mean?"

"Jesus, bro, I didn't realize finding her was this urgent."

His carelessness annoys me. Mostly because I don't want to be in a position where I have to justify my interest in Jessa.

"She has my fucking phone," I growl.

"Yeah, but it's locked," he points out. "It's not like she can access anything that's inside it."

"I'm not about to take that risk."

Yulian's smile turns cheeky. I grit my teeth—this is exactly what I was hoping to avoid.

“Oh, I get it,” he says childishly. “You need to find her, huh?”

“Don't be an idiot,” I snap. “This is business.”

“Trust you to acquire business that's that hot.”

“Yulian,” I say in a warning tone.

He suppresses a sigh. I've been disappointing my easygoing, playful younger brother ever since our personalities started diverging when we were boys. He stayed youthful. I became what my father always intended me to be.

“Okay, okay. Sorry. I just didn't think it was urgent. Give me an hour, tops.”

“You have thirty minutes,” I counter.

He wrinkles his nose. “Forty-five?”

“I'm not negotiating, Yulian.”

He sighs. “Then I'm wasting time standing here talking to you. I'll be back in half an hour.”

He practically runs out of the room and smashes right into Lev on the way out.

“Where the hell are you going in such a hurry?” Lev complains as Yulian pivots around him and just keeps going without a word of apology.

Lev walks into the room looking extremely annoyed. “What has he fucked up now?”

“Never mind. You look like you could use a drink.”

“Always.”

I pour us both a glass of bourbon and we sit down next to the billiards table in black leather armchairs that face one another.

“Well?” I ask.

“It looks like loyalties are split down the middle. Couple of the suppliers turned me down outright.”

“They didn't even hear the offer?” I ask incredulously.

“Rodion got to them long before we did.”

“Husavic?”

“Yep.”

“The Triad?”

“Mhmm.”

“O’Connor?”

“On the fence.”

I lean in my seat and abandon my bourbon. “On the fence about what? Taking our money?”

“Says he doesn’t want to get in the middle of a Bratva war.”

“Then tell him not to be in the middle. He needs to pick a fucking side,” I say. “Unless he wants to face the wrath of both Bratvas instead of one.”

Lev sighs and takes a long pull of his drink. “Some of them think they can stay out of this.”

“The stupid ones, maybe.”

Lev eyes me carefully, and I can tell that he’s not saying something he really wants to say simply because he knows I’ll get pissed.

“What? What is it?”

Lev shrugs and sips his bourbon. Stubborn, mute bastard.

“If you want to keep enjoying that drink,” I growl, “you won’t make me ask again.”

Lev sighs. “You and Marina... It was chaos, Ant. And that chaos was never contained.”

“Because the bitch couldn’t keep her mouth shut.”

“She thought she could scare you into treating her the way she wanted to be treated,” Lev says.

I scoff. “It had nothing to do with how I treated her. She couldn’t make me care about her. That was the crime, apparently.”

Lev doesn't touch that, wisely. But I can see the way his eyebrows rise and fall like ocean waves. It's his thinking face.

"You're wondering why we couldn't make it work?" I surmise.

"Well, why couldn't you?"

"Because there was no foundation. It started off fueled by lust and desperation. When that fizzled out, we had nothing to say to one another."

"Is it different with her?"

I know exactly who he's talking about, but I feign ignorance.

"Who?"

"You know damn well who, Anton. The Gilmore girl."

"She was a good fuck," I offer carelessly, as if she hasn't invaded every dream I've had since that night on the sea. "But memorable only because she was ballsy enough to steal from me."

Lev snorts. "That wasn't courage; it was ignorance. If she really knew who you are and what you're capable of, she'd never have even thought about stealing from you."

"She'll learn soon enough."

My cock twitches to life at the thought of facing her again. Of breaking her again. Perhaps more permanently this time.

Right on cue, Yulian appears through the door. "Seventeen minutes," he says with a smirk, waiting for a pat on the back.

I give him nothing. "Well?"

"She's on her way home as we speak."

"Good."

"You know, you could send me in," Yulian suggests. "I'm sure I can shake her down for the phone. And if she resists... well, then, I can just shake her down."

I bite back the fury that offhand remark induces in me and shake my head. "Not necessary. I need you on the Turner meeting tonight. You can accompany Lev."

He frowns. “I’m back up?”

I nod. “Lev is the one who set the meeting up with Turner. So he’s the one steering the ship, until such time as I decide to come onboard. Make sure you’ve got his back, understood?”

Yulian looks affronted that I would even need to say that. “Don’t I always?”

“Unless there’s a piece of ass in the vicinity,” Lev points out. “In which case, you’ll step over my dead body to get to her.”

“Depends on the girl,” Yulian says with a careless smile.

I get to my feet and head for the door. “Call me after the meeting. Don’t bother me until then unless it’s urgent.”

I head to the garage and pick out one of my more modest vehicles. A silver Audi that won’t look too conspicuous driving down a quiet suburban street in the middle of Los Angeles.

I tap Jessa’s address into my GPS and cruise out.

It’s a smooth drive to Henning Street. *Somerset Villas* is the fifth building on a road that slopes sharply upward. There isn’t much traffic by foot or car.

Good. Fewer peering eyes.

I park on the opposite side of the street and settle in for a stakeout. There’s something almost wholesome about being here again. Like I’m a fresh-faced Bratva recruit watching and observing and learning the rhythms of the city we rule.

I don’t have to sit in the car for long. A cab pulls in front of the building and an older woman steps out. She has a small suitcase in tow.

I get out of the car, making sure to wait until the cab has driven off. Then I approach her with a smile. “Can I help you with that?”

Her eyes go wide as she takes me in. “Oh, uh...”

“I’m Darren,” I introduce with fake cheer. “Just moved into one of the upstairs apartments.”

“Oh!” she says, her smile turning warmer. “That’s nice. Welcome. Yes, I’d like the help please. I packed this gosh-darn thing way too heavy.”

I take her suitcase while she turns to the main door and uses her code to get us in. *Five-five-three*. I’ll remember that for later.

I follow her to her second floor apartment, chatting amicably the whole time. “Where are you coming from?” I ask.

“Maine,” she tells me. “I was visiting my daughter. She just had a baby. Her second.”

“How nice for you.”

She gives me a guilty smile. “It was nice for the first week. Then it started to get noisy.”

I laugh. “I can understand that. My brother has three kids. Family dinners are always chaotic.”

“Believe me, I know. What do you do?”

“I’m a doctor,” I tell her without missing a beat. “So you won’t see me much, I’m afraid. Crazy hours.”

The woman whistles. “Wow, very impressive. I wish my son had followed that path. He decided he wanted to be a dancer.”

“And did he succeed?”

She scoffs. “He’s stripping in Las Vegas, so I suppose he did, in a sense.”

Smiling, I wait until she gets her door open and then I pop the suitcase right inside the door.

“Thank you so much,” she says, turning around to face me.

“Of course. Goodnight, Mrs. ...?”

“Donnelly.”

“Mrs. Donnelly. Hope to run into you again at some point.”

Her smile tells me that I’ve completely won her over. I smirk. And everyone says Yulian is the one with charm.

The moment the door shuts, I head upstairs to the third floor. Number Thirty-Four beckons. It doesn't take me long to jimmy the lock and let myself in.

It's always interesting to step into another person's private space with no one else present. You see the little knick-knacks they've gathered, the detritus of a life much different than yours. You see what they love and what they neglect. You see where they sit, where they eat, where they sleep. It's intimate. The kind of thing that can make your heart soften.

In Jessa's case, it makes my cock throb.

A pair of fluffy flip-flops sit by the foot of the sofa. There are a few books stacked on the two shelves that flank the TV unit. Cookbooks, mostly, with the occasional bodice ripper romance novel thrown in for spice. A house plant in the corner begs for more water. The kitchen, on the other hand, is clean and well-loved.

I glide down the hall and into her bedroom. My eyes scan everything, taking notes, collecting facts.

Indentation on the pillow suggests a side-sleeper.

Pile of dirty clothes in one corner—dry cleans when she can, handwashes what she can't.

Culinary encyclopedia on the nightstand, a pair of glasses on top. Must read before bed.

I turn around and notice a wooden dressing table with a design of painted daisies down the side. The oval mirror above it has pictures slid beneath the frame.

Most are uninteresting. Jessa as a baby in her mother's arms, Jessa in chef's whites on her graduation day, Jessa and her ex-fiancé as he proposes to her.

But one catches my eye.

I know everything there is to know about Dane William Dempsey, thirty years old, takes Xanax recreationally and plays video games, lingers too long on his lunch breaks, lifts weights at the twenty-four gym down the road twice a week

but spends most of the time between sets browsing porn on his phone. He is irrelevant to me now.

The man Jessa is with in the picture, though? That's not Dane.

He's holding her like he loves her. An arm slung around her shoulder, warm and cozy. They're standing on a suburban street, beaming up at the camera. She smiles pleasantly, easily.

I memorize the stranger's face and then I move on.

When I go back into the living room, I notice the two wine glasses sitting out on the kitchen counter. Interesting.

I take a seat on the window seat and gaze down at the street below. It's not long before I see someone turn the corner.

She's wearing ankle boots and a light gray trench-coat. Her blonde hair flutters loose behind her. I wonder if she knows that she switches her hips when she walks, that every man who passes by does a double-take, that cars slow down just to watch her.

I wonder if she knows I'm watching her now.

She strides quickly down the street and then disappears into the bowels of this building. Sixty seconds until she's here, maybe less. My limbs twitch with anticipation and my dick is now fully erect. Inconvenient, but the anticipation of tonight has been building steadily the last couple of days, so it's not particularly surprising.

I glance towards the two empty wine glasses, wondering who she could have been entertaining. A friend? A date? The man in the photograph from her bedroom?

I hear the faint sound of footsteps in the hallway. Then the key twists in the lock.

She opens the door and walks in without looking up into the dark apartment. I stay where I am, still and ready.

She drops her bag onto the floor and hangs her coat up on the hanger next to the door. She's wearing ripped black jeans and a thin white sweater that reveals the black lace bra she's got underneath. Finally, she turns on the lights.

She still doesn't notice me and I can see why—she's deep in thought. Even as she checks to make sure she's locked the door securely, she doesn't once seem to sense that she's not alone in the apartment.

Not until she's halfway into the living room does she spot me.

Her mouth parts in a gasp, her golden eyes widening in fear. She looks stunning when she's terrified.

Good. She should be.

JESSA

“Hello, Jessa,” he says coolly. “Long time no see.”

“Not long enough,” I manage to spit out. I glance around my apartment, trying to figure out if there’s anyone else here or if he came alone. “How did you get in?”

By the looks of it, he’s been here for a while. He’s relaxed, anyway, lounging in my favorite spot in front of the window.

I like having the sunlight on my face when I read. I like looking out the window and observing people going about their lives when I need to take a break from the page.

That is *my* damn spot.

And I hate that he looks so good sitting in it.

“Is that really the most important question you’d like to ask?” he asks.

“Do you have an alternative suggestion?”

“How about, ‘*Why are you here, Anton*’?”

I stare at him, second-guessing my plan of stashing the phone with Chris. If Chris gets dragged into this, it’ll be my fault. I can’t let that happen.

“You’re here to check up on me.”

His smile turns into a scowl. “Don’t get cute. It doesn’t suit you.”

“I’m not—”

“Why am I here, Jessa?”

“I have no idea,” I say, jerking my chin out at him defiantly.

He sighs and leans forward, resting his elbows against his knees. “I don’t have patience for games.”

“You’re in luck because I don’t have time for games,” I tell him. “I’m just keeping my head down and going about my life, just like I said I would. And in case you’re wondering: no, I haven’t told a soul about you or about what happened on that yacht.”

“Good to know,” he says. “Then you won’t mind handing me back the phone you stole from me that night.”

I can’t help but be proud of the confidence with which I say the next phrase. “What phone?”

“Jessa, Jessa, Jessa,” he tuts. “I thought I told you never to lie to me.”

I shrug. “It’s not my fault you misplaced your stuff.”

“Is that what happened?” he asks, pushing himself up and sauntering over to me. “You’re going to stick with that story?”

“It’s not a story.”

He regards me coolly. I can see by the light in his eyes, the clench in his jaw: he knows I have his phone. He’s just trying to figure out where it’s hidden.

“I must say, you seem remarkably calm for a woman whose home has just been broken into.”

“It’s not like I wasn’t expecting this visit,” I point out. “I’ve been mentally preparing for it since I got back.”

“I’m flattered.”

I roll my eyes and move around him, trying to look as unconcerned as I can. “Can I offer you something to drink?” I ask pleasantly. “I don’t have much. Orange juice, mostly. Coffee. Or I could make you a cocktail of bleach, if you’d prefer?”

He regards me with amusement. “Something alcoholic would be better.”

I pull open the fridge door and root around in there. “I’ve got two beers from last summer. If they kill you, I take no responsibility.”

“It’ll take more than an old beer to kill me, Jessa.”

I shrug and toss it to him. “Suit yourself.”

He catches it out of the air easily, twists off the cap with one huge hand, and pitches it right into the trash can across the room. It’s obnoxious how effortless his every motion is.

I take up a station across the island from him. The distance is good. It gives me a sense of security. And even though I know it’s completely false, I cling to it anyway.

Show a bully your fear and they’ll feast on it. My dad has never really been one for advice, so the little he does give, I remember. That one feels particularly applicable right now.

Anton takes a swig of the beer. I admire the sloping curve of his Adam’s apple. The man is devastatingly handsome. He looks out of place in my scrubby little kitchen, though.

“Nice place,” he says, looking around.

“Is that sarcasm?”

He laughs. “Do you not think it’s nice?”

“No,” I rush to correct. “I actually love this apartment. I’m just guessing it’s not what you’re used to.”

“It’s not,” he says. “But why would you care?”

“I don’t,” I snap.

So much for being smooth and confident. I turn around and grab myself a glass of water, mostly because I don’t want to be stuck staring at him while I fight off an embarrassed blush.

When I return to the counter opposite him, he eyes my hands with interest. I glance down at the bandages wrapped around two of my fingers.

“Tough day at work?” he asks.

“You could say I’ve been a little distracted lately.”

“Are you blaming me?”

“You,” I admit. “Dane. Myself. Mostly the last one. I seem to be making all the wrong choices.”

“Like stealing my phone,” he offers.

I give him a sweet smile. “That one wasn’t me.”

“Right. I forgot you were sticking with your story.”

“It’s easy to stick to when it’s the truth.”

We stare at each other. Of course, I’m the first one to blink. But I choose to blame his sinful gray eyes. You can’t look at them too long without damaging your own.

“How’s the beer?” I ask, looking away.

“Disgusting.”

I laugh. “Don’t blame me. That was Dane’s.”

Anton scowls. “How a man could have so little taste as to choose this piss and so much as to choose you is a baffling contradiction.”

“I’m not totally sure,” I muse, “but I’m pretty sure that’s a compliment?”

“It’s an acknowledgment that you dodged a bullet.”

I snort out a laugh. “I wouldn’t say that. I ran away from Dane and right onto your boat. Feels like I dodged a bullet and waltzed into a nuke.”

“Some would call that luck,” he says smugly.

“That’s not the word I would use.”

“Maybe you will, in the future.”

“I think you’re overestimating your charm.”

“Are you saying I have an ego?” he asks innocently, as though he genuinely wants to know the answer. His dark hair is curling over his forehead. My fingers itch to smooth it back in place.

“Most men do,” I tell him. “Then throw in a little wealth, power, and good looks? They become virtually insufferable. You don’t strike me as the humble type.”

He arches one perfect eyebrow. “And you don’t strike me as the stupid type. Yet here we are.”

I take a deep breath to steel myself. Bantering with him is weirdly intoxicating. Like getting in the cage with a tiger. “Do you usually make personal calls for the sole purpose of intimidating innocent people?”

“It’s the kind of work I usually delegate, to be honest,” he says. “But for you, I made an exception.”

“I would have rather talked to Yulian, but I guess I’m flattered.”

“Trust me,” he says, leaning in and giving me the full impact of those gray eyes, “you shouldn’t be.”

A moment passes. Neither of us look away. I feel like I’m being seared and skewered and stripped open, but I fear that what will happen if I break eye contact would be so much worse.

Then he blinks and the moment ends.

Straightening up, he runs a hand through the mess of dark hair. “How was work today?”

“Don’t gimme that shit.” I shake my head. “You don’t actually care.”

“I wouldn’t ask if that was the case.”

“No. You’re asking because—C’mon, that’s not why you’re here.”

He smiles. “Then why am I here, Jessa?”

“You want to make sure I’ve kept my mouth shut. Which I have,” I say softly.

“And my phone.”

We stare each other down, and I’m starting to realize that simply denying that I took his phone is not a long-term strategy.

He gets up suddenly, making me jerk back with alarm. He walks around the counter until he’s standing right in front of

me. He really is incredibly tall.

“What are you doing?” I ask, distracted by the way his gray eyes turn a chalky blue under the kitchen lights.

“Trying to determine how long you’re going to keep this up.”

“As long as I need to.”

He smiles. “Where have you hidden it?”

I bite my lip. “I’m not telling.”

“Jessa—”

“I have no reason to believe you won’t hurt me,” I blurt out. “I needed... insurance.”

Jesus. How did he manage to do that? One second, I was absolutely determined to remain steadfast. The next second, I’m singing like a bird.

“*Kotyonok*, there’s no amount of insurance in the whole fucking world that can keep me at bay.”

He’s managed to get even closer to me. He’s so broad that he wipes out everything else. I could be anywhere in the universe and it wouldn’t matter, because all I can see and smell and feel is him.

“I’m not scared of you,” I whisper.

“But you’re scared of something. What is it, Jessa?” He inches closer. “Scared you’ll make the same mistake twice?”

I thrust my chin up towards him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You want me to tell you?” he asks with raised eyebrows. Then he shakes his head. “No, no. I don’t want to make this too easy. The best games make you work for it.”

He traps me between his arms and the kitchen counter. His scent is so strong, a cologne I’ve never smelled before, uniquely him and uniquely dark and uniquely powerful.

“Just so you know, if anything happens to me, you’ll never find your phone,” I tell him. “And... and the cops will know who to come after.”

“Sounds to me like you’re lying, Jessa. I bet you think you’re being brave. Like you need to protect whichever unlucky soul you decided to involve in this.”

“You don’t know what I’m capable of,” I say—which, even as it crosses my lips, feels like the biggest, dumbest lie in the history of fibbing.

“Then that makes us even.” His eyes lower to my chest, but his gaze doesn’t linger there. “Tell me where you’ve hidden it and this whole messy business comes to a close.”

“You really expect me to believe that?”

“I think it’s in your best interests to believe whatever I tell you.”

“Yeah, I did that once,” I remind him. “With a man I promised to marry. Fool me once, shame on you, et cetera.”

“I’m a different sort of man, Jessa. You don’t want to stand in my way.”

“Why?” I demand. “Because you’ll kill me if I do?”

He doesn’t exactly jump to refute that point. Instead, he leans in a little. His hands grip my hips. Leaning forward, he brushes his lips against my ear and whispers, “Worse. I’ll keep coming back.”

I frown, but when his hands snake downwards, following the curve of my legs, I can’t stop a little gasp from escaping my lips.

“I’m starting to wonder if this is the very reason you took my phone in the first place,” he observes. “Because you wanted to make sure I would come searching for you.”

“Who’s to say it’s not the other way around?”

He looks amused with my theory. “*Kotyonok*, do you think I need an excuse to do anything? When I see something I want, I reach out and take it.”

I put my hands on his chest and try to push him away. It’s about as effective as doing the same thing to a mountain. “You’re not taking me.”

“I think you’re forgetting,” he murmurs, his hand sliding up between my breasts. “I already did.”

I bite my lip as a heated blush steals over my cheeks. “You think because we had sex, that means somehow you own me? It doesn’t. Not even a little bit. Did I want you in that moment? Yeah, sure. But that doesn’t mean I want you forever. No matter how strong or powerful or handsome you think you are.”

I’m all fire and brimstone—at least, it feels that way—but Anton just smirks and chuckles. “If that’s how you insult me, you should do it more often.”

I try to push him away again. Somehow, it’s even less effective than the first attempt.

“You know why you took my phone, Jessa?” he asks. “Because deep down, you like the excitement of it. You crave danger. You knew what you were doing when you took it. You knew what you were inviting in. And you did it anyway.”

“I wanted to be smart.”

“No,” he says, cutting me off. “You wanted to make an impression.”

I find myself staring at him. It’s dumb—I’m the one in my head, not him. He can’t hear my thoughts. He can’t see what’s going on inside me.

So why does it feel like he can? How come, when Anton Stepanov gazes down at me, it’s like every dirty little secret I’ve ever had is written across my forehead for him to read?

How does he know things about me that even I don’t know?

“I... that’s not—”

“You agreed to marry a man who was cheating on you with your best friend. She was lying to you. He was lying to you. And you didn’t see it. You never suspected a thing the entire time they were fucking each other and laughing at you behind your back.”

His words are harsh, but in the weirdest way, they’re not cruel. It’s more like he’s trying to help me come to a realization I’ve

been avoiding this whole time.

“I... I trusted them,” I whisper, making the mistake of meeting his eyes.

“Did you really? Or were you just chasing the drama?”

My eyes go wide. “That’s a horrible thing to say.”

“The truth often is.”

I shake my head and try to get out from between his arms. Again, he blocks me.

“Not so fast, little one.”

“Whatever you’re going to do to me,” I growl, pushing my face up towards his, “just fucking do it.”

His eyes are gray steel, glowing with promises that can morph into threats at the snap of his fingers.

And I’ve just set fire to his worst intentions.

His arm twists around my waist. Before I can catch up with the action, his lips slam down against mine. The breath rushes right out of me.

And before I think straight, I can feel my body responding.

No! I scream at myself. Don’t fall for this. Don’t let him pull you in. You don’t have an excuse anymore. You know who he is.

But it’s useless. My tongue is entwined in his and there’s no argument in the world that could make me pull away.

As it turns out, I don’t have to. Because Anton breaks the kiss first.

I’m breathing heavily, staring up at him, my chest bruising against his wall of muscle. He traces his finger along the curve of my bottom lip.

“Sure you aren’t just chasing the drama?”

He might as well have slapped me across the face.

ANTON

“You really are a son of a bitch,” she snarls, face twisted up in anger.

She slams her palms against my chest. I can tell she’s throwing all her rage behind the move, but I barely feel a thing.

I keep her trapped between my arms. She thinks it’s to make a point. But I made my point a while ago.

This is about what *I* want.

And even if she doesn’t know it... it’s what she wants, too.

The girl has viper eyes and an angel’s smile. She can give as good as she gets. But there’s an innocence that still clings to her no matter how hard she tries to buck it. She’s desperate to hold her own against me, but she’s too proud to admit that she’s completely out of her depth.

I don’t mind. It just makes the game that much more fun.

“Get. Off. Of. Me.”

I roll my eyes. “I’d listen if I believed that was what you really wanted.”

“I’m fucking serious,” she growls at me—or, more accurately, at the floor between her feet, since she’s avoiding my eyes like she’s worried she’ll turn into stone if she meets them. “Let me go or I’ll scream so loud the whole building will hear.”

I *tsk* quietly. “You don’t want to wake up Mrs. Donnelly, do you?”

She freezes between my arms. “How do you know Mrs. Donnelly?”

I ignore the question. I only met the woman a few minutes ago, but if Jessa wants to think that I know more than I do, that’s no problem. “Sweet old lady. Doesn’t have much patience with the grandkids.”

“Jesus. How long have you been watching me?” she asks as panic starts to edge in.

“Long enough to know that you’re going to cave long before I have to break you.”

Her eyes harden to steel. “Then you don’t know me at all.”

I drop my arms and walk away before she can. I meander toward her bookshelf. It’s chaotic, spines facing in and out and up and down, pages dog-eared, covers missing.

“Have you really read all these?” I ask, grabbing a paperback and flipping through the pages.

“I’ve read all the recipe books,” she says hesitantly. “And most of the others.”

“What about this one?” I snap the book shut and hold up the cover. “You like him?”

“He’s a good writer.”

“He’s unoriginal,” I correct. “Afraid of the truth.”

She moves into the living room, making sure to keep the coffee table between us. As if that could possibly stop me. “How do you figure that?” she asks.

“The good guy always wins in the end,” I tell her. “He writes lies.”

“Oh, I see,” she scoffs. “You’re trying to tell me that this is real life and in real life, the villain always wins. A.K.A... you.”

I smile. “I’m trying to tell you that in real life, there are no heroes and villains, Jessa. In real life, it’s just eat or be eaten.”

“Not in *my* life.”

“That kind of naivete is exactly why your fiancé cheated on you as long as he did,” I snarl. “If you keep thinking of life as a fluffy romance novel, you’re going to keep getting hurt.”

She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. It doesn’t matter. Nothing she can say will change what I know is happening behind those pretty little eyes. The fear. The doubt. The longing.

“Give me the phone,” I tell her quietly.

For a moment there, I’m certain I have her. She’s crumbling in my hands. Putty to be molded. A soft, warm, wet—

Then she takes a seat on her L-shaped sofa and props her feet up on the table.

I’m secretly proud. It would have been a much less interesting night if she had just caved under pressure and given me what I asked for.

“If you’re hungry, there’s some leftover coq au vin in the fridge,” she tells me. “It’s good. I made it myself.”

I sit down at the opposite end of the sofa and throw one foot up to rest on the edge of the coffee table. She tenses slightly, but she keeps her expression neutral, bordering on unconcerned. Again, I have to admire her bravery. This one has fire.

“What do you think you’re proving right now?” I ask. “I’m genuinely curious.”

She gives me a shrug. “You’re a bully. I’ve dealt with bullies before.”

“Do tell.”

“I switched schools when I was eight,” she tells me. “Mom and Dad decided I would benefit from a private school education. There was a group of girls who hated me. Honestly, I don’t even know why. I don’t think they needed a legitimate reason. I was new, and they had each other, and so they just picked me as the enemy.” She’s quiet for a moment. “Or maybe it was because I had buck teeth and a bowl cut.”

“Hardly a punishable offense.”

“Neither is being in the wrong place at the wrong time,” she points out. “And yet here we are.”

I suppress my smile. “Finish your story. What happened?”

“I endured,” she tells me. “I waited them out. I faced them head-on sometimes and even if I got my ass kicked, eventually, they realized something: I was made of stronger stuff.”

Her eyes grow cloudy, but not with tears. She made peace with her past a long time ago. She can refer to it without breaking down. She doesn’t let fear rule her.

“What were your parents like?” I ask.

Jessa frowns. “Is this an interview?”

“It’s a question.”

The war in her eyes rages for a moment over whether or not to indulge me. It’s strange: her childhood shouldn’t be of any interest. And yet, I want her to continue talking. I want her to tell me all the stories that contributed to creating the woman she is now. I want to see what shaped her, if only so I know what kind of history I’m destroying when I bend her to my will.

In the end, she gives in. They always do.

She purses her lips and sighs. “We don’t have much in common. My mother saw me as a chore. Dad worked a lot to make sure he could afford the private school he sent me to.”

“You said he was a police officer?”

She nods. “He worked really hard all his life. I think that was his way of showing me that he loved me, since God knows he never said it much. It took a beat, but I figured it out when I was about eleven. With Mom... it was just different with her. She worked, too—part-time because she claimed she wanted to be at home when I came back from school. But she never actually spent any real time with me. You know what she said to me the day after my almost wedding?” she asks.

“She told you that you should forgive Dane.”

Jessa looks momentarily impressed. “How’d you know?”

I shrug. “I just know the type.”

“She told me I should have gone through with the wedding and dealt with things later. I told her that I wasn’t about to forgive Dane or Salma for what they did to me. You know what she said to me then?”

“Something judgmental and superior, no doubt.”

Jessa smiles at that one. “Sure you haven’t met my mother?”

“I’ve been lucky enough to avoid it thus far.”

Her smile gets wider, perhaps a little more comfortable. “She told me that ‘wasn’t very Christ-like.’”

“She’s one of those, huh?”

Jessa nods with a tired grimace on her face. “My fiancé and best friend had cheated and lied to me for years, but somehow, I was still the one in the wrong for not being forgiving enough.”

“So what did you say?”

“I told her I didn’t want to speak to her anymore. My father stepped in and told me not to be rude to my mother.” She shakes her head. “I walked out on them both.”

“Have you heard from them since?”

“No. And I’m not likely to, either. In my family, the child always has to apologize first.”

“You planning to?” I ask curiously.

She bites her lip. The gesture is surprisingly endearing. She hesitates for a moment before she answers. “Eventually, I will.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re my parents.”

“That’s a piss-poor reason.”

“You’re giving me advice now?” she scoffs.

“I feel like you asked for it.”

She considers that a moment and nods. “Mom’s birthday is coming up. I have to call her for that.”

“Who says you have to do anything?”

She frowns. “She’s my mother.”

“So?”

She shakes her head. “You clearly don’t understand. You’re not used to compromising or... or being the bigger person.”

“Look at me, Jessa. I’m always the bigger person.”

She guffaws with laughter then looks embarrassed. It’s surprisingly easy to sit here in her claustrophobic little apartment and listen to her ramble. I’m not restless, stirred up the way I usually am. I can just... breathe.

“So,” I press, “you’re brave when it comes to bullies but not when it comes to your parents?”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Isn’t it?”

She considers that for a moment. “My parents do care about me, even if it’s not always obvious to me. They just think they know best.”

“And do you agree that they do?”

“Well, I think I’ve proven that I clearly don’t know best. So maybe it’s possible that they do.”

“Your mother’s advice was to go back to your cheating fiancé and marry him. Does that sound like good advice to you?”

She sighs. “If anyone has the right to give me that advice, it’s her.”

I wait for her to continue, because I know she will. There’s something she wants to get off her chest. Something she hasn’t shared with many people before me.

“She forgave my father,” Jessa says in a soft voice. “He cheated on her years ago when I was in middle school.”

“She told you that?”

“Neither one of them ever did,” she admits. “I heard voices in the middle of the night one day. I snuck downstairs and heard my parents talking. Arguing, rather. Apparently, Dad was having an affair with one of the women in his precinct. Mom asked him if the fling was over. He said it was. She asked him why he ended it, and he actually told her the truth. He didn’t end it; she did. The woman wanted him to leave us, and he refused.”

Jessa’s eyes are glazed over, lost to the memory. “And my mom... She reacted by walking over to him and hugging him. It was probably the first time I’d ever seen them hug like that. The next day when I came down, it was like nothing had happened. Dad was reading the newspaper. Mom was making breakfast. They continued with their lives like nothing ever happened. So I did, too.”

She looks up and, for a moment, she looks surprised to see me there. Or maybe she’s just surprised that she’s shared so much.

“My dad realized after a while that I was being bullied in school,” she says, jumping back in time a little. “He asked me if I wanted him to speak to their parents. I said no.”

“Pride?” I ask.

“I don’t know, honestly. I felt like I could do it alone. Stand up to them alone. And I also knew that running to anyone else for help would prove to them that I was as weak as they thought I was. I didn’t want to give them the satisfaction.”

“And how long did it take for them to back off you?”

“Years,” she whispers. “It took years.”

I see years of battle in her eyes, in the slump of her posture. Someone who still carries the scars they got when they were too young to know to protect themselves. It makes my chest throb with a strange kind of hot anger I’ve never felt before.

Anger at these unnamed girls for daring to hurt her.

Anger at her parents for not intervening.

Anger at myself, crazy as that might sound, for not being there to stop it all myself.

“But you know what?” she continues. “No matter how bad it got with them, I never went to the teachers. I’m proud of that.”

“Ah,” I say, pretending to be impressed. “Just like you won’t go to the cops now.”

“Exactly,” she says with a nod of satisfaction. It’s as though she’s resting her case.

“Was that the point of all that information about your childhood and your parents?” I ask. “A roundabout way of reassuring me that I can trust you?”

“Maybe.”

She bites her lower lip self-consciously and my engine revs all over again. I cross my legs, but she doesn’t seem to notice the effect her little mannerisms have on me.

“I watched this documentary once,” she says, almost as an afterthought. “This true crime thing. This psychologist or psychiatrist or whatever, he was talking about killers’ mindsets, and he said that predators—that’s what he called them, ‘predators’—they can do all the horrible shit they do because they dissociated from their victims. The people they kill aren’t really ‘people’ to them. But if you can make a sociopath learn something, anything, about the person, they couldn’t go through with it. It’s harder to murder the girl you know has anxiety issues growing up because she watched her mother die in a car crash when she was twelve. It’s harder to gut the man who liked to eat peanut butter sandwiches because it reminded him of his idyllic childhood before his parents divorced.”

I smile. “So you think I can’t kill you now because I know that you were bullied as a child?” I ask. “Because I know your father cheated on your mother?”

“It was worth a shot,” she mumbles.

I push myself off the sofa and take a step towards her. She sinks into the cushions while I lean in and trap her between my arms once more.

“It’s unfortunate that you went through that. It’s sad that you had to spend most of your life fighting off your bullies on your

own,” I tell her, my face inches away from hers. “But neither piece of information is going to stop me from getting what I want. I’ll be back tomorrow night. And I expect you to have my phone with you.”

“Would you really kill me?” she asks in a small voice.

I lean in and press my lips to hers. A reminder of everything she’s given me already.

When I pull back, I keep my face dangerously close. “I will do whatever I need to,” I rasp. “I always do.”

Then I straighten up and head towards the door, feeling her eyes on me the entire time.

“Anton?” she calls.

I turn towards her. “Yes, *kotyonok?*”

“What happened to your wife?” she asks.

I stiffen. “She killed herself. Like I told you.”

Jessa blinks, processing slowly. “Why would she do that?”

The truth is so much more complicated than anyone understands. There are layers involved. You ignore some layers and I look like the villain. The predator. You remove a few more layers and the center of evil shifts elsewhere.

But no one knows that besides me and Marina.

And one of us is dead.

I sigh. “Because she knew that if she didn’t do it at some point... I would have done it for her.”

JESSA

I wake up at five in the morning. Although “wake up” isn’t exactly accurate, because it feels more like I never really slept at all.

I splash cold water on my face, trying to wash away the fatigue that clings to the new lines on my face. But my eyes are still puffy when I put on my sweats and head out for a run.

I try to run for at least half an hour. Four or five times a week, if I can manage. Today, I do triple that.

Every time I think about cooling down, it feels like Anton is closing in on me. Like I can sense him creeping up just out of sight, ready to snatch me up and swallow me whole.

I haven’t decided what I’m going to do about the phone. If I give it back to him, I lose my leverage and I’m completely at his mercy. It doesn’t help that, in every rare moment of silence, I hear his parting words to me from last night.

She knew that, if she didn’t do it at some point... I would have done it for her.

That’s as good as a confession, isn’t it? Even if Anton didn’t kill his wife, he pushed her into killing herself. She was desperate. Scared.

He was this woman’s nightmare—her final nightmare, by the sounds of it—and I’ve been mooning over him.

I let him fuck me against a yacht railing. And even after I saw him shoot a man in cold blood, I let him kiss me last night.

My stomach twists with guilt. The stitch in my side becomes unbearable as I bend over and grab my knees, trying to catch my breath.

“Oh God...”

I end up puking my guts out in the weeds on the edge of a playground. When I resurface, I notice two mothers staring at me with disgust as they usher their gawking children away.

Talk about hitting new lows.

When I'm done retching, I jog away as fast as I can, making a mental note to never come back to this neighborhood again. I'm so lost in thought when I approach my building that I don't even notice Freya until she claps me on the back.

“Jesus!” I scream, twisting around and batting her hand away.

“Whoa!” She holds up her hands. “It's just me.”

Closing my eyes, I run my hands over my face. “Shit, Freya. I'm so sorry. You startled me.”

“Clearly. You didn't hear me calling?”

“I was... deep in thought.”

She nods, looking at me with concern. “Why don't you come up to my place?” she suggests, holding up a brown paper bag. “I've got croissants.”

“I don't think I could eat right now if my life depended on it.”

“Then you can watch me eat,” she insists. “Come on.”

I follow her up to her apartment and collapse onto one of her barstools the moment we get to the kitchen. Wordlessly, she pours me a glass of water and hands it to me.

“Thanks,” I mumble.

“Is there a reason you're so jumpy today?” she asks, eyeing me curiously.

I shake my head. “Just... contemplating a few things.”

“Like?”

“Um, let's call it life decisions.”

“Ah, life. Trust me. I’ve been there.” She pulls out the croissants and puts them on a plate. “Sure you don’t want one? They’re delicious.”

“Not right now, thanks.”

“Juice, then?” she asks. “Or coffee?”

“Maybe some coffee. Black, please.” I’m going to need some caffeine if I have any hope of making it through this day.

She gives me a thumbs up and puts on a fresh pot to brew. When it’s burbling away, she turns back to me, leans against the counter, and grins mischievously.

“Uh-oh,” I say. “I don’t think I like that look you’re giving me.”

Her grin widens. “Sooo... does this distraction of yours have anything to do with the stud muffin I saw leaving your apartment last night?”

I freeze. “What?”

Her smile gets wider. “Oh, don’t play coy with me, girl! I saw the guy. He was yummy. And that’s putting it lightly.”

I cringe, my eyes falling down. “It’s not what you think.”

“It was, like, midnight,” she points out. “I think it was exactly what I think.”

“Trust me: it wasn’t.”

She frowns. “Oh, come on, Jessa. It’s not like you’re involved with anyone, right? You’re a newly single woman and he’s a gorgeous man. Did you bang or did you not?”

The question comes out a little sharp to my ears. Or maybe I’m just carrying the guilt of my complete lack of willpower where Anton Stepanov is concerned.

“No, we did not ‘bang.’ It’s not like that.”

But the moment I say it, I remember the way he kissed me last night. A power play, of course. But for a moment, I thought it was more.

Pathetic, I know. The more I think about it, the worse it gets.

I feel my shame compound as the coffee pot sings. “Freya,” I say, “you might want to take that off.”

She yelps, then turns around to grab the pot and pour out black coffee into a shallow mug. “Here,” she says, thrusting it into my hands. “Now, back to the good stuff. Where did you meet him?”

“I... can’t say.”

I curse myself for being so damn transparent. If I’d played this off better, she might have never suspected anything. But now, she’s looking at me with concern.

“He isn’t a gigolo, is he?”

“W-what?” I blurt, gaping at her. “Of course not!”

She smiles. “Because no judgment, okay? A girl’s gotta get some, and that’s a real easy way to do it.”

“Jesus.” I roll my eyes. “He’s not a prostitute. Actually, I kinda wish he was. That would make things so much simpler.”

Freya’s eyes hit the roof and again, I curse myself for being so stupidly obvious today. But since the damage is already done, I decide to level with her.

“Trust me, Freya. I don’t want to get you involved in this mess. You’re better off not knowing.”

Her grin falters. “You’re starting to scare me, girl.”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle,” I tell her. “It’s just a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Anton. That’s his name. I’m in the process of ending things.”

She looks confused now. “So you *are* involved with him?”

“Sort of, but not romantically.”

“Uh-huh,” she says, clearly not following me.

“I can’t really talk about it.”

“Jessa,” she says, grabbing my hand suddenly, “is he dangerous?”

Her gaze is direct, piercing. And I’m a shit liar. So I sigh and say, “I think so, yeah.”

Somehow, this information doesn't frazzle her the way it's been frazzling me. She looks calmer and more determined than ever. Even her voice cools and hardens into steel. "It may surprise you to know that I've known men like him my whole life."

"What do you mean?"

She sighs. "I never told you about the real reason I moved to L.A., did I?"

I shake my head.

"I was involved with a man," she shares. "I believed for a long time that he was in love with me. I'd like to think I'm a smart woman, but the truth is, it took me a long time to figure out that real love doesn't involve beatings and abuse and constant fighting."

Horror washes over me. "Oh my God, Freya..." My hand reaches for hers instinctively. She's cold to the touch, like the memory itself is sucking the life out of her.

She gives me a melancholy smile. "I stayed with him way longer than I should have."

"How long?"

"Two years," she admits. "The first six months were more or less perfect. And then *it* started. He was controlling, possessive. At the time, I was stupid enough to justify his behavior by claiming he just loved me so much he didn't know how to handle it. Then it got to a point where I couldn't justify it anymore. If you love a person, how could you hit them? Scream at them? Tell them they're worthless?"

I squeeze her hand as dread does the same to my heart. "He did all that to you?"

"That, and worse," Freya says, her eyes dipping low for a moment. "Sometimes he used to hold me down just so he could watch me struggle. When he was really pissed, he'd choke me."

"Oh my God..."

A shiver runs through her. “Every time I made up my mind that I was going to leave him, he’d convince me to stay.”

“How?”

“Sometimes, it would be as simple as a gesture. He’d come home with flowers. Red roses, because he knew they were my favorite. I’d tell myself that he’d only made a silly mistake. It wouldn’t happen again. But when he really fucked up, it was different. The first time he beat me, I had bruises up and down my stomach. That was the first night I packed my bags. It wasn’t the last.”

“He convinced you to stay,” I guess.

She nods as she bites her lip to keep the tears from spilling over. “He got down on his knees in front of me and begged me to stay. He pleaded for my forgiveness. He promised he would never do it again as long as he lived.”

“And you believed him?”

“A part of me did,” she says softly. “But I’ll be honest: I knew deep down that he would never stop. If you hit a woman once, you’ll do it again. If you’re capable of doing it at all, you’re capable of everything.”

I find myself staring at Freya, marveling at how put together she is considering what she’s been through. She looks strong and capable and far from intimidated.

She takes a deep breath. “He was so beautiful,” she whispers. “Dark hair and the most intense eyes I’ve ever seen. It was stupid, but I used to think, *‘He’s too beautiful to do such ugly things.’* But I was wrong. About that and so much else.”

“Did you ever go to anyone for help?”

“The thing about men like that is that they isolate you,” she explains. “He made me feel guilty about hanging out with my friends. Sometimes, he would pick a fight right after I came home from a night out with the girls. It got to the point when it was just easier for me to avoid going out. I’d stay at home and take care of him because that made him happy. I didn’t even realize what he was doing. At the time, it just felt like... love.”

“That’s not love,” I say, shaking my head in disgust. “That’s abuse.”

“I get that now.” She shrugs painfully. “Back then, though, it felt like he loved me so much that he couldn’t bear to be away from me. I thought about all my girlfriends who complained that their boyfriends never spent quality time with them. I just figured I was one of the lucky ones—I had a partner who wanted me around all the time. By the time I realized what he’d done, I’d drifted apart from most of my core friend group.”

“What about your parents?” I ask. “Your family?”

She nods. “He was rich and charming and my parents loved him. They saw only the charm and the wit and the good looks. If I so much as voiced one word of complaint, both of them would tell me to be grateful for landing a man like him. Which is why I never told them. They would’ve just taken his side.”

“Freya—”

“You don’t understand, Jessa,” she says, cutting me off. “I was terrified that they would believe him and not me. I didn’t think I could handle that. So I just... left. And now, I’m here.”

“He let you go?”

She blushes. “I didn’t really ask, per se. Didn’t really tell him, you know? I left him a note. Said it was over and that I was leaving him for a fresh start somewhere else. I implied it was in England. And then I booked a flight to Los Angeles.”

“Jesus.”

She gives me a shaky laugh. “I never expected to tell that story so soon. Especially not to someone I just met.”

“You can trust me,” I say firmly.

She nods. “I know I can. And I hope you can trust me, too, Jessa. I don’t know what exactly you’ve got going on with that man, but no matter how beautiful he is—trust me, it’s not worth it.”

It’s got the ring of truth to it. If only I could remember that piece of advice the next time Anton’s hand is snaking up my

thigh, his breath heating my lips, his—

I shake off the image immediately. There won't be a next time. I'll never let him get that close again.

It's a promise I make to myself, but even as I make it, I feel doubt follow like a shadow.

Making a promise is one thing. Keeping it is a whole 'nother ball game.

"I don't want to put you in danger, Freya," I tell her honestly. "You've got enough going on as it is."

She's the one who grabs my hand this time. "This is a dangerous world for us women. We've got to have each other's backs. You can't do everything alone."

I smile. "You're right about that."

"Tell me the truth," she says. I notice, not for the first time, what a strangely murky brown and blue her eyes are. "Are you in a similar situation to the one I just ran from?"

I'm silent, gnawing at my lip. I can't tell her. I shouldn't tell her. At best, it changes nothing. At worst, it puts her in just as much danger as I'm in.

But she shared her truth with me. I owe her mine.

And the light in her eyes says she will understand.

So I tell her.

"I think I told you part of this, but I was supposed to get married not too long ago..."

She listens to my whole story silently, face stoic, brows furrowed. The first time she makes a sound is when I describe the silent gunshot that broke through my little bubble of safety.

"He... he actually killed a man?" Freya asks.

"And I screamed," I admit. "I gave myself away like an idiot."

She strokes the back of my hand. "How could you have known?"

"He left me in the room while he dealt with whatever kinds of things he deals with. I watched his 'clean-up' team handle the

body. And when no one was paying attention to me, I took his phone.”

Her eyes go wide. “You did *what*? Do you have it now? Is it —”

“It’s somewhere safe,” I say, unwilling to out Chris. “But he’s coming back tonight to collect.”

“Fuck,” Freya says, her eyes flicking from one side of the room to the other. “Fucking McFuck me, we have to do something about this.”

“There’s nothing to do, Freya. He’s dangerous. I can’t cross him.”

“Well, you certainly can’t give him back that damn phone, either,” she argues.

“You think I shouldn’t?” I ask nervously.

She shoots me an incredulous glare. “What’s stopping him from putting a bullet in your head the second it’s back in his possession?”

I open my mouth to answer, but the truth is, I have no idea what to say. She’s right. That phone is the last line of defense between me and death at Anton’s hands.

“Don’t worry, Jessa,” Freya says, looking me right in the eye. “I’ll have your back tonight.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll make sure he can’t hurt you.”

“What are you going to do?”

She just squeezes my hand. “Whatever you do, don’t give him back that phone, okay?”

I have no idea what Freya has planned, but I find myself nodding. God knows I need an ally right now. I’m in way over my head.

“Okay,” I tell her. “I trust you.”

ANTON

“Where are you?”

Lev’s voice crackles through the car speakers. I shouldn’t have answered because there’s a thousand percent chance that all he’s gonna do is piss me the fuck off, but I have too many plans in motion not to.

“Out.”

“It’s the girl again, isn’t it?”

I take the corner hard and whip down the sloped street. Then I park opposite her building and look up at the window I know is hers.

The lights are on in the living room and kitchen. I can see a shadow move across the curtains. Even from down here, her silhouette is enough to get my dick hard.

“I came to get my phone back.”

“That’s not why you went,” Lev says shrewdly. “We both know that. This is not the kind of job you do yourself. It’s beneath you.”

“I’ve given you and Yulian enough to get done.”

“And when have you ever cared about our workload before?” Lev asks. I can practically see the gleeful smirk on his face.

“Is there an actual reason you’re calling?” I ask abruptly.

“There’s been a lot of chatter lately. The grapevine is buzzing.”

“About?”

“You,” he says. “Marina. Rodion. All your names keep popping up.”

“That’s not surprising.”

“But it is worrisome,” Lev retorts.

I roll my eyes. “Do I sound worried to you, *sobrat*?”

“Maybe you should be, for a change.”

Sometimes, I prefer speaking to Yulian. He is brash and boorish. Childish at the best of times. But he has a confidence that is infectious. And he believes in the Bratva above all else.

Lev, on the other hand, is a worrier through and through.

“Well, I’m not. I know what I’m capable of. I know what my men are capable of.”

“What if Rodion has us outnumbered?”

“It won’t matter.”

“Jesus, Anton. You sound like your father.”

He stops short the moment he says it, wondering if he’s overstepped some invisible boundary. He’s lucky I’m distracted right now. I watch Jessa crisscross the window again and again. It looks like she’s pacing.

No prizes for guessing what’s got her all worked up.

I wonder idly if she has the phone in hand and is prepared to hand it over, or if she intends to continue challenging me. I’m honestly not sure which I would prefer.

“I am my father’s son, after all,” I tell Lev. “What did you expect?”

“More caution.”

I frown. “Caution is one thing. Cowardice is another.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Lev asks defensively. Worrier though he may be, he’s a prideful man. Bratva to his core.

“It means we may see something as cautious. But to every enemy, every bystander, every neutral third party, we look weak. I refuse to look weak, Lev.”

“It’s not weak to be smart. You’re forgetting that forty percent of the Stepanov Bratva’s business interests are mixed in with the Ivanovs.”

“I haven’t forgotten anything,” I snap. “You’re the one bleating about nonsense like a sheep at the slaughterhouse.”

Lev sighs. “Listen, I don’t relish this role I have. Canary in the coal mine, the boy who cried wolf, whatever you wanna call me, that’s fine. But it’s my job to remind you of the stakes. We can’t afford to burn that bridge. Not until we’ve shored up our liabilities.”

Damn it, he’s right. He’s right and we both know it.

“Fuck my father,” I growl. “He did this. He got us in this mess.”

“He trusted in his friendship with Rodion,” Lev says. I know he shares the sentiment blaming my father; he would just never be so obvious about it. It’s understood I can say certain things about my father that no one else can.

“*Trust*,” I spit derisively. “Stupid fucking word, stupid fucking concept. He was naïve to think that that level of trust had any place in our world.”

“You trust me, don’t you?” Lev asks, somewhat teasing.

“Sure, but I still put my seatbelt on when you drive.”

“Asshole. That was one time.”

I chuckle as the tension between us eases. “I don’t trust anyone, Lev. Not enough to turn my back to them. My father made that mistake, and look what it’s doing to the Bratva. It broke down the moment he died.”

“No, it didn’t,” Lev says quietly. “It broke down the moment you married Marina Ivanov.”

I can’t deny that.

“We’ll talk when I get back.”

I can tell he wants to ask when that will be, but he knows that'll just piss me off. "Okay, enjoy yourself tonight."

I roll my eyes. "I'm not here to enjoy myself."

"Really?" he asks innocently. "You could have fooled me."

I answer by hanging up on the smug motherfucker. When I look back up to Jessa's apartment, the light in the kitchen is off, replaced by a television's bluish, flickering glow.

I get out of the jeep and head towards the apartment's front door. I use Mrs. Donnelly's code to get inside and then I march straight to Jessa's apartment.

After glancing over my shoulder to make sure the hallway is empty, I jimmy the lock as surreptitiously as possible so that she won't notice I'm here until I walk in. The glare of the television hides the sound of the tumblers catching.

A second later, I walk into her living room. She springs onto her feet from her reclining position on the sofa. Her blonde hair has been freshly washed. The ends are still damp.

I close the door behind me and turn the lock.

"Having a pleasant evening?" I ask.

The initial shock fades and she throws me an annoyed glare. I've got to hand it to her—she hides her fear well. "Most people knock, you know."

"I'm not most people."

"Yeah, you've made that abundantly clear."

She's wearing dark tights that act as a second skin. They wrap themselves around her shapely legs, leaving little to the imagination. She's paired them with a white tank top that's almost as tight, and I realize she's not wearing a bra, either. Her nipples poke through—with arousal or fear or both.

When I sniff the air, I can smell tomatoes and mozzarella. But underneath it is the faintest whiff of perfume.

"Did you dress up just for me, Jessa?" I ask.

That gets me exactly the response I was searching for. She scrunches up her nose in disgust and pretends to look insulted. “I haven’t dressed up at all.”

“Really?” I ask, my gaze sliding down to the swell of her cleavage. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“You’re a textbook narcissist. Of course you think everything is about you.”

“Tell me, do you always wear perfume at the end of the day?”

She stiffens a little, probably contemplating whether she should lie or just tell the truth. “Yes. It makes me feel good.”

“Makes sense,” I say sarcastically, causing her expression to twist into annoyance. But I can see through her. I can see the self-consciousness she’s trying to mask.

“Well?”

“Well?” she parrots back.

I cock my head to the side. “I’m the wrong man to fuck with, Jessa.”

She stiffens slightly, but she maintains her position. “I’m not giving up the phone.”

“What did I tell you?” I say calmly. “You crave the drama.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Stop trying to pull reverse psychology on me. It won’t work.”

“What will work?” I ask, moving around her coffee table so that I’m standing right in front of her.

“Nothing,” she says. “I can’t be bought.”

“What about seduced?” I ask. “Can you be seduced?”

She betrays herself by jerking away from me so violently that not even she can deny the response. Her cheeks flush with embarrassment.

“You’re overestimating your effect on me,” she mumbles, but there’s no sting in her voice when she says it.

I reach out and brush my fingers across her lips. The shudder that rolls through her body is subtle but unmistakable.

“No, I don’t think I am.” I move closer and she backs away immediately. “What’s the matter, Jessa? Doubting your resolve?”

She glares at me. “I think I prefer when you’re threatening my life.”

I smile. “I can see why. That affected you much less than this.”

I stroke her cheek with the back of my knuckles, leaving a hot blush when I withdraw my hand. The whole time, she stares up at me with those fuck me eyes, never blinking, never looking away.

I guide her backwards until there’s nowhere left to go, trapping her between myself and the window. Our hips meet flush. I’m hard as a rock and I don’t mind her knowing.

“Give me back my phone,” I rasp.

“I don’t have it on me,” she says, but her voice wavers.

“I told you yesterday that I would be back for it. Did you not believe me?”

“Maybe I just decided not to listen.”

My eyes flare. I lean closer. Inches apart now. The tension is a physical thing in the air. A scent, a crackle, a tightness in my chest.

A small gasp escapes her lips. She wants to push me away, but she doesn’t trust what she might do if she touches me.

“Interesting...”

“What is?” she asks defensively.

“I think this is the first time I’ve seen you truly scared.”

She looks skeptical for a moment. “I’d say I was pretty scared when you murdered an innocent man in cold blood.”

I chuckle. “‘Innocent man’? *Kotyonok*, what about him read as innocent to you?”

“Well...”

I can see her head spinning and I laugh. “You assume because he died, he’s a victim? He was a fucking arms dealer, Jessa.

He's killed more people than I have."

She frowns. "Even if that's true, it doesn't make what you did right."

"I never said it did. I assure you, I am not the good guy in this or any story. But neither was he."

She shakes her head like that'll change the facts of the situation. "If I give you back that phone, then I'm a sitting duck. You can kill me just like you killed him."

I push my groin against hers. Her eyes go wide, but she doesn't address the heat catapulting between our bodies. "Why would I kill you, beautiful girl? It'd be a waste."

"I don't trust you."

I lean in so close that our noses are almost touching. "I'm going to ask one more fucking time—"

The thud of footsteps outside the apartment has my ears pricking up. Then comes the pounding of authoritative knocks on the door.

She jerks, her eyes shooting past me.

"What did you do?" I growl.

But I can see it in her eyes: she's not quite sure what's happening, either.

"Whoever is on the other side of this door, you better play along," I threaten her.

The defiance in her eyes is unmistakable. "I don't think you have much to bargain with right now."

Another flurry of knocks, loud and fast and insistent. *BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM.*

I give her a smile. "Your parents' names are Connie and Brandon Gilmore," I say quietly. "They live at 27 St. Michaels Street. Did I get that right?"

She freezes, but I don't wait for her expression to catch up with the threat I've just made. I untuck my shirt and undo the

top couple of buttons. Then I remove my shoes and place them next to the sofa.

“What the hell are you doing?” she demands, frowning at me.

“Grab me a beer from the fridge, will you, honey?” I call nonchalantly as I head towards the door.

I know what that kind of knocking means. And sure enough, I’m not surprised when I pull the door open and I’m faced with two policemen from the local precinct.

The older of the two is thin, with graying hair underneath his hat and a hard gleam in his eyes. The younger one is significantly larger in every direction, and he has that pasty, uncertain look of incompetence.

“Officers?” I say, feigning shock. “Is there a problem?”

The older one looks uncomfortable. “Evening, sir. I’m Officer Lewiston. This is Officer Branagh. We received a call about a domestic disturbance in this apartment.”

I glance back at Jessa. “Honey, do you have any idea what these officers are talking about?”

Jessa looks shell-shocked, but that works well for the situation. My eyes meet hers and I know she understands the choice she has before her.

She turns her gaze to the cops. “I’m afraid not,” she says, coming forward.

I turn to both men. “Yeah, me neither. I just got home a few minutes ago. And my girlfriend and I were just about to sit down to dinner. There was no disturbance of any kind. Not from us, at least. You sure you got the right apartment?”

I infuse my tone with just the right amount of chagrin. The amount that suggests that I am intensely insulted by the accusation that I could be responsible for hurting any woman.

The officers exchange a glance. “Uh, we are sorry for the inconvenience, sir. But would it be possible for us to... look around?”

I stare at them for a moment, waiting for them to say anything else. When they don't, I laugh. "Are you serious?"

"Afraid so, sir."

Still playacting with a frown, I turn towards Jessa. She hesitates only a second before she walks up to me and slips her hand around my elbow. The gesture is natural, like she's done it a thousand times before. Maybe she's fantasized it.

"I'm sorry, officers—there must have been some sort of mistake," she says. "But we understand that you're just doing your jobs. So if you need to look around, please feel free."

Both men look at me warily. I step to the side and allow them to enter the apartment.

It's clear within seconds that there's nothing amiss inside. There's half a pizza on the coffee table and my shoes lying where I tossed them beside the sofa.

"As I said," I tell them, "I just got home from work. Who did you say made the call?"

"I'm afraid we're not at liberty to say, sir."

I glance at Jessa. "Could it be possible that Dane did this?"

Her mouth drops open. "Dane?"

I turn to the cops. "Her ex-boyfriend," I say with a regretful expression. "Or ex-fiancé, rather. The two of them had a messy breakup and... let's just say he wasn't very happy to hear that Jessa had moved on so fast."

Both cops are beginning to look more and more uncomfortable.

"We're really sorry about this, sir," Lewiston says. "But when we get this kind of call, it's our duty to check it out. Make sure nothing is amiss."

I sigh. "Of course. I understand. You're just doing your job. I'm sorry for being short. I just... it's been a long day and I don't like the implication that I would ever... that I could... hurt my girl."

“Of course, sir. No man does,” Lewiston says, even as he looks around.

The second cop, Branagh, is observing Jessa carefully. She’s standing by my side avoiding everybody’s eyes, which is not helping us look carefree and innocent.

I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her against my body. It’s an easy gesture to make—shockingly easy, actually.

Then I press a kiss to the side of her forehead, close enough that I can whisper to her, “You’ve gotta do better than that.”

She stiffens for a split second, but then she recovers remarkably well. “Can I get you officers anything?”

“No, thank you, ma’am,” Lewiston says at the same time Branagh says, “That would be great.”

Lewiston throws his junior a disgusted glare. “We’re really not supposed to eat or drink on the job.”

I give them both a smile. “Don’t worry—we won’t tell.”

I head over to the kitchen, moving around with all apparent familiarity. I open the fridge and take a quick glance inside.

“We’ve got some orange juice, but I can also offer you guys a cup of coffee?”

“No, we really shouldn’t...” Lewiston says, but he’s sounding less and less convincing.

“Please,” I insist. “It’s the least we can do after you were dragged out here for nothing.”

“Well...” Lewiston sighs. “Alright. I’ll take a coffee.”

“I’ll have the same,” Branagh adds.

“Excellent,” I say. “Why don’t you both take a seat?”

They sit at the kitchen counter while Jessa joins me in the kitchen. She’s being suspiciously quiet and I don’t like it. All it takes is one wrong look to raise the alarms again.

“You okay, sweetheart?” I ask, placing my hand on the small of her back.

She looks up at me. “I... I...”

“Yes?” I ask, digging my fingertips into her back. Not enough to hurt her. Just enough to remind her: *Play by my rules, or people get hurt.*

JESSA

The two big things on my mind are not stacking up in anything resembling priority order. Not a normal, rational priority, at least.

Because I should be fairly fixated on the fact that the cold-blooded killer next to me just threatened to bring that campaign of violence to my parents' doorstep. He was being serious—literally, deadly serious.

And yet I'm more preoccupied with the fact that that same killer's hand is on my lower back, resting right above my ass. With just the lightest of pressures, he reminds me that I have a role to play. His touch sends shivers racing up and down my spine.

"You okay, sweetheart?" Anton asks, looking at me with concern that's so sincere it takes me by surprise.

"Sorry," I say. "This is just... really surprising. You never expect to find the police at your door, you know?"

Both cops give me guilty smiles. "We have to check things out when we get a call like that, miss," the younger one says apologetically. "But it's clear that nothing is amiss here."

"Exactly right," Anton says, pouring them both generous cups of coffee. "Can I offer you something to eat? My girl is an amazing chef."

He glances at me as he talks. The pride in his eyes is unmistakable. It's almost enough to make me forget that we're playing pretend right now.

“Is that right?” Officer Lewiston asks, looking at me with a paternal smile.

“Amazing, I’m not so sure, but I’m definitely a chef.”

“She’s modest,” Anton insists. “Jessa here is like the Picasso of the kitchen. Her bacon-wrapped shrimp is to die for.”

I do a double-take, though his face betrays nothing. I made the bacon-wrapped shrimp as an appetizer for the dinner I served on his yacht the night we met.

“Where do you work?” Branagh asks.

“A catering company,” I explain. “They hire out their chefs for events and stuff.”

“That’s how we met, actually,” Anton says. I give him a questioning frown. Is he really going there? He turns to me. Apparently, he is. “Isn’t that right, honey?”

I force a smile onto my face. “That’s right.”

“Best night of my life.”

Officer Lewiston looks between us with a fond smile. “That’s a nice story. Something to tell the grandkids one day, huh?”

“Definitely,” Anton says without missing a beat. “I’m looking forward to it.”

His hand is draped carelessly around my shoulders now. The weight is surprisingly comfortable. Dane wasn’t one for public touching. No hand-holding, no squeezing my thigh when we sat next to each other, no wrapping his arm around my waist.

It bothered me at first, but then I felt silly for it. Wasn’t it more important that we spent our nights and mornings together? What did it matter if he didn’t want to be openly affectionate? That didn’t count for much in the greater scheme of things.

But as I stand there with Anton’s arm around me, I realize how much I was leaving on the table. Being touched, being claimed—it does something to me that words can’t reach. Makes something in my chest unclench just the tiniest bit.

“Have we upset you, ma’am?” Officer Lewiston says, his tone softening.

I try to shake off the introspection. It's neither the right time nor the right place, and it's especially not the right man.

Raising my eyes to the officer, I smile as pleasantly as I can. "I'd be lying if I said I'm not a little shaken up by all this."

He looks me right in the eye, and I realize that I'm starting to make him suspicious again. Apparently, Anton can feel this, too, because he gives me a subtle squeeze on the shoulder that could easily be mistaken for support.

Is it completely weird that I do actually feel comforted by the gesture?

God, I need to find a fucking therapist.

"Ma'am, is there anything you want to tell us?" Officer Lewiston asks, even as he accepts the coffee from Anton.

"I just can't believe someone would do something like this," I say. "Call up the cops and report a domestic disturbance. Do you think it's possible it was a mistake?"

"Not impossible," Officer Lewiston says, relaxing a little. "These things happen."

"Well, no harm, no foul, right?" says Anton. "Say, Officers, do either of you fish? I was just on a trip out to..."

The two cops sip their coffee while Anton makes small talk with them. He's seamless. The way he threads the conversation with little reassurances, painting a picture for the two cops of our pretend life together.

"... Took a vacation to Bermuda last year. Beautiful place, have you ever been? ... Bowling league on Tuesday nights... She's a reader, chews through romance novels like hard candies..."

I find myself listening to the fake narrative like a child hearing her favorite bedtime story. For a moment, even I start to wonder if it's real. He's that good.

When the cops finally finish their coffee, they stand up in unison. "We should get going," Officer Lewiston says. "We're taken up enough of your time."

Anton waves them away. “Not at all. I’m sorry I was a little short when you first walked in. I was just surprised.”

“Understandable. We’re sorry to have disturbed your evening.”

Anton walks them both to the door and lets them out with a smile and a wave, then shuts the door firmly behind them. I stand at the kitchen counter and stare at the two empty coffee cups left behind.

A second later, Anton’s shadow falls over me. “That went well.”

I look up at him. “Depends on your perspective.”

“When did you call the cops?” he asks.

“I didn’t,” I snap.

He raises his eyebrows. “You expect me to believe that they just showed up? Did they imagine the 911 call?”

“Maybe Mrs. Donnelly got suspicious about the ‘doctor’ she met the other day.”

“Impossible. I charmed the pants off the old broad.”

“Yeah, you do seem to have a natural gift.”

He smirks. “Not a gift. Gifts are given. Skills are honed.”

Rolling my eyes, I take the coffee cups and turn my back on him as I wash them in the sink. I swear I can feel his presence lurking right behind me, but when I turn around, he’s still leaning against the counter in the same position he was in when I turned around.

“I didn’t call the cops,” I say finally.

“If only I could believe that.”

“Think about it. You were watching me the whole time. When would I have had the time to make the call in the first place?”

“You could have asked someone else to make the calls for you.”

I shiver. “I’d never involve anyone else in this nightmare.”

“Maybe whoever’s helping you wants to get involved,” he suggests. “Maybe whoever’s helping you wants to play the knight in shining armor.”

I frown. “What are you implying?”

“That you like to rebound fast.”

I glare at him. “Jealous?”

“Would you prefer it if I was?” he asks. He steps around the counter and saunters towards me.

I shake my head. “Anton...”

“Jessa.”

“Please... don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t do this,” I whisper, gesturing between us. “I’m not a threat.”

His eyes gleam with a kind of anti-light. Like they’re sucking it in instead of reflecting it out. “You know what?” he says. “I actually believed that before tonight. Now... not so much.”

I feel fear snaking down my spine, but I manage to keep it from overwhelming me. What was Freya thinking, calling the cops on Anton? As if that would stop a man like him. He could have easily put a bullet into each officer that walked through the door.

Then one into me, for good measure.

“It was just a coincidence,” I say. “Bad luck.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences. And I make my own luck.”

“Anton,” I say, stepping towards him for the first time that I can consciously remember, “I swear to you: I’m not the one who called the cops.”

“Then who did?”

“I don’t know,” I lie immediately. “I have no clue, but I did not ask anyone to do it.”

He stares down at me for a long moment. Then, thank God, he nods. I'm not sure if it's an *I believe you* nod or an *I don't give a shit about arguing with you anymore* nod. Either way, it lets me breathe again.

"It wouldn't have helped either way, you know," he remarks. "Nothing they can do to me."

"Meaning what? You're above the law?"

He nods. "Exactly that."

"So then you don't have to worry about anything, do you?" I ask. "Even if I went to the cops, no one would believe me."

"Doesn't mean I don't need my phone."

"So it is important?" I ask.

He gives me an ironic smile. "It belongs to me. Of course it's important."

He traps me between the fridge and his body. He's not even touching me, but he might as well have me in chains. I feel paralyzed. Like I can't move until he gives me permission.

"If anything happens to me tonight, those two cops have seen your face," I point out. "I'm guessing neither one of them works for you."

"Not yet."

I frown. "You can't be as powerful as you claim to be."

"Care to test that theory?" With a devilish smile, he takes another step towards me. I twitch back so hard against the fridge that I hear things toppling over inside.

"What's that expression on your face, Jessa?" he murmurs, reaching up and tucking a stray lock of hair back behind my ear.

"Disgust," I spit, but the word doesn't come out anywhere near as forcefully as I intended it.

His smile only gets wider. "Disgust," he repeats, his fingers sliding over my breasts. I know he can feel how hard my

nipples are. “I don’t think so. Looks more like excitement to me.”

I have no idea if he’s about to stab me or kiss me. But when he drops to one knee in front of me, I feel an undeniable frisson of excitement rip through me.

His hands snake down my hips and pull at the hem of my tights. I open my mouth to protest, but nothing escapes my lips besides a rushed gasp.

Because if I’m being brutally honest with myself, I don’t want him to stop.

Electricity spins through my body. It concentrates right between my legs. He pulls down my tights and takes my panties down with them.

To my surprise, there is no self-consciousness. It’s burned away in the heat of his hands on me, the promise of his lips against my thigh.

“Anton...”

It’s meant to be an admonishment, but it comes out in a sigh. Like I’m egging him on. He moves slowly, his eyes flitting up to my face every few seconds to make sure I’m suffering in bliss the way he wants.

I have more than enough opportunities to stop him. To push him away. To struggle. To plead with him. Anything to show him that I don’t actually want this.

But my body is betraying me. I know he can see the moisture between my lips, and he tastes it the moment his tongue lands against my slit.

I gasp as he raises one of my legs and settles it over his shoulder. He runs his tongue up and down me. I reach behind and grip the fridge for support, eyes fluttering closed. I’m vaguely aware of more items knocking around in there, but I couldn’t care less.

Then he pushes his tongue inside me, and it’s a miracle I’m still standing at all.

I've never been eaten out like this before. Dane wasn't a fan of going down on me. He loved oral sex, but he hated being the giver. Whenever he agreed, it was always short-lived and half-hearted.

This... this is a world apart from anything I've ever experienced before.

Anton is consuming me like I'm his last meal on earth. My hands are itching to grab hold of his full head of hair. But that feels like an admission I'm not ready for. Keeping my hands to myself is one of the only small dignities I have left.

Though I'm sure he'll rip that away from me soon enough.

Instead, I thrust myself into his face, hoping he'll push even deeper into me. And he doesn't disappoint. His tongue slides up to my clit and starts sucking furiously.

I'm gasping now, losing all sense of who I am and what I'm supposed to want in this scenario.

He's a killer? *Doesn't matter.*

He's a monster? *Doesn't matter.*

He's a liar and a criminal and a bad, bad man? *Doesn't. Fucking. Matter.*

"Oh God," I moan when I feel my orgasm on the rise.

Can this really be happening so fast? It took me ages to come with Dane. Half the time, it never happened at all. He pretended to care in the beginning, but once we got comfortable with one another, he stopped trying altogether.

"You're just too difficult, hon. I don't have the time to make this happen for you," he'd say. *"But hey, that's what vibrators are for, right?"*

I cringe at the memory. Why the hell did I stay with him so long? Is Anton right about me? Do I just crave drama? Do I hate myself?

It is the wrong question to ask, especially with Anton's face buried between my legs, because God knows I'm not coming up with an answer anytime soon. Definitely not when I'm

teetering on the verge of orgasm, my body spasming beyond my control, so close to tumbling over that edge and coasting down in—

Then he pulls away abruptly.

I stifle a scream as I slide down the front of the fridge into a puddle on the floor, pants twisted awkwardly around my ankles.

Anton looks down at me with a self-satisfied smile.

“I’ll be back,” he tells me, knowing just how vicious this torture is. “And if I don’t get my phone then... I’m taking you instead.”

ANTON

I ignore the unknown number flashing across my screen. Not very many people have this number. It's private for a reason. If it's unknown, it's either bullshit or a trap. I don't have time for either.

"You gonna answer that?" Lev asks pointedly.

"No," I say, reclining into my chair and putting my feet up on the table. The screen cuts to black and I continue on with my conversation with Lev.

"Where were you last night?" I ask him before he can start questioning me.

"A club downtown," he says.

"Yulian dragged you there?"

"Actually, no. Went with some of the boys."

"That's out of character."

"So?" Lev asks, somewhat self-consciously. "I needed a little break."

"And did you find it?"

He smiles. "Her name was a flower..."

"But you can't remember exactly which flower?"

He groans. "I wish I could. Lily or Holly or something like that. She was pretty cool."

"Holly is a tree, idiot," I laugh. "Let me guess: you saw her across the club, locked eyes like Lady and the Tramp?"

“No, asshole, I saw her up on stage.”

I raise one eyebrow. “You’re hot for a stripper?”

“She’s putting herself through college and stripping on the side to pay for it. Also, her ex is a deadbeat who skipped out on child support a couple years back. The burden is entirely on her.”

“So she’s got kids?”

“Just one. A boy.”

“When did she tell you all this?” I ask.

“A private dance in one of the rooms,” Lev says. “The boys thought I needed to let off some steam. But I got in there and before she started dancing, we started talking.”

“Did you get a dance out of her?”

He smiles secretively. “Got more than that.”

“You fucked her?”

“I like to think we made love to one another,” he sighs dreamily.

I shake my head. “Lev, my friend, getting involved with a stripper is—”

“She’s not like that. She’s nothing like the strippers we’re used to.”

“Meaning what?” I ask.

“She’s smart. She’s driven. She’s ambitious.”

“She’d have to be,” I drawl. “She set her sights on you, didn’t she?”

“Fuck you. That’s not what she was doing.”

“Don’t play dumb, Lev.”

“She didn’t even charge me!”

“For the dance or the fuck?”

He grimaces. “The boys took care of the dance. The sex just... happened.” He raises his eyes to mine and squints. “Don’t sit

there and judge me, asshole.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because you’re in no position to,” he retorts, “seeing as how you’re fucking around with the girl who stole your phone. If she were anyone else, she’d be dead.”

“Lucky for her, she’s a good lay,” I growl. “But the moment it stops, she’ll stop being an issue.”

“So you’re just keeping her around for what... entertainment’s sake?”

“I don’t need a reason.”

“And you’re not getting attached?” Lev asks.

“Not like you are with the stripper.”

“I’m not getting attached,” Lev says immediately. “I’m just... intrigued.”

I snort. “So intrigued you can’t even remember her name.”

“It’s probably not her real name anyway, is it?” he points out.

“Must have been true love if you never thought to ask.”

He narrows his eyes. “Well, once she had her mouth around my dick, it felt like the time for conversation had passed.”

My phone lights up again. It’s the unknown number. Lev and I frown in sync. “Who could it be?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t like it.”

We exchange a glance and I make a split second decision. I accept the call. “Hello?”

“Anton.”

I recognize his voice immediately. The raspy, exasperated snarl. “Rodion.”

Lev’s eyes flare and he sits straight up.

“Long time since we last spoke,” I add.

“Indeed,” Rodion says immediately. “I was lost to my grief for a long time. I needed to put Marina’s death behind me.”

I nod. “Understandable.”

“It’s not as easy for a father to move on from that kind of loss. Not as easy as it is for a husband to do so.”

I grit my teeth. His bitterness is practically tangible.

“Her death affected me, too, Rodion.”

“I’m glad to hear that from you, Anton. Especially in light of what I am hearing from others.”

And there it is. A direct statement that I can’t possibly ignore. “I’ve heard the rumors just like you have. They don’t bother me. I am more concerned that you’re taking them seriously.”

“Should I not?”

“Not unless you like swallowing lies. I had nothing to do with Marina’s death.”

He tuts. “The thing is, Anton, I knew my daughter better than anyone. She was not the type of woman who would ever take her own life. She was far too strong for that.”

He isn’t wrong on one front: I remember just how strong she was. It had taken an iron will to cow that woman. Even then, I couldn’t truly break her.

“She killed herself. Accept it.”

“Or it was made to look that way,” he says. “Not that I can say so definitively. After all, I never saw her body.”

“I was her husband. It was my job to bury her, not yours.”

A shadow flits over Lev’s face. Deception upon deception. And I’m the puppet master of them all.

“Considering the state of your marriage,” he growls, “I would have thought you’d be happy to pass along that responsibility.”

“The responsibility of burying my own wife?” I ask. “No, Rodion. I take my duties seriously. I don’t delegate the things that are mine to uphold.”

Even as I say it, I recognize the irony of the statement. I squash that thought as soon as it arises.

“Very honorable, Anton. I’ve always thought that of you, you know. That you are a man of honor.”

“Then I hope you’re not giving any real credence to these filthy rumors.”

“Who would hope to benefit from them?” Rodion asks.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I ask. “Someone who wants to drive a wedge between our Bratvas. Someone who seeks to divide and conquer.”

“We both have enemies,” Rodion says thoughtfully.

“Exactly.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “My Bratva was promised to you, Anton.”

“I remember.”

“But the condition was that you would be my wife’s husband, my son-in-law, the father of my grandchildren,” Rodion says. “Now, I have no son-in-law. I have no daughter. I have no grandchildren.”

“Pity.”

Lev’s eyebrows rise. I can tell from his face that I’m not displaying the appropriate amount of regret. If that’s anyone’s fault, it’s the bitch who took her own life just to spite me.

She made it hard to love her.

She made it impossible to mourn her.

“You can understand why it would be hard for me to pass over my legacy to you now.”

I tense. “Are you calling to tell me you have another successor?”

Rodion hesitates. “I haven’t made up my mind yet. I’m going to need to be sure before I decide.”

“I told you I didn’t kill her, but you’re saying I did. Which means you’re calling me a liar, Rodion. I don’t like being called a liar.”

He may be the elder here in terms of age and experience. But I'm a don just as much as he is. He has a fine line to walk.

The fact that he's called me at all tells me he's worried that the trouble brewing in the underworld is going to come to a head. He wants to be prepared.

That makes two of us.

"I could give you the answer you want to hear, Anton," Rodion demurs. "But I'd rather be honest. Marina came to see me days before her body was discovered."

I tense. "And?"

"She told me about the state of your marriage. She told me about the baby."

Anger courses through me, thick and unyielding. It rivals the regret I feel when I think about the innocent life that was lost in the midst of all the chaos.

"That was an unfortunate accident, Rodion," I say. "But... it happens. It happens all the time."

"She blamed you."

"I know she did," I admit.

"Losing the child destroyed her," Rodion continues. "I saw the look in her eyes. She was distraught."

"Distraught enough to drive her to suicide," I suggest. "It makes sense."

"Does it?" Rodion ponders. "Or is it simply a convenient alibi?"

I wait for him to accuse me, but he doesn't. He stops just short of it, trying to tamp down his anger and remain businesslike. I wonder how much longer that restraint will last.

"It is not good for our enemies to think we're divided, Anton," he says, breaking the pregnant silence.

"I agree."

"We must meet soon. Hash this out."

Hash this out. The words are significant, and I don't miss the weight they hold. "Of course, Rodion. I think that's a good idea. I will set something up and let you know. I want nothing more than to put all this behind us."

He doesn't answer immediately. When he does, he sounds wary. "Take care of yourself, Anton."

But I can read between the lines. It is a talent I developed at an early age, when I realized that my father was a dangerous man who liked to speak in violent riddles.

Watch your back. That's what he's really saying to me.

The moment I hang up, Lev leans in. "Well?"

"He's trying to act like all this trouble brewing isn't coming from him."

Lev scoffs. "Bull-fuckin'-shit."

I nod. "But insofar as we can get him to the table, we need to play along with that narrative."

"He wants to meet?" Lev asks.

"Yes."

"And you trust that he's not going to open fire when you show up?"

"I'm handling the meeting arrangements."

Lev's eyes go wide. "And he agreed to that? Well, I'll be damned."

"We'll all be damned, probably," Yulian chimes in suddenly as he swings the door open and struts over to us.

"Where were you?" I ask impatiently. "I asked you to be here forty fucking minutes ago."

Yulian checks the time and shrugs. "Shit, sorry. Didn't realize." I glare at him, but he only smiles sheepishly at me. "I'm sorry, bro. Got caught up."

"Sit down," I growl at him. "And when I give you an order, I'm not your fucking 'bro.' I'm your don. Is that understood?"

His smile falters for just a moment. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“It better not. What have you got for me?”

He straightens up a little and I can tell he’s trying his best not to piss me off further. “The word underground is that there are factions forming. No word on which side they’ll fall toward.”

“I think that depends on how this meeting goes,” I say, glancing at Lev.

“What meeting?” asks Yulian.

“Rodion just called.”

His jaw drops. “Seriously? Fuck. What did he say?”

“He was sussing out the situation. Kept his cards close to the vest.”

“Did he threaten you?” Yulian asks.

“Not explicitly, but I can read between the lines. He’s leaning towards the rumors, but he knows there’s a lot at stake if he chooses to break with us.”

“So... we need to convince him that you had nothing to do with Marina’s death?” Yulian suggests.

I narrow my eyes at my brother. “We needed to do that from the moment it happened. It doesn’t help that no one but you saw the body.”

Yulian matches my stare. “I was trying to protect you.”

“Because you thought I killed her?”

Yulian stops short. He struggles for a moment and then exhales tiredly. “Alright. Okay... yeah, I thought you killed her. I knew that I needed to get rid of the body. If Rodion got his hands on Marina’s body, then I thought he would have realized —”

“Realized what?” I ask.

Yulian falls silent. “Nothing. It’s not important anymore. She’s gone.”

“She’s gone, but she left behind a big fucking mess for me to clean up,” I say. “As per usual.”

“We just need to make nice with Rodion,” Yulian says. “Make peace and this will all blow over. No one’s going to challenge either one of you if they know that the Stepanovs and the Ivanovs are on good terms.”

“I’m not sure there are terms anymore,” I admit. “Now that Marina’s gone, Rodion has no real reason to name me as his successor.”

Yulian frowns. “You’re still his son-in-law.”

“*Was,*” I correct. “An ex-son-in-law who gave him no grandchildren. He’s not going to give me his legacy if it means I marry another woman and pass down that empire to a child that has no relation to him.”

“His daughter couldn’t even give you a child,” Lev snarls. “It was the least she could do, and she didn’t even do that.”

I used to feel that way. But it’s been a long time since I thought having a baby would bridge the divide between our families. There are only two ways to make this end now.

With lies.

Or with blood.

“This meeting with Rodion has to happen,” I tell both of them. “We need to figure out where his head is at.”

“What if it’s a trap?” Lev asks.

“Not a chance,” Yulian says, still the naïve little boy that Otets used to shield from the world. “Rodion would never go against you so blatantly. He may have seniority, but you have the lion’s share of the power.”

“He’s been in power far longer than Anton has,” Lev points out. “And Rodion fights dirty. Always has.”

Yulian turns to me. “You really believe he’d put up a fight? For what?”

“For revenge,” I say simply. “If he really believes I killed Marina, then all bets are off.”

“We just gotta talk to the guy. He’ll see reason. He’ll believe us.”

I stare at my younger brother, marveling at how young he seems right now. Despite growing up in this world, he’s innocent, gullible.

Part of it is our father’s fault. Part of it is just who Yulian is.

Things have always come easy for him, and so he just assumes life will always go his way. He doesn’t realize that I’ve been there in the shadows the whole time, dragging obstacles out of his way so that he wouldn’t have to struggle the way I did.

Of course, Otets argued that my struggle was necessary in order to shape me into the kind of leader I had to become. Yulian escaped the hardships only because he didn’t have the burden of responsibility to deal with.

And yet sometimes, it’s hard not to be resentful.

“Someone wants a break between our Bratvas,” I say. “Probably the same person spreading the rumors. We need to find out who it is.”

“That’s a long list of suspects,” Lev warns.

“Better get to it, then. But first things first: we set up the meeting.”

“What do you have in mind?” asks Yulian.

“A dinner,” I say. “Civilized. Cordial. We need to remind Rodion about the relationship between our respective Bratvas. Show him that it’s in his best interests to continue our alliance. At least for now.”

Both of my right-hand men look up at me in surprise. “Huh?” they chorus in unison.

“I have no intention of sharing business interests with the Ivanovs for that much longer,” I explain. “Otets was foolish to twine our empires together. I plan on unraveling them as soon as possible.”

“Anton,” Yulian says, his mouth hanging open, “separating yourself from the Ivanovs should not be the goal.”

“What should?”

“Uniting the two Bratvas,” he says. “That was always the plan.”

“Yes—back when Marina was my wife and we were supposed to produce heirs together. Her death changed all that.”

“Call me crazy, but you sound relieved,” Yulian mutters.

“Maybe I am.”

Yulian and Lev exchange a glance, but I’m not interested in deciphering what each man thinks about this. I’ve made up my own mind where the Ivanovs are concerned.

I want to avoid war, but I no longer have any interest in continuing the interlocked alliance that my father started. It’s time for the Stepanov Bratva to go its own way.

And if Rodion doesn’t like that... he can fucking deal with it.

“You want me to look into venues for this dinner?” Yulian asks, getting to his feet eagerly.

“Get preliminary plans underway,” I tell him. “I’ll finalize them once you’ve got things organized.”

Yulian nods and heads out of my office. Lev turns to me with a raised eyebrow and a devilish expression on his face.

“I’ve seen you look like that only a handful of times,” I remark. “It never turned out good for me.”

He grins. “You’re going to need a caterer for this thing, aren’t you?”

“Quick thinking. I’m impressed.”

He shrugs. “This conversation just reminded me of the kinds of hell you went through with Marina. If this new chick is giving you a little excitement, some distraction, then you deserve it.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

Lev laughs. “I’ll pour. And I’ll be sure she’s there.”

I nod, pleased. And just like that, this dinner gets a lot more interesting.

JESSA

“I’m sorry,” Freya says for the tenth time this morning. “I really am. I guess I just assumed it would play out differently.”

“It was my fault,” I tell her. “You didn’t know just how bad it was. How bad *he* is.”

“He really just charmed the cops?” Freya asks in disbelief.

“Like freaking hypnosis,” I sigh. “He even got them to stay for coffee. They chatted about golf.”

“Jesus, Joseph, and Mary.”

We walk into Café Nervosa, past the line of impatient people waiting outside.

“Are you sure we can do this?” Freya asks, ducking her head to avoid the stink eye being thrown our way from the people in line.

“I used to wait tables here back in the day,” I tell her. “The owner is awesome. And one of the perks of being a good waitress here is you get a table whenever you want. Watch.”

I stride up to the hostess counter. When the girl working sees me, her face splits in a huge grin. “Look what the cat dragged in!” she screeches happily.

“Hey, Marianne,” I say as we hug. “I called this morning for a table.”

“Right this way,” she says with a smile. “I’ve placed you by the window, is that okay?”

“Perfect.”

Marianne situates both of us with drinks and the brunch menu.

“Do you need a moment or are you ready to order?”

“We’ve got one more person coming,” I say. “So give us ten?”

“Sure thing.” She hurries off to help a needy couple waving for her attention.

Freya turns to me curiously. “Who’s the third wheel?”

“His name is Chris. He’s my best friend.”

“Oh?” Freya asks, looking immediately interested.

“I think the two of you will hit it off,” I say. “He’s been my closest friend for ages. In fact, he was the only one who warned me off Dane.”

“I like him already,” Freya says, ignoring the menu completely. “I take it he knows about your... problem?”

“He does,” I say. “But I haven’t really filled him in on the last couple of visits I’ve received from you-know-who.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’ll only worry,” I explain. “And I’ve put him through enough as it is.”

Freya leans in a little and lowers her voice. “How pissed was he once the cops left?”

“He was... annoyed,” I admit. “But I wouldn’t say he was pissed.”

“Huh,” she says, frowning. “Weird.”

Weird doesn’t begin to cover what happened. When I think about the full extent of his “reaction,” I feel myself go beet red. I’m hoping Freya doesn’t notice. But she has already proven herself to be eagle-eyed.

“Why are you blushing?”

I shake my head. “I’m not.”

“Oh my God, Jessa. Look at you. You totally are. What aren’t you telling me?” When I don’t answer, her eyes go wide with

shock. “Don’t tell me—wait, no, c’mon now—you seriously have the hots for this guy?”

I look around in panic. Because God, I really, really don’t want Chris hearing that. Thankfully, he hasn’t made an appearance yet.

“He’s... he’s attractive. But it’s not like that.”

Freya shakes her head at me. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“There’s nothing,” I say, but I don’t even manage to convince myself.

Freya’s sights are locked on me, and I know she’s not going to let up until I give her something. I haven’t told her about the fact that I’ve already slept with Anton, and I don’t plan to, either.

There’s no way I’ll ever live that down.

“Hey, I thought we were the type of friends that can be honest with one another,” she whines.

Since it would be too rude to point out that we’ve been friends for all of, like, five minutes, I settle for a more diplomatic response.

“I just—it’s embarrassing, okay?”

Her eyes go wide. For a moment, she looks like some intrepid young reporter who just got her first whiff of a huge breaking story.

“Tell me more.”

She’s so direct that I find myself giving her exactly what she wants. Well... not *exactly* what she wants. I’m guessing what she wants is the truth.

But I only give her part of it.

“We... we kissed.”

Her jaw drops to the table. “No!”

“Just to clarify, it was before I knew who he is and what he does.”

“But you kissed him?”

“He kissed me,” I clarify quickly. “I mean, there was chemistry from the beginning, and I wasn’t exactly pushing him away. But yeah, it happened and I’ve felt guilty about it ever since.”

Freya stares at me. Her blue eyes seem to get a little brighter, a little more focused. “So...?” she says, drumming her fingers on the table rapid-fire.

“So what?”

“So how was it?!” she exclaims in exasperation.

I blush and pretend to be suddenly interested in the menu I already know by heart. “That’s neither here nor there.”

“Come on. Give me the deets. Spill the beans. Share the tea. Air the dirty laundry.”

I sigh. She is like a bulldog with a bone. “It was... amazing, okay?”

She sighs. “Makes sense. He looks like he can kiss.”

“He can kill, too. That’s the problem.”

“It’s okay, Jessa. You don’t have to pretend with me.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I’ve been there, too. He’s so much more attractive because of the danger he represents. He’s exciting. Off-limits in a way that makes him more desirable. Am I right?”

Her explanation fits in a little too well with Anton’s theory that I chase drama. Instinctively, I rear back from it, but even I can see why.

“I just didn’t know who he was. Otherwise, I would never have gotten on that boat.”

“But you did get on the boat,” she points out. “Why?”

“I needed a distraction.”

“I’ll bet,” she says, raising her eyebrows. “Good pick.”

“Not like that,” I snap. “I meant that I wanted to immerse myself in a job and not have to think about my fiancé and best friend cheating together.”

“You got way more than you bargained for then.”

“God, you have no idea.”

“Did you sleep with him?” she stage-whispers.

I glare at her. “You’ve asked me that question before.”

“So why do I get the feeling you lied the first time?” Her brow arches, eyes searching.

And I double down. Because no way am I admitting to sleeping with a murderer. “No. Just a kiss.”

“What about last night?”

My entire body ignites with goosebumps. I’m thankful for the long-sleeved cotton shirt I’m wearing. “I told you what happened last night.”

She gives me a shrewd look. “I can smell the guilt coming off you right now, Jessa. Just tell me.”

Her persistence is starting to get irritating. But a part of me also just wants to get it off my chest. Again, I don’t tell her the whole truth. Just a version of it. Just a bit.

“He’s just playing mind games with me.”

“Does he touch you?”

I frown. “Um…”

“He does,” Freya exclaims. “Oh my—”

“Hey.”

I turn towards Chris’s quiet greeting and stand up with relief. I give him a tight hug before turning towards Freya. She’s looking up at Chris with barely concealed annoyance.

“You must be the best friend,” she drawls.

I step in for introductions. “Freya, this is Chris. Chris, this is Freya.”

They shake hands and Chris slides into the vacant chair between us. He grabs the menus I've forgotten about. "Have you ordered yet?"

"We've been busy chatting," I say, just as Marianne reappears.

"You guys good to go?" she asks.

Freya looks at me. "Why don't you order for me? You know this place well."

"I'm good with that, too," Chris agrees, putting the ball in my court.

So I run the gamut, ordering a stack of pancakes, a breakfast skillet, and a breakfast burrito. Everyone gets a bit of everything.

The moment Marianne steps away, Freya glances towards Chris. "I've heard a lot about you," she remarks.

He gives her a cryptic half-smile that has me tensing a little. "Wish I could say the same about you."

I kick him under the table, but he doesn't so much as glance at me. "Jessa said you moved into her building?"

"A few weeks ago," Freya says. "We only met recently, which is probably why you haven't heard much about me. But Jessa and I became fast friends."

"I can see that."

Why does he sound so... disapproving?

"I've been through something similar," Freya continues. "So I feel like I can help out our girl here."

Chris frowns. "Something similar?"

"Um, listen, Chris," I say quickly. "Freya knows about... my problem."

His eyes go wide. "You told her?"

"Don't worry," Freya says quickly. "Her secret is safe with me."

"I should hope so," he says, turning to me. "J, what are you thinking telling a perfect stranger about—"

“Hey,” Freya interrupts. “I’m not a stranger anymore. I had her back last night.”

“Last night?” he says without looking at Freya. “What happened last night?”

I’m quickly realizing that this brunch was a mistake. Neither Freya nor Chris have any context. I should have met with them separately, eased them into this first meeting.

My decision-making has really not been stellar lately.

“Listen, I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to worry you,” I say, grabbing his arm. “Anton... he’s been visiting me.”

“The fuck does that mean?” Chris hisses.

“He hasn’t hurt me or anything—”

“But he’s threatened to?” he guesses.

My eyes fall shamefully to my fingers resting on Chris’s forearm. “Yeah. He wants his phone back.”

“Well, then give it the fuck back to him,” Chris says immediately. “I’ve hidden it away, but I can get it out for you.”

“Ohh, you have the phone,” Freya says, putting the pieces together. “Got it.”

Chris throws her a glare before turning it on me. “What the hell were you thinking, J?”

“I was thinking perfectly fine, thanks,” I say, getting defensive. “I trust Freya.”

Annoyance flickers across his face. “Fine. Trust her all you want. But that doesn’t take care of your other problem.”

“It’s not the problem, Chris—it’s the solution. He needs that damn phone. It’s important to him. He said as much to me. He’s not going to hurt me as long as I have it.”

“But he will keep dropping in unannounced and scaring the bejeezus out of you? Gee, what an upgrade.” He shakes his head in disbelief. “Just give him back the phone, Jess.”

Freya and I exchange a glance. Of course he catches it. “What? What is it?”

Freya speaks before I do. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to return the phone.”

Chris’s eyes go wide as he turns to me. “And you agree with that?”

“Well, maybe...”

“Jesus, Jessa. You’re not a stupid person, so why are you acting like one right now? The man is dangerous. You’re playing with fire.”

“Maybe that’s what she likes,” Freya murmurs under her breath.

I throw her a warning glare, but thankfully, Chris didn’t hear her this time.

“Chris, I know you’re worried. But honestly, I know what I’m doing. I’ve thought this through.”

“Doesn’t look like it! He’s not some small-time tough guy. This man has resources at his disposal. He’s a fucking mob boss.”

“Bratva don,” I correct without even thinking about it. He looks like he’s about to bite my head off so I continue before he has a chance to. “And he’s not going to hurt me.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because he’s got the hots for her,” Freya adds unhelpfully.

Chris goes quiet for a second. “Excuse me?”

“A little tonsil hockey goes a long way,” she adds, trying and failing to contain her laughter.

I turn to Chris, who’s looking at me with an expression that I can only describe as abject disappointment. “Have you—did he—is there something going on between you and this guy?”

“No! No, of course not. I just... it just so happens that there was a kiss. Before I knew who he was,” I hurry to explain.

“Jesus,” Chris growls, running his hand over his face. “Jesus fucking Christ, Jessa.”

“I didn’t know who he was!” I insist.

Instantly, the memory of last night blazes across my memory. The way Anton gripped my legs. The way he threw one over his shoulder so that he could torture me with the promise of pleasure, only to withdraw at the last possible second.

Asshole.

“Has anything else happened between the two of you?” Chris asks.

I stare at him, ready to lie, but I hesitate the moment my eyes meet his. It’s always been hard for me to lie to Chris. He’s known me for too long.

“He’s gotten under your skin, hasn’t he?”

“Have you seen the man?” Freya asks. “He’s drop-dead gorgeous.”

He turns to Freya. “How have you seen him?”

“I noticed him leaving her place late one night.”

“Late?” Chris growls, turning to me.

“I don’t think he’s the kind of guy who sticks to business hours, Chris.”

“What the hell are you doing, Jess?” he demands. “Just answer that. What the hell are you *doing*?”

“Chris, please... just hold on to the phone for a little longer, okay? I need you to trust me.”

“I do trust you. I just don’t trust your lousy-ass judgment,” he snarls.

Marianne appears suddenly with a large tray in hand. “Ahoy, everybody. Brunch is served.”

“Something came up,” Chris says, getting to his feet. “I won’t be staying.”

“Chris—”

“Call me when you’ve come to your senses,” he says sharply.

Then he stalks off. I can’t even follow him with Marianne in the way. I look after him helplessly, feeling my stomach drop into my shoes as he disappears out of the café.

Marianne ignores the tension and puts down three plates loaded with brunchy goodness. It smells heavenly, but I no longer have an appetite for any of it.

“Enjoy!” she says with false brightness before she retreats. Waitresses are trained to avoid these kind of awkward landmines, and Marianne has been in the game for a long time.

“Shit,” I groan, dropping my head into my hands.

“Hey now,” Freya says quietly. “Don’t let him get to you.”

“He did get to me. He’s my best friend, Freya!”

“I know, but he’s wrong about this. Giving up that phone is a bad idea.” She pauses for a beat, then adds, “It’s obvious why he wants you to do it, though.”

I frown. “It is?”

Freya looks at me with an amused expression and reaches for the bright orange mocktail between us. “Oh, honey, don’t tell me you don’t see it?”

“See what?”

She giggles a little and takes a long drag of her drink before she deigns to answer. “Your surly best friend has feelings for you. Probably has for some time now.”

I stare at her for a long time. “That’s... crazy.”

“No, it’s not,” she says confidently. “I know when a man is interested in a woman. And that boy thinks you’re the hottest thing walking. He thinks that if you give up the phone, then Evil Mr. Bond won’t be paying you any more visits. He’s just clearing the way.”

“No. No, that’s not it. Chris is looking out for me.”

“Oh goodness, don’t be naive. Open your eyes, Jessa. Why do you think he got his panties in a twist when the kiss got brought up?”

“He’s protective. Thanks for that, by the way.”

She shrugs. “You told me he was your best friend. I assumed he knew. And even if he didn’t, I assumed you wouldn’t mind

telling him.”

Sighing, I fall back against my chair. “I still don’t think you’re right about this.”

“Did he have a problem with any of your other exes?”

“Well... yeah. But that was different. He was right about all of them.”

“Or maybe he was just jealous?” she suggests.

I think back to all my previous boyfriends and Chris’s reaction to each and every one. He’d never exactly been crazy about any of them. Not even the ones that turned out to be mostly decent.

“You’re seeing it now, aren’t you?” she presses, as relentless as ever.

I shake my head. “I can’t deal with that right now.”

“No, no, of course not. You’ve got hotter fish to fry.”

I glare at her. “It’s not like that.”

“Don’t worry, honey,” she croons reassuringly. “It’s our little secret.”

ANTON

“Have the catering staff arrived?”

Lev eyes me knowingly. “Is that really your question?”

I grimace. He’s on one tonight. “Answer it, motherfucker.”

He chuckles. “Yes, Don Stepanov, the catering staff—none of whose identities matter at all in any way to anyone, especially not the sous chef’s and especially not to you—just pulled up outside the staff’s quarters. They’re making their way up to the kitchen on the seventeenth floor as we speak.”

Lev and I are sitting in a private drawing room that adjoins the immaculate suite at the Plaza Hotel that I’ve booked for the evening. The dinner will take place in The Gilded Room, which boasts a stunning view of Los Angeles.

I like seeing the city from up here. It reminds me how much of it I own.

“You want me to bring her in before service starts?” Lev asks.

I nod. “I want you to bring in the whole staff before service starts. I want to have a chat with my caterers.”

Lev raises his eyebrows.

“What?” I snap.

“You’re playing with your food before you eat it. Almost literally, actually.”

“What’s your point?”

He holds up his hands in self-defense. “No point. Just good to know you’re still in there, man.” He stands up and makes for the door. “I’ll go get ‘em lined up.”

When Lev is gone, I turn back to the view.

If I concentrate hard enough, I can almost make out the boundaries of my own property. It’s perched on a hill, overlooking the other mansions sprawled prostrate at its feet. I’d rather be there than here. As nice as the hotels I stay in are, nothing beats being home.

But I wouldn’t dare let Rodion into my inner sanctum. And he wouldn’t agree to it, either. Too much for both of us to risk.

Him agreeing to this meeting may seem like a positive sign, a gesture of friendship—Lord knows Lev and Yulian are both optimistic in that department—but I know the man too well to be so sure.

Rodion likes his agendas. He’s cunning and he never issues a challenge he isn’t sure he can win. He is playing nice with me thus far because he understands he can’t beat me. But if that tide turns in the slightest, this meeting could become a declaration of war.

I wander into my personal dressing room and change into dark black suit pants and a crisp white shirt. I add cufflinks with my family crest emblazoned in silver, but ignore the black jacket.

When I make my way into the main sitting room, Yulian is standing by the window, staring out at the view.

“Yo, bro,” he says, glancing towards me. “Exciting night, huh?”

“That remains to be seen.”

He rolls his eyes. “Ever the pessimist.”

“Realist,” I correct. “I’m not in the habit of claiming premature victories.”

“He’s coming, isn’t he?”

“But for what reason?” I ask, joining him by the window. “That’s the question you should be asking.”

It's a sheer drop down to the sidewalk below. Our lives hang on the strength of the thin pane of glass in front of us. It's the only barrier between being in this room and tumbling to our deaths. No man with a fear of heights would be able to stand here. But Yulian and I don't fear anything anymore. That kind of thinking was trained out of us. The only fear we were allowed is the fear of looking weak.

"He's only trying to determine if you're still worthy of bearing the title he wants to pass to you."

"I have the title," I snarl, "regardless of what he deigns to give me. I don't need or want his fucking approval."

Yulian looks at me, dumbstruck. "You can't be serious about that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's... it's the Ivanovs!" he says, like I'd forgotten. "They've been around longer than us. Roots matter."

"Fuck roots. I can build my empire just fine without the Ivanovs' help."

"Then your empire is going to have an immediate and powerful rival." He's looking at me as though he doesn't know who I am anymore.

I shrug. "I'm not one to shy away from a challenge."

"He's your father-in-law," Yulian points out quietly.

"I'm not so sure the term still applies. Not now that his daughter is six feet under."

Yulian winces. His eyes sweep over me watchfully and then he sighs. "You know, it doesn't help your case, speaking like that."

"I didn't realize there was a case that needed to be made, brother."

Yulian shakes his head. "I know you think I'm naïve. But if you're not aware that every single person coming tonight is going to be watching you, then you're even more naïve than I am."

“Your point?”

“You need to talk about Marina like you cared about her.”

I give my brother a disgruntled look. “Jesus, Yulian. That’s your advice?”

“If you walk around pretending like her death doesn’t matter, then what do you think they’ll assume? What do you think Rodion will assume?”

“Exactly what he’s already thinking, no doubt,” I scoff.

“If you provoke him, he’ll rescind his offer to smooth things over.”

“I’ve already told you that I don’t want his Bratva. If he hands it over, I’ll take it. If he resists, then it’s no skin off my nose. I’ll take it in that case, too. Eventually.”

“This is not what Papa wanted.”

“Fuck Otets,” I say sharply.

Yulian turns to me, mouth agape. Any word against our father is a deep insult to my brother, but it needs to be said. I add, “The old man was a fool to get mixed up with the Ivanovs.”

“That’s not why you’re mad at him, though.”

“What are you today?” I demand. “A shrink?”

He doesn’t back down, even as my anger starts to bubble over. “You resent the fact that he arranged your marriage to Marina.”

I grit my teeth. “He should have known better.”

“He thought you’d be happy.”

“No, he didn’t give a fuck about my happiness. He was only thinking about his legacy. His goddamn empire. I told him early on that it wouldn’t work between us. Marina was beautiful and an Ivanov, but that was the extent of her appeal. It was enough for Otets. Not for me.”

Yulian throws up his hands in frustration and pivots angrily towards the door.

“You’re storming out now? Still trying to defend our father’s honor?” I taunt.

He turns back to face me. “The only reason you’re resisting this union is because it’s what Papa wanted. I think you’re being stubborn just to stick it to him. And you’re going to regret it.”

“You missed your calling, little brother,” I say sarcastically. “If the whole Bratva lifestyle is getting too much for you, you’d make an excellent psychologist. Either that or a fortune cookie writer.”

His face goes from red to white to blue in rapid succession. He’s never been one for controlling his emotions. “Fuck you, Anton,” Yulian says finally. Then he slams the door in my face.

Smirking, I turn back to my view. It is more fun than it should be to get under his skin. It happens so rarely. Mostly because Yulian has always adopted a more freewheeling attitude to life.

But when it comes to our father, he doesn’t have a sense of humor.

“What did you say to Yulian?” Lev asks as soon as he walks through the door a few minutes later.

I bark out a laugh. “The truth. It’s not my fault he doesn’t like hearing it.”

“I’ve never seen the man so rattled before.”

“He’s a daddy’s boy. Daddy being dead doesn’t change that.”

“Ah. How empathetic of you.”

Lev takes the same spot that Yulian was standing in. He runs his hand through his thick head of hair and turns to me.

“They’ll congregate in The Gilded Room in five,” he informs me.

“Let’s get going then.”

The dinner will take place in a suite of rooms designed for parties. The central space is a ballroom with high ceilings and intricate moldings and gold leaf details on the walls and

ceiling—hence the name, The Gilded Room. From there, smaller, more private rooms branch out in the shadows.

For tonight’s purposes, I’ll only be using the large room. I want to see all of my guests. There will be no sneaking away into darkened corners.

“Yulian thinks I’m being stubborn by not kissing Rodion’s ass. He wants me to put on a show for the bastard.”

“A show of what?”

“Love for his daughter.”

Lev laughs. “That would only come off as disingenuous.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“That, and the fact that your problems with Marina weren’t exactly a secret,” he says.

“Only because she ran to her daddy every time we argued.”

“She was just trying to get your attention,” Lev says as we approach the massive double doors of The Gilded Room.

“Yeah, she did love the fucking drama.”

“Drama?” Lev says, as he pulls open one of the double doors. “Nah, she wanted your attention because she was in love with you.”

He walks through the door, leaving me standing there completely floored.

Did he just say that she was in *love* with me? That traitorous bitch didn’t know the meaning of the word. It’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. Doesn’t make a lick of sense.

And yet it resonates somewhere inside me.

I push that feeling away, compose myself, and stride through the double doors. Just inside, the hired staff is waiting in a long line to greet me. They’re dressed in matching outfits of black pants and white aprons.

I spot Jessa immediately. She’s dressed in a freshly pressed white chef’s coat with the words “*Sous Chef*” stitched over

her right breast. Her blonde hair has been combed back into a tight bun and her makeup is subtle and understated.

Her chin is lifted, professional—and then she sees me.

Then, just like Yulian, she runs the gamut of emotions. Surprise, denial, acceptance, anger, fear. Her eyebrows pull together, her mouth pulling down in a deep frown.

She clearly had no idea this night was meant just for her.

I ignore her for the time being and plant myself in front of the line of staff. “I hope you know that it’s unprecedented to hire a catering company at The Plaza.”

A soft murmur of acknowledgement runs through the lineup. They nod their heads and stand taller, trying to earn my respect.

All but one. Jessa is staring daggers at me.

“I don’t accept mediocrity. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.” The head chef speaks on behalf of the entire staff.

“Excellent. Glad we understand each other. Good luck with service tonight,” I say.

The head chef, a portly older man, gives me a deep nod and then snaps his fingers. The staff marches out after him.

All but one.

Jessa lingers against the wall, waiting for the rest of her workmates to disappear into the kitchens. The moment the door closes on them, she walks right up to me.

“*You* did this!” she says, jabbing her finger into my chest.

“You’re welcome.”

“I wasn’t thanking you,” she hisses. “You’re an asshole.”

I hear Lev chuckle from somewhere behind me. It’s clear Jessa hears him, too. Her frown sharpens, but she keeps her eyes fixed on me. “What the hell are you playing at?”

“I have no idea what you’re so upset about. I gave you a job.”

She rolls her eyes like I'm playing dumb. "Yeah, because you're the kind of guy who just hands out favors with no strings attached. Yeah fucking right, Anton. You always want something in return. You should get '*Quid Pro Quo*' tattooed on your damn forehead."

I smirk. "So you're not totally clueless."

"I'm not giving you back the phone," she snaps.

"No?"

"No." She grits her teeth and jerks her chin out at me defiantly. "Giving me this job changes nothing. I'm sticking to my guns."

"To your detriment."

She frowns. "Is that a threat?"

"Friendly warning, nothing more."

"You're underestimating me," she asserts. "I'm not as weak-willed as the skanks you're clearly used to spending time with."

I have to bite back a laugh. "If you only knew."

Her expression falters. She wipes it clean and glares at me again. "Can't wait for tonight to be over so I never have to see you again."

My smirk grows. "I wouldn't be so sure. This is less of a finale and more of a trial run."

She frowns, but she can't help asking, "What?"

"I have a job offer for you. I need a chef in my home."

Jessa barks out a derisive laugh right in my face. "Yeah, well, you can take that job offer, fold it 'til it's all corners, and shove it up your ass."

With that, she turns towards the kitchen doors. For a moment, I consider reeling her back, pressing her up against the wall, and tasting the anger on her lips. She'd fight back, but that is all part of the foreplay when it comes to her and me. Stoking the flames.

But now is neither the time nor the place. I take a deep breath and let her go. Even though my cock is throbbing painfully in my pants.

Lev clears his throat behind me when she's gone. "Like I said, playing with your food."

I turn to him. "Excuse me?"

He gives me a skeptical look. What's with everyone looking at me like I'm stupid tonight?

"You and I both know that if you really wanted that phone back, you could get it. You could have gotten it a week ago."

"So?"

"So the only reason you're prolonging this little game is because you like interacting with her."

I glance towards the door she disappeared through and say nothing.

Lev sighs. "I'll admit, she certainly is... intriguing," he concedes. "Feisty. A bit like Marina in that way."

That makes my jaw clench tight. "Marina was a spoiled brat who didn't work a day in her life. Jessa knows about hard work. She's not entitled the way Marina was," I say. "She's strong-willed."

"So was Marina," Lev points out.

"No, Marina was pig-headed."

"Exactly. The two of you were too alike to ever really work."

I throw Lev a glare. "Fuck you."

He laughs. "I get it. You've found a pretty new toy to play with. And honestly, after all the shit you went through with Marina, you deserve it. But all I'll say is... be careful."

"I always am."

"I know you are," Lev says. "But this girl might be a handful. I can sense it."

I raise my eyebrows, understanding his deeper meaning. "This is not like Marina, Lev."

He shrugs. "If you say so."

"I do say so," I tell him. "Now, go get me the manager in charge of the catering staff. I want a quick word."

Lev smirks. "As you wish, Don Stepanov."

"And once you've spoken to the manager, head to hotel management and let them know that they can cut two of the waiters off the roster for tonight."

He opens his mouth to ask why, then thinks better of it. "She was right," Lev says instead. "You really are an asshole."

He shakes his head and leaves, laughing the whole way out.

A few minutes later, a woman in a skirt suit walks into The Gilded Room. Her makeup is caked on thick and her hair falls around her shoulders in unnecessarily voluminous waves.

"Good evening, sir. I'm Eloise Manor, the manager for tonight," she says. "I was told you wished to have a word with me?"

I nod. "I need a favor, Eloise. No questions asked."

She looks instantly intrigued. "Of course, sir. Whatever you like."

"It turns out an illness took out a few of the waitstaff for tonight. I'm going to need one of your people to exchange their whites for a waitress uniform."

"I'm sorry?" she says, frowning. "This is the first I've heard ___"

"It happened. This is the solution. I've already picked who I want to serve us."

"Oh?"

"The sous chef," I say.

The woman stares at me for a long moment, clearly shocked. But she remembers her assignment well. *No questions asked.*

She smiles politely and nods. "Whatever you want, sir."

I nod back. "Excellent answer."

JESSA

I stand gaping at Eloise for far too long. Part of me expects her to bust out laughing, because this has to be a joke.

But she's stone-faced.

I shake my head. "I don't understand."

Eloise sighs. "I don't know what to tell you. The client made a request, and I couldn't say no. I mean, c'mon, Jessa—this is The Plaza."

"Exactly! How can The Plaza be short-staffed?" I demand. "It doesn't make sense."

"No, it doesn't," she says, pushing a new uniform into my hands. "But that doesn't change the fact that you're waitressing tonight. I'm sorry. My hands are tied."

She pulled me to a back corner of the massive kitchen to give me the news, but the entire staff is still watching. People who work in food and bev are the nosiest people on the planet.

Penny and Craig are the only two I'm actually friends with, so they're the only ones who look concerned. The others just look curious. Like gawking at a car crash while you drive by.

"Hold on..." I say as something occurs to me. "Did the client ask for me specifically?"

"He asked for the sous chef, yes. And I agree it's odd, but maybe it's a compliment."

"Excuse me? Which part is a compliment?"

“Parties like this are all about appearances. He obviously thought you were the prettiest member of the staff to wait tables for his hoity-toity friends.”

I shake my head. “Trust me, this is not about my looks.”

“Whatever it is, you’ll still earn the same paycheck, so stop complaining and get changed.”

Eloise turns and strides away. I’m left standing there holding my new uniform.

Everything in me wants to fight, but I can’t really see a way out of this. I could walk out, but I need this job. Maybe Anton can afford to do whatever he wants, consequences be damned, but I sure as hell can’t.

And he knows that very, very well.

“You okay?” Penny is looking at the uniform in my hand with a sympathetic expression. “We overheard.”

“Who didn’t?” I mutter.

“It’s not gonna be so bad,” Penny says, patting my shoulder. “At least you’ll get to ogle Mr. Eye Candy all night.”

I laugh inwardly. Penny wouldn’t understand, but ogling Mr. Eye Candy is the last thing I want to do. I’d rather stab Mr. Eye Candy.

“I should get changed,” I say, moving into the dressing room. I’m tired of everyone staring at me like I have the plague.

Taking off my sous chef jacket feels like shedding my skin. It’s uncomfortable. Painful, even.

But not nearly as painful as putting on my new uniform.

The tight-fitted black skirt hits me mid-thigh. And the black shirt and vest, also tight-fitted, cuts in a ridiculously low V across my chest. I also have to swap out my comfy kitchen clogs for a pair of worn-looking black pumps that just so happen to be in my size.

“Fucking bastard,” I mutter every few seconds.

I've just finished changing when Eloise walks into the dressing room. She nods with satisfaction and gives me the once-over.

"You look great."

"Hurray," I say sarcastically.

She ignores me. "I think you should let down your hair."

"I don't want to."

"Jesse, you realize that I have to write performance reviews at the end of each and every job we do, right? So far, I've never had to write anything other than praise where you're concerned. Don't let this night be any different."

"I'm a chef, not a waiter," I say, sticking my chin out. "This is not my job."

"Unfortunately, your job is whatever the client says it is," she says sternly. "Now, let down your hair and add a little makeup. You're on in five minutes."

"Five? But service doesn't start—"

"You have to get out there to start pouring drinks."

I shake my head as humiliation rushes through me.

It's not that I think of waitressing as a demeaning job. It's just that it's not *my* job. I've worked my ass off to work in a kitchen. I'm supposed to make the food, not deliver someone else's.

And now, in a matter of seconds, Anton the Asshole has relegated me to waiting on him hand and foot.

Despite Eloise's request, I refuse to add more makeup. But I let my hair down and head into The Gilded Room where the event is supposed to take place.

The moment the head waiter spots me, he beelines straight in my direction. I suppress a sigh when I see the annoyed expression on his face. His name tag reads "*Douglas Henning.*"

He doesn't bother with a hello. "I don't need to tell you this is highly irregular."

I shake my head. "No, you don't."

"But since neither one of us has a choice in the matter, let's make the most of it, shall we?"

"Fantastic. Sounds like a plan."

He narrows his eyes at me. They're the color of burnt umber. He's handsome for an older man, distinguished, with an air of class. I bet clients love him.

"You'll have to show a little more enthusiasm than that when the guests arrive," he reprimands. "Is that clear?"

I nod.

"Do you have experience waitressing?"

"Some."

"What does that mean?"

"Two years in a café when I was a teenager. And a year during college."

"Not ideal, but it'll have to do. Be polite, be efficient, and don't fuck up."

"Easy for you to say," I mutter under my breath.

"What was that?"

"I can handle this," I say quickly.

"Good. Now, go grab a tray. The guests will be arriving any second."

As I move to grab a tray, I survey the rest of the waitstaff and the room. All the men and women are in a neat line, expressions serious. This gig is a big deal for all of us.

And it makes sense. The venue is insane. With the gleam reflecting off the walls, every single one of us in here looks like the gold-painted girl from that one James Bond movie.

The doors open. Guests begin to pour in and the whole staff leaps into action. I stay rooted in place, scanning the crowd for

him.

“What are you waiting for, new blood?” one of the waitresses asks me with an annoyed glance over her shoulder. “Go serve.”

Gulping, I wade into the thick of the crowd.

All of them are dripping with wealth. Literally. The men are in ten thousand dollar suits with priceless watches clasped around their wrists. The women are in designer dresses with the biggest jewels I’ve ever seen hanging around their necks, wrists, and ears. Plastic surgery is the rule, not the exception. Fake tits and nose jobs as far as the eye can see.

I happen to make eye contact with one of the women. She’s probably in her fifties, but she has the store-bought glow of someone fighting Father Time with a fair amount of success.

She’s wearing a champagne-colored power suit with strappy black stilettos. Her coat is cut low to reveal the embellished bra she’s wearing underneath and highlight the pink diamond pendant hanging between her breasts.

“Is that champagne?” she asks me.

“Yes ma’am,” I say, offering her the tray. “Dom Perignon.”

She laughs prettily. “I’d expect no less from Anton.”

Her hair is platinum blonde, but her roots are a deep, rich brown. There’s no question that she’s beautiful, but it’s a sharp kind of beauty. The kind you want to run from, not to.

I wonder how she knows Anton. Is she a friend? An acquaintance? A lover?

The last thought leaves me with a niggling feeling at the back of my mind that I don’t like one bit. Who cares if she was or is anything to him?

I certainly don’t.

“You’re not wearing a name tag.”

I blink and snap back to reality. “Uh... what?”

I cringe internally. I should have said something posh or dignified. “*Excuse me*” or “*Pardon.*” I should also pull myself together and stop babbling like an idiot.

The woman raises an eyebrow and gives me a pitying smile. “You’re not wearing a name tag. All the other waitstaff are.”

“Oh,” I say, looking down at my vest. “Right. I, uh, forgot it. But if you need anything, my name is—”

“Jessa.”

Anton emerges out of nowhere. For a moment, I think he’s reaching for me. But then his hand curls around the woman’s waist. He doesn’t pull her close or anything. It’s more like a greeting.

Albeit a very intimate one.

“Jasmine,” he murmurs, turning to the woman. “You look ravishing this evening, as usual.”

She gives him a faint smile. “Such a flirt.”

“Always.”

Both of them turn to me at the exact same time. They glitter together. It actually hurts my eyes. “The uniform suits you, Jessa,” Anton says to me.

My cheeks color. For a moment, I actually contemplate grabbing one of the champagne flutes just so I can fling the contents in his face.

“I don’t agree. But thank you.”

Jasmine looks between us, her expression twisting into amusement. “Jessa is your name?”

“Yes.”

Her smile gets a little wider. “I didn’t realize you were bringing your playthings to work, Anton.”

“I am *not* his plaything,” I snap.

She looks at me with raised eyebrows. “Hm, I can see that.”

I feel like a bug under a microscope. Before either of them can say anything that might get me fired, I march away from them.

I spend the next hour circulating around the room, offering drinks and canapes to every person in the room except for two.

Most of the men in attendance are older. Anton is one of the youngest by a good margin. I spot Lev and Yulian swimming in the crowd, too. Neither of them seem to notice me.

Most of the female guests ignore me and the other waitstaff entirely. Except for Queen Jasmine, as I've started calling her in my head. I can feel her watching me from time to time, though she makes no attempt to speak to me again.

The men, on the other hand, try to make conversation every chance they get. "Conversation" being a pretty loose term for repulsive attempts to pick me up.

"What's your name, pretty girl?" one man asks me.

He's mid-sixties if he's a day, and he has an actual gold tooth. He looks me up and down like I'm the next hors d'oeuvre on the menu.

"Josephine," I lie automatically.

"Beautiful name."

"It was my grandmother's," I say, talking fast and angrily. "You would have liked her. She was about your age when she died."

The confident smirk on his face withers and dies. He looks at me as though I'm a rat he would love to step on. Then he turns his back on me abruptly. The two other men standing beside him do the same.

I smirk, satisfied with my work there. But when I walk back to the drinks table to refresh my tray, Douglas appears right in front of me.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he demands.

"Refilling. What does it look like?"

"You're pissing off the guests."

"I'm just serving drinks," I say innocently.

“Not to my satisfaction,” he growls. “I get it—they’re a bunch of pervy older men who you have no interest in. You don’t have to fuck them, just flirt.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “My integrity is not for sale.”

“You’re confusing integrity and pride,” he says scornfully. “Stop acting like you’re better than this. Some of us feed our families with this job. I already told you once: don’t fuck this up.”

He succeeds in making me feel guilty before he stomps off as elegantly as possible. I refill my tray and step back into the fray.

Without even realizing it, I end up close to Anton. He doesn’t see me, though. He’s deep in conversation with Lev and Yulian.

It’s the first time all night that the three of them have converged. They’ve been on opposite ends of the room, working the crowd. Now, their heads are bent together and they’re whispering rapid-fire to each other. I catch sporadic snippets of their conversation.

“Where the fuck is he?” Lev growls. “He should be here by now.”

“You think he won’t show?” Yulian asks. “If he doesn’t, it would be a clear sign. To everybody here.”

“He’ll show,” Anton says, all confidence as usual.

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I know the old man. He has no choice but to come. He’s toeing the line as usual. Trying to show up fashionably late to make a statement.”

“What statement is that?” Yulian asks.

I have a billion and one questions, but before I can keep eavesdropping, the men disperse without a word. The moment Lev and Yulian melt back into the crowd, a woman steps towards Anton.

If I thought Queen Jasmine was beautiful, then this woman is on another level. She's dressed in a scarlet red mini-dress with a low back and a scooped neckline that has her enviable cleavage on full display.

Her hair is blonde. But unlike mine, it looks like it's been crafted from waves of spun gold. It hangs down her back where her softly tanned skin disappears underneath the thin, crisscrossed straps of her dress. She's in towering heels that make her already long legs even longer.

"Jhené," he greets.

I roll my eyes. *Jhené*. Of course she'd have a supermodel name that matched her supermodel face and her supermodel body. Also, not sure how this is relevant, but Anton seems to have a thing for girls whose names start with "J." Weird fetish, but okay.

"How are you?" he asks.

"Great as always," she says with a flirtatious little giggle. "Daddy didn't want me coming tonight."

"And why is that?"

Something twists down my spine. It's so wrong—the levity in his words. The way his hand flutters on her hip like he knows I'm watching. He isn't talking to Jhené the way he talks to me, all backhanded jokes and threats. He's going all suave and seductive.

"He said tensions are high."

Anton nods. "Your father has always been perceptive."

"For the record, I don't believe it," she says, resting her palm on the lapel of his unbuttoned coat. "And off the record, she had it coming anyway."

Then she winks at Anton.

The smile stays on his face, but he gently plucks the glass from her hand. "I think you've had a little too much to drink."

He places his hand on her waist and steers her around. I watch them walk away, and I realize they're probably the most

beautiful couple I've ever seen in my life.

I wrinkle my nose and spin around—only to realize Lev is staring at me. He was watching me watch them. I immediately go beet-red, avert my gaze, and move quickly around the room.

“Having fun?”

I turn to the side and do a double take when I see who spoke. A second later, I realize it's not Anton I'm looking at. It's his brother.

And he's looking at me like he wants something.

God, I'm getting sick of this family.

JESSA

I spin away from him, giving Yulian my back. I don't want him to think that I'm open to a conversation. Especially not here. My boss is occupied on the other side of the room, but I have a feeling Douglas has an eagle eye for this kind of unprofessional "fraternization."

"Expecting someone different?" Yulian whispers over my shoulder.

"No," I lie.

"It's the bane of my existence, you know," he says.

I shouldn't engage, but curiosity gets the best of me. I look back at him. "What is?"

"Being second-best."

I shake my head. "I have no idea what you're talking about right now."

"Sure you do," Yulian says. "You've been watching my brother all night."

I try to fight the blush that rises up on my cheeks, though I'm pretty sure it's a losing effort. "I have not!"

"No need to get defensive on me. Most women watch Anton. It's just... hormones. Or pheromones, whatever. Animal instinct."

I roll my eyes. "I'm working."

“Are you?” he asks. “Looks more like you’re an undercover spy. And not a very good one at that.”

“The only reason I’m even here is because of your damn brother.”

He wags his finger in my face like a disappointed parent. “Actually, the only reason you’re here is because of you. You took something that doesn’t belong to you.”

I laugh at him. “You’re going to give me a lecture about right and wrong?” I scoff. “Pretty sure murder ranks a little higher on the list than petty theft.”

He just smirks at me as though nothing I say can affect him. “You’ve got more spirit than I gave you credit for.”

“Oh God,” I groan. “I’m this close to throwing up in your face.”

“Well, that would certainly make a party out of this nightmarish evening.”

“What is even the point of tonight?” I snap. “Everyone here looks—”

“Embalmed?” he offers.

I snort like a pig. Very classy.

“Don’t let appearances fool you,” he continues. “This room currently holds some of the richest and most powerful people in the whole city. Hell, the whole country.”

“I haven’t heard of any of them.”

“That’s because they’ve built their empires on hidden corpses and blood money. It doesn’t exactly earn you a spot in the papers. Unless you’re unlucky.”

I frown, feeling a chill run down my spine. Is he trying to scare me? I study his face, but he’s looking around the room like he’s trying to give me a tour.

“There’s been some turnover since the last shindig. Especially amongst the women,” he says. “They’re a lot younger now.”

I wrinkle my nose. “You’re disgusting.”

“Hey, I didn’t do it. I’m just telling you how it is.”

“I don’t need you to tell me anything. I can see for myself.”

My eyes flit automatically to Queen Jasmine. She’s standing between two older men, trying desperately not to look bored.

“That’s Jasmine Reglan,” Yulian says, following my line of sight.

“Who’s she?”

“Daughter of Don Carlos,” Yulian tells me. “Married to William Carrington.”

“She looks awful flirty for someone with a ring on her finger.”

Yulian chuckles. “Poor bastard is probably at home in the doghouse,” he explains. “He’s her third attempt at marital bliss. A twenty-eight-year-old former playboy who gave up on his dreams of being an actor and traded it in for the pleasure of being a kept man. He’s new to the life.”

“What life is that, exactly?”

“The life of power and intrigue, deceit and mind games. It’s never easy on the ones that marry into it. Hell, it’s not easy on the ones who are born into it.”

I glare up at him. “Are you trying to make me feel sorry for you, or are you trying to scare me?”

He looks mildly amused by that. “Scare you? What, are you trying to marry into this life?”

My face flushes warm, and I turn away from him. He caught me. I’m about to make an excuse and leave when I notice Anton again.

He’s on the other side of the room with Jhené. I can see Anton’s face, but her back is to me. All I can see are layers of sun-swept golden hair.

“She’s a knockout, isn’t she?” Yulian says. “Jhené Torino. Bratva princess.”

“Princess? Is that a thing in the Bratva?”

“Fuck yeah.”

“Do all Bratva princesses look like that?”

“Don’t be fooled. Not all that beauty is real.” He gives me a pointed smile. “Wanna spot what’s fake?”

I survey her again, feeling a weird combination of girl crush meets simmering jealousy. “The boobs?”

“No, actually, those are real,” he says.

I frown. “And you would know because...?”

He bows mockingly. “A gentleman never gropes and tells.”

I roll my eyes. “Charming.”

“Always. Keep guessing.”

“The ass?”

“Bona fide, I’m afraid.”

I feel a twinge of discomfort in the realization that I’m actively objectifying a woman right alongside a real pig of a man. But then I feel that twist of jealousy again and the petty part of me decides to keep playing along. Shit, I might be a bad person.

“The nose?”

“Bingo.” Yulian nods. “She used to look like Miss Piggy.”

“Wow. That’s fucked up.”

He shrugs. “True story.”

I shake my head and try to contain the rude laugh bubbling up.

“The nose job was a birthday present a few years ago. Most people get cats when they turn sixteen, but...” He shrugs.

“Wait, how old is she now?” I ask incredulously.

“Twenty, twenty-one,” Yulian answers. “Something like that.”

“Wow, I thought she was older.”

“That’s kind of the point,” he says. “You have to grow up fast in this world. And you can’t show any flaws. Rumor has it she got the nose job done for my brother.”

“For Anton?” I ask, glancing at Yulian to determine if he’s just pulling my leg or not. His expression is serious. “Why on earth

would she do that?”

“Love,” Yulian coos, dramatically batting his eyes. Then he sighs. “She’s been chasing after him since the second she turned legal. Even him getting married didn’t deter her. That’s the thing about Bratva princesses—they’re stubborn. They usually get what they want.”

I watch her with Anton, noting the way she uses any excuse to touch him. He doesn’t seem to mind the attention at all. It makes me wonder what they’re talking about.

What do the Bratva prince and the Bratva princess have to say to one another?

“Well, he’s single now,” I point out.

“Is he?”

I meet his curious gaze and roll my eyes. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“My brother seems inordinately fond of you.”

“*Fond?*” I repeat, chortling. “That is not the word I would use. The whole time I’ve known him, he’s either been threatening me or trying to embarrass me.”

Yulian shakes his head. “Classic Anton. Only he can be an asshole and still get whatever he wants.”

“He’s not getting me,” I snap defensively.

Yulian just laughs. “From what I hear, he already has.”

Then the bastard has the audacity to saunter away. I’m halfway to walking after him, just to defend myself, when I get a faceful of Douglas.

“Jesus!” I cry out, narrowly avoiding a collision with my boss.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he demands with so much calm that it actually unnerves me. If we weren’t in front of the guests, he’d be screaming.

“Um... my job?”

“It’s one thing to have a conversation with a guest. But to get into a confrontation with—”

“I’d hardly call that a confrontation.”

“I am still speaking,” he hisses, cutting me off. “You will do your rounds and refrain from speaking to anybody else. Is that understood?”

“What if they speak to me? Which is what Yulian was—”

“You answer. You offer them a beverage or a canape. Then you leave.”

He glares at me until I nod. Then the angry mask vanishes, replaced with the pleasant serenity that makes him so freakishly good at his job. He nods back and pivots away.

“Ass,” I mutter under my breath when he’s out of hearing range. I look up and realize that Yulian is observing me from a few feet away.

He gives me a knowing wink and turns back to an older gentleman with a bad combover.

Feeling deflated, I continue my rounds. When dinner is served, I am forced to watch as Anton sits at one of the tables, Princess Jhené and Queen Jasmine situated happily on either side of him.

“Jessa.”

I don’t have to turn to see who the clipped voice belongs to. “Yes, Douglas?”

“You’re assigned to table one.”

I don’t need to check to see which table that is. After everything that has happened tonight, I can’t believe I didn’t see this coming.

“Fuck me.”

“What was that?” Douglas snaps.

“I said, sure thing.”

He purses his lips. “Mhmm. So I thought.”

He whisks away again. I have no choice but to take my assigned cart and head to table one. Everyone is already deep in conversation, barely paying me any attention as I approach.

“You can’t remain single forever, Anton,” Queen Jasmine says. “You’re far too young.”

“And far too handsome,” Jhené adds with a little giggle. She’s been knocking back the champagne pretty hard tonight. I personally served her two glasses. And I’ve seen her hijack several other waiters in between.

Yulian is slumped in his chair opposite them with that knowing smirk on his face. He meets my gaze, but I turn away quickly and serve the table.

“Thank you,” Queen Jasmine says. Her eyes linger on my face.

Jhené doesn’t even notice when I put the first appetizer down on her plate. She’s staring right at Anton, caressing his bicep as though she’s forgotten they’re in public.

For a moment, I feel heat along the back of my neck and I know he’s watching me. I turn slowly to the table and announce the food I’ve just served.

“Lobster, beetroot, and Beluga caviar with a crayfish emulsion and cauliflower foam.”

I make the mistake of looking up when I’m finished reciting. Anton’s eyes are locked on me. His pearly grays carve off a piece of my soul before I drag my gaze away.

Self-preservation. That’s all I can think of as I roll the cart away with relief.

By the grace of God, I make it through the entire dinner service. And by the time dessert is served, I actually feel proud. I got off to a rocky start, but I was the perfect waitress for the whole meal. Even Jhené thanked me as I cleared away her dessert plate.

The music picks up again, announcing the end of service. More champagne is brought out, but before I grab a tray, I decide to take my fifteen-minute break to use the restroom. Even Douglas gives me an approving nod as I duck through the main doors. I refrain from giving him the middle finger in return.

Staff bathrooms are outside The Gilded Room to the right. I sigh when I step into the quiet little oasis.

This night feels like it has stretched on forever. And it's still not over.

I look at myself in the clear oval mirror above the sink. I look tired, but no worse than I'd look if I'd spent the night in the kitchen like I was supposed to. The heat and steam always curls my hair and melts my makeup off. It's why I usually don't wear any while I work.

I splash some water on my face and shake off the tension in my shoulders. Before I head out, I decide to check my phone.

I have a couple of missed texts from Freya wishing me luck tonight. And two missed calls from my boss. Not Douglas, but my manager at Starlight Caterers.

I call immediately, my heart thudding unceremoniously against my rib cage. "Melissa? Hello?"

"Jessa," Melissa says, sounding distracted. "Thanks for calling back."

"I would have called sooner, but I'm on the job."

"I know. The Plaza."

She has never called me in the middle of a job, particularly not one this important to the company. "What's going on?"

"I understand this is highly irregular, Jessa..."

I shudder. That's the second time tonight someone has said as much to me. "What is?"

She continues on as if I hadn't spoken up. "But the unfortunate truth is... we're going to have to let you go."

I feel like I've been punched in the gut. "Excuse me? I'm not sure I heard you correctly."

"I'm afraid you heard me right," Melissa says regretfully. "We're going to have to terminate your contract with Starlight Caterers, effective immediately. Of course you'll receive a generous severance package and a glowing recommendation letter—"

“What’s the reason for termination?” I demand.

Melissa stops short. “Um, well...”

“You need a legitimate reason for terminating my contract, Melissa. What is it?”

“We’re downsizing.”

“That’s bullshit,” I say instantly.

“Jessa.”

I’m not an angry person and I’ve certainly never talked back to Melissa. I like her, for Christ’s sake! We’ve gotten drinks after work before, and she’s always been a good boss to me.

But if I’m being fired, Melissa isn’t my boss anymore. I’m tired and I’m pissed and I’ll talk to her however I damn well please.

“I was promised a promotion next year. You were gonna make me head chef, remember?” I hiss. “I was going to be the head freaking chef for all catering gigs. You don’t go from that to being fired in a matter of seconds. I want the real reason, Melissa. You owe me that.”

She’s silent for a long time. I wonder if she’s just going to hang up on me.

“Oh, hon,” she says. “I don’t know the real reason either. I got a call from Mr. Mandelson.”

“As in... *the* Mr. Mandelson? The owner?”

“Yes. He’s the one who gave me the directive,” Melissa says. “All I can say is you pissed off someone powerful. He called me after hours and said to let you know right away.”

I look up and catch my reflection in the mirror. My face is a mask of disbelief, but I’ve never looked more alive. My cheeks are flushed with color and my eyes are bright. Fighting fit.

But my fight isn’t with Melissa.

“Thanks for telling me, Mel. You’ve been a great boss.”

Before she can say anything, I hang up. Then I march out of the bathroom and back into The Gilded Room.

Douglas sees me first. He must sense the change in my demeanor, because he starts shaking his head, trying to cut me off at the pass.

But I don't listen. I don't fucking care anymore.

All I care about is screaming at the man who has repeatedly ruined my life from the moment he walked into it.

Of course, I have to wade through a crowd of women to get to him. They're all chattering, trying to get his attention. When Anton looks at me instead, they finally take notice. The conversation stops and all eyes find me.

I pin him with a glare.

"We need to talk, asshole."

ANTON

It's almost twelve midnight and that limp old fuck still isn't here.

Lev and Yulian keep shooting me glances. I know what they're thinking, because I'm thinking the same thing.

It's gonna look bad if he doesn't show.

As if there aren't enough whispers going around already. A break in the alliance will cause problems before we're ready to deal with them.

But I ignore my two right-hand men. I know my enemy perfectly well.

People sometimes thought Otets forced me to be at every meeting with him. Wrong—I wanted to be there. I understood that one day, knowing my enemy would save my Bratva.

And even at eighteen, I knew that Rodion Ivanov's friendship only ran surface-deep.

I knew marrying the bastard's daughter was a bad idea. But Otets was blinded by his desire to take the Ivanov Bratva under his wing. He thought it would all be so simple, so neat.

But nothing in this life is simple.

Nothing is neat.

Everything comes with a bloody, ragged edge.

"You're distracted tonight, darling," Jasmine says, shooting me a sexy smile. "Any particular reason?"

“Business as usual.”

“I would have believed you... if I hadn’t met the pretty blonde with the killer side-eye,” she says slyly.

“What blonde?” Jhené butts in immediately.

She hasn’t been very far from me tonight. Apparently, the girl has it in her head that she’s going to be the next Mrs. Stepanov.

Of course, Jasmine doesn’t deign to respond, so Jhené turns to me. She hooks her arm around mine possessively. “Which blonde is she talking about, Anton?”

Jasmine stares at the two of us with amusement. The older she gets, the more readily her claws come out. It’s how she compensates for the boredom in her personal life. Apparently, the third husband is turning out to be quite the disappointment. Easy on the eyes, but no one is home upstairs.

“You do seem to have a thing for blondes, don’t you, Anton?” Jasmine asks.

“Which blonde?” Jhené asks again, growing frustrated.

“I’d say you’re about to find out,” Jasmine says with a little chuckle.

I turn just in time to see Jessa blazing a trail right for me. Her eyes are fixed on me unabashedly for the first time all night. I can practically see the steam coming out of her ears.

She stops half a foot away from me, hands fisted and quivering like she’s barely resisting jabbing a furious finger into my chest. “We need to talk, asshole.”

Jhené looks between us for a moment, waiting for the punchline. When it doesn’t come, her expression turns snotty.

“Excuse you. I don’t think the waitstaff should be talking to —”

“Zip it, Barbie. I’m not talking to you,” Jessa interrupts. Then she whips her head back to me. “I’m talking to *this* particular asshole.”

I suppress my smile. “Come with me.”

I lead her through the crowd, most of whom make no attempt to hide the fact that they're watching with morbid curiosity. Jhené wasn't wrong—any member of the waitstaff would normally be dismissed without question for pulling a stunt like this.

But Jessa is special.

I walk the little spitfire into one of the private alcoves that adjoin The Gilded Room. I snap the door shut and turn to her. Just as I suspected, she gives me the finger jab to the chest that she held back in the main room.

“You are the biggest dick on the fucking planet.”

“You called me in here to talk dirty to me?” I taunt. “If I'd known that's what you wanted, I would've come much sooner.”

“Don't get cute with me. It suits your brother, but not you.”

I noticed them talking earlier in the night. I have to bite my tongue from asking what exactly they were talking about.

“I just got a call from my boss,” she says, her eyes flashing dangerously. “She let me know that I've been terminated, effective immediately.”

I raise my eyebrows but don't say anything. Obviously, that just pisses her off more. “You just got me fired, motherfucker! Aren't you going to say anything?”

I stroke my chin. “Well... I did warn you.”

She stares at me in shock. “You... you're not even going to deny it?”

I scoff. “Why would I?”

“But—what—why—what was the fucking point?” she seethes.

“The point?” I ask, taking a step towards her. “The point, Jessa, is that you refuse to listen. I wanted my phone back; you refused. I could use force and get what I want. But this method strikes me as so much more fun.”

She processes that, her eyes blinking fast, her chest rising and falling with horror. “This job... it was my whole life.”

“Shame you gambled with your life then, isn’t it?” I say. “But I didn’t exactly throw you into the ocean without a life vest, you realize.”

“Didn’t you?”

“There is a job offer on the table,” I remind her.

She narrows her eyes with disgust. “Working for you? No thanks, I’m not taking your fucking pity job.”

I shrug. “Your choice.”

“You can’t honestly think this will work. It’s blackmail.”

“And who are you going to report me to?”

The defeat starts to sink in as she continues to stare at me. Her voice is a hollow croak. “Why are you doing this?”

“It’s simple. If you had complied from the beginning and returned my phone, that would have been that. But you chose to provoke me. Now, not only will you have to return my phone, you’re going to have to pay off your interest.”

She pales. “Interest?”

“That’s right. I’ve wasted a lot of time chasing down that phone, Jessa. And my time does not come free. I demand compensation, and this is what I want.”

“So you’re asking for slave labor. I don’t know why I’m surprised.”

I laugh and saunter closer to her. She’s only a few inches away now. Close enough to smell her perfume, to sense her warmth. To see the fear and fury brewing in her eyes.

“The longer you delay giving me back my phone, the longer you’ll have to work for me.”

She shakes her head, breaking eye contact. “This... this isn’t fair.”

“If you’re looking for ‘fair,’ you’re looking at the wrong man,” I tell her. “You should know that by now. So what do you say? Ready to return my phone now?”

Her expression turns to stone. “Fuck no.” I chuckle, which prompts Jessa’s eyes to narrow even further into angry little slits. “What the hell is so funny?”

I shrug. “I guess I should take that as a compliment.”

“Excuse me?”

“You don’t want this game to end any more than I do. Why else would you hold on to that phone, knowing your freedom hangs in the balance?”

“Because I will not let you manipulate me.”

I give her my most disarming smile, before I grab her around the waist and pull her to me. “Is that right?”

She plants both her hands on my chest and tries to shove me off her, but the effort is half-hearted. She’s concentrating on my lips, breathing fast and shallow. Telling me in every way but with her words that she’s addicted to the taste of me.

“I admire the effort,” I tell her sarcastically. “Standing ovation.”

“You think you affect me a lot more than you actually do, you know,” she says through gritted teeth. “I’m onto you, Anton.”

“What exactly are you ‘onto,’ Jessa?”

She stops struggling for a moment, her eyes bright with righteousness. “You’re bored with your life,” she snarls. “You want a distraction. And I’m the kind of easy prey you’ve always wanted.”

I’m not expecting that, and for a moment, she actually succeeds in catching me off guard. But I recover quickly. “And how did you come to that conclusion?”

“I was watching you tonight.”

“I noticed.”

She ignores that bait. “You charm the room like you charmed me that first night. You control everyone around you. Every woman in there ogles you like you’re God’s gift to Earth. But I don’t. I don’t give a shit who you are.”

“Is that what you tell yourself?” I ask, gripping her waist a little tighter. “When you’re alone in your bed at night and you can’t fall asleep without wondering where I am, what I’m doing, if I’m thinking of you like you’re thinking of me?”

“I don’t have to tell myself anything,” she hisses. “I can see it all on your face.”

“Is that why you can’t stop staring?”

Her eyes drop to my lips again. Color rises in her cheeks and her lips part. Instantly, my cock is a steel rod in my pants.

Jhené can doll herself up all she wants, but she’s got nothing on the woman in front of me. She is fucking magnificent.

“I’m not the only one staring,” she musters up with as much bravado as she can find.

I smirk. Unlike Jessa, I’m not the least bit ashamed of my desires.

“Because I’m imagining all the things I’m going to do to you,” I rasp to her. “All the things I haven’t already done...”

Is it a threat? A promise? I leave that question open to interpretation. Her eyes go cloudy as she grapples for the answer. Desperate to know but too proud to ask.

Her exhale is warm across my face. I find myself leaning towards her just as she shoves her doubts aside and tilts her chin up to meet me.

Our lips slam together, all anger and passion and indignation.

She claws at my chest at the same time I grab a fistful of her delicious ass. I’ve just pushed my tongue into her hungry mouth when the door opens and I hear a familiar gasp.

Jessa jumps away from me instantly.

Jhené gawks in at us with a pinched expression on her face. She looks like she’s swallowed something horrible.

“What are you doing?” I demand.

If possible, she seems even more insulted by my tone. “I... I wanted to find you.”

“If I wanted to be found, I would have been out there with the rest of my guests.”

Embarrassment flashes across her face. Then she jerks her chin out in a pout and says the only thing that could possibly get my attention. “I just... I thought you’d want to know that Don Ivanov arrived a few minutes ago.”

Fuck.

I pretend as though the news is nothing but an inconvenience. A second later, I realize I don’t actually have to pretend. His timing couldn’t be worse.

“I’ll be right out,” I say in a clipped voice.

Jhené throws Jessa a deadly glare and slinks back out of the room.

“Is he the man you’ve been waiting for all night?” Jessa asks.

“You’ve been paying attention.”

“Well, your party was so boring that listening to other people’s conversations is all I had. Who is he?”

“My father-in-law.”

She freezes for a moment. “Oh.”

That expression tells me everything I need to know about her: that I’m right about what the little *kotyonok* thinks of me, what she thinks of herself, what she thinks of this dangerous dance we’re locked into.

And my reaction to the crestfallen look in her eyes tells me everything I need to know about myself: that at some point in this game, I got in deeper than I realized.

Toying with her sporadically isn’t enough.

Tasting her from time to time no longer satisfies.

I want to swallow her whole.

But weakness is the last thing I need right now. And if there’s one thing that marks a don as weak, it’s losing his mind over a silly little girl. So I do the only thing I can do—straighten up and leave.

“I trust you know your way out,” I say as I go. “If not, just follow the signs for the staff staircase at the back.”

I can feel everyone’s eyes on me when I emerge. I ignore them all and glide through the room in search of the old fuck.

Yulian finds me before I can find Ivanov. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?” I ask impatiently, still scouring the crowd in search of my sullen-faced father-in-law.

“That you were in there banging Jessa?”

“Fucking hell,” I growl. “Jhené couldn’t wait to spread that rumor, could she?”

“First of all, it’s not a rumor if it’s true. And second of all, you know Jhené is as spiteful as she is hot.”

“Fuck Jhené. Where is *he*?” I demand, ready to put this conversation to death.

“In one of the private rooms. He wants to speak to you alone. Lev’s with him now.”

“Stay out here and hold down the fort for me,” I say, heading in the direction he’s pointed out.

“Wait!” Yulian calls, following after me. “I have to stay here?”

“I need a man watching the rest of these piranhas,” I point out. “And I trust you.”

“This is grunt work,” he complains.

“And you’re the best at it.”

He throws me a glare. “Asshole.”

Clenching my jaw, I head into the room that Ivanov and his men are in. The windows along one wall show the southern swathes of the city twinkling in the night.

Lev stands fidgeting off to the side, clearly impatient for me to arrive. Ivanov is sitting on one of the high-backed black velvet chairs. A freshly-lit cigar dangles between his fingers. He must keep a whole damn Cuban factory in business, because he’s been smoking two or three of the same brand every single day

for as long as I've known him. The smell makes my hackles rise at once.

"Rodion," I growl. "Glad you could finally join us."

He gives me his best imitation of a smile, which is eerie and unsettling in its own way. Like an alien pretending to do what humans do. "Business held me up. You understand."

"Of course," I say, even though he isn't really asking for my understanding or my forgiveness. "You're here now."

"So, it seems, is the entirety of the underworld. The ones that matter, at least."

He's gained weight since I last saw him. He's still not a large man by any means, but he was always so slim that even the slightest difference stands out. The circles under his eyes are more pronounced now, too. He looks like a caricature of a villain, pale and paunched and puffing on that damn cigar.

"I wouldn't bother with them if they didn't matter," I say coolly as I sink to the seat opposite him.

Lev remains standing. I've made it clear that he doesn't need to play bodyguard when we're in these kinds of situations, but he prefers to. He gets a strange sense of security out of it.

"Not all that glitters is gold," Rodion advises.

I smile. "Otets used to say that a lot."

"He was a wise man in his time," he says. "I can't say the same for the men I'm forced to rub shoulders with these days."

It's a more pointed jab than I'm expecting. Kudos to the old man for sacking up. Maybe his daughter's death was the catalyst for him to finally grow a pair.

"Well, then I should have invited you sooner."

Rodion glances towards the window. "Marina loved this hotel."

Jumping straight to it, then. So be it. It's better that way. I don't want to be stuck in this room any longer than I have to be.

“I know,” I say. “I brought her here on our third wedding anniversary.”

“Is that the anniversary you gave her the black eye?” Rodion asks. “Or the one where you gave her the scar down her leg?”

I can feel Lev tense behind me. The atmosphere in the room changes, but I refuse to lose control of the situation.

“I don’t recall the black eye,” I say smoothly. “And as for the scar on her leg... she gave that to herself.”

“My daughter would never.”

“There’s a lot your daughter did that you didn’t know about,” I tell him, refusing to pull my punches anymore. “Did you know that she got pregnant at seventeen?”

Rodion’s whole face seems to puff up suddenly, like a bird fluffing its feathers before an attack. “Of course she didn’t. Don’t be preposterous.”

“Remember that ski weekend she wanted in the Alps right before her high school graduation?” I press. “She didn’t go to Switzerland, Rodion. She went to Austria to abort the baby.”

Just when I think he’s about to attack, his face drains of color. He stares back at me, pale and shaken. In this moment, he very much looks like the old man he is.

“The father was someone who worked for you, by the way. He probably still does. She never actually gave me his name.”

“Why would she even tell you the story?” Rodion demands, grappling at straws now.

“We were in the middle of a fight. She wanted to reveal something about herself that would... shock me? Impress me? I don’t know her motivation. Maybe she just wanted me to know what she was capable of,” I say. “The point is, she threw it in my face one day, about a year into our marriage. I know she loved to visit you, Rodion. Loved to tell you about our fights, our lowest lows. Did she ever tell you that little story from her past?”

The man just stares at me, ashen-faced and speechless.

Good. It's long past time to dispel him of these stupid notions.

"She was not the shrinking violet you paint her as. She fought and she fought hard," I say. "Had no reservations; she gave as good as she got. I'm no fool, Rodion—I've heard the rumors. I deny them all. I had no hand in Marina's death. She did that herself."

His mouth opens and closes for a few seconds before he finds his voice again. "She... she may have had secrets... but that does not mean she killed herself," he says finally.

"I don't think she meant to kill herself, Rodion," I say calmly. "I think she was trying to get what she always wanted: attention."

His eyes go wide, ready to resort to anger. But I stop him with a raise of my hand. "You can't deny she loved causing a scene. She did it often."

"I—"

"Your little girl wanted to get my attention. Maybe she wanted more of yours, too," I shrug. "But she overplayed her hand just like I always knew she would. She got more than she bargained for. She got all the fucking attention she wanted and then some."

Rodion bristles, rising in his seat. The cigar in his fingers trembles like a warning. "I will not sit here and—"

"Our families' friendship has meant a lot to me, Rodion," I interrupt. "I don't want to destroy what my father built. I'd like to carry it forward. But first comes accepting the truth about your daughter. I did not kill her. The people who started that rumor only seek to benefit from divided loyalties. Surely you can see that?"

Rodion falls silent for a moment. I can see him contemplating his choices.

And I can see him coming to the realization that he doesn't have many.

He's not happy about it, but he nods anyway. "There was never a question about it, Anton," he says. "The Stepanovs and

the Ivanovs are brothers-in-arms.”

I return the fake smile he’s giving me. “My thoughts exactly.”

JESSA

I hate the way Penny and Craig are looking at me. The pity on their faces makes me feel about two feet tall. Like I'm the one who did something wrong, as opposed to the self-righteous asshole who just humiliated me in the one safe haven I thought I had left.

"You're the most talented chef I know," Penny says, handing me my bag. "Seriously, the only reason you're not head chef is because of the whole seniority hierarchy. Which is complete bullshit, for the record."

"Yeah, you'll get a job in no time." Craig hesitates before curiosity gets the better of him. "Did Melissa say why?"

The rest of the staff filed downstairs already, so we're the only three left in the kitchens.

"Guys," I say, turning to them, "I'm thankful for your support, seriously, but I think I need time to process this."

They both nod, looking ashamed, and then part to let me through. They've been hovering as soon as I told them the news.

As we get ready to clear out, I turn and give The Plaza's kitchen a final look.

I'd been looking forward to cooking here. But most chefs don't come back from being unceremoniously fired. There's very little chance I'll ever get another opportunity to cook at The Plaza.

And if Anton has his way, there's no chance I'll ever get another opportunity to cook again, period.

I'm so mad I could cry. But I hold back. He might not be here to see the tears fall, but I get the feeling that sick bastard has a spidey sense for this kind of thing. And I won't give him the satisfaction.

We take the second entrance out of the kitchens and go down to a common area. I can see the majestic double doors of The Gilded Room adjacent to where we're standing.

I'm ready to take the elevator down with Craig and Penny when I spot Yulian exiting The Gilded Room. He doesn't stop me. He's too deep in conversation with someone on the phone.

He crosses the open expanse and heads towards the balcony on the other side of the hall. I glance after him a moment, curious. I don't actually have a good reason to follow him, other than to maybe throw myself at his mercy and see if he can get Anton to change his mind. That's pathetic, obviously, and I won't be doing it, but still... There has to be something he can do.

"Jessa?" Craig calls after me. "You coming?"

"Um, actually you guys go ahead. I need to... to make a call." They hesitate, but I wave them on. "Seriously, go on. I'll call you guys tomorrow."

Craig has to physically pull Penny towards the elevators. I wait until their backs are to me before I follow Yulian's footsteps to the balcony.

The Plaza's balconies are more like private terraces. They're large and broken into separate seating areas. Each corner is dedicated to a cluster of upholstered sofas and armchairs with flickering candles on the tables. The space between is filled with lush, dense greenery, a natural kind of privacy screen.

And standing against the railing is Yulian.

"... miss me, do you?" he's saying into the phone.

I raise my eyebrows. Not the kind of conversation I'd expected to hear from him. I make an added effort not to make noise as

I move a little closer.

The wind masks my footsteps pretty well, but he also seems deeply absorbed in the conversation.

“I know. Don’t worry, I’ll come by soon. We can have some alone time, just you and me... Of course, baby. You know I’d do anything for you. You and that magic pussy of yours.”

I wrinkle my nose. The cute conversation has taken a turn toward not-so-cute. I’m regretting my decision to eavesdrop and wondering whether he’ll be able to hear me vomiting into the pot of the nearby bonsai tree.

Thankfully, he ends the call seconds later. “Speak to you soon.”

He realizes I’m there a second after he hangs up. His eyebrows jet up with annoyance, but he doesn’t flinch otherwise.

“How long have you been there?”

“Too long,” I say, turning my disgusted face on him. “Who’s the girl with the magic pussy?”

He smirks. “Not anyone you’d know.”

“Sounded serious between you two.”

He rolls his eyes. “If you knew me, you’d know that I’m not serious about anything.”

But I can tell immediately that he’s lying. He’s trying to salvage his reputation and erase the last minute from my memory.

“No?”

“No,” he reiterates. “Being serious isn’t my inheritance.”

“Because you’re the second son?”

He shrugs. “Something like that.”

“A little archaic, don’t you think?”

He shakes his head. “People like to think of themselves as superior. We’re so modern these days, so progressive, so open-minded... it’s all bullshit. We’re primitive fucking animals. Always have been, always will be.”

“Agree to disagree,” I mumble. His anger is a little off-putting. There are reservoirs of rage in this seemingly nonchalant, happy-go-lucky guy that are much, much deeper than I realized at first.

“No, I’m right. Care for an example? Take you and my brother,” he starts. I tense immediately. “He’s the big bad wolf, and you’re the little lamb who got caught in his crosshairs. And even though you’re supposed to be running in the other direction, you’re not. Why? Because at the end of the day, women crave a strong man. A powerful one. They can talk all they want about evolution and growth and intelligence and choice and respect and feminism and on and on and on. But at the end of the day, power is what attracts you the most.”

I straighten up haughtily. “That’s not true.”

“Oh, it’s true alright. If you disagree, then you’re just in denial.”

“I would love nothing more than to run in the opposite direction from your prick of a brother, Yulian,” I snap. “Except I have a feeling the son of a bitch will chase me wherever I go. That’s why I kept the phone. It’s my last line of defense.”

He rubs the bridge of his nose as if he’s tired of lecturing to me. “Let me be straight with you,” Yulian sighs. “I know you think the phone gives you security, but it’s a false sense of security. My brother will get what he wants in the end. He always does.”

“Is that right?”

“It’s the one thing I know to be absolutely true.”

“Then tell me something else that’s true,” I say. “Did he kill his wife?”

Yulian goes still. Deadly still. His eyes traverse my face, searching for a way to answer this that’ll appease me and shield his brother at the same time.

The hesitation itself feels like an answer, though. I feel cold despite the warm evening. Bone-deep cold. Soul-deep cold.

“He... wouldn’t have killed her,” he says at last.

“That’s not very clear. Nor is it very comforting.”

“Are you really trying to be comforted?” he asks. When I don’t answer, he leans closer. “My brother has gone easy on you, Jessa. And I’m not gonna lie, it’s because you’ve got a pretty face and a prettier smile. But he’ll get bored at some point, and then the protection you think you have will disappear.”

I stand my ground, even though I’m shaking in my clogs. “Sounds like you’re telling me he killed his wife, Yulian.”

He cocks his head to the side. “I’m telling you to be smart and give my brother his phone back.”

“Did you like his wife?” I ask.

He stops short, looking amused by the question. “Curious about her, are you?”

“I’m just asking.”

He nods, his smile getting wider. “Funnily enough, she looked a lot like you. Beautiful, blonde... a little skinnier, maybe. A little more cunning. But definitely similar.”

I swallow past a suddenly bitter knot in my throat. “But what was she like?”

“Strong. Feisty. Determined,” he says. “She was a wildfire. He couldn’t control her.”

I stare at Yulian’s face. His eyes are hazy; he’s losing himself to old memories. Maybe if I can convince him to keep talking, I’ll get some real information out of him.

“I can’t imagine Anton not being able to control anyone.”

He smirks. “I thought the same thing before Marina came into the picture. Honestly, when the match was first proposed, everyone thought it was an amazing idea. They were perfect together. Not just because they looked perfect together. It was everything: the birth and the breeding. The combined wealth and power.”

His explanation leaves me feeling hollow inside. It’s a black hole in my chest and it’ll swallow me up if I lean too close to

it. So instead, I just listen, hanging on to every word, even as I lose sight of why I asked the question in the first place. Why I bothered coming out here in the first place.

“Even their personalities were similar,” he’s saying. “It should have been a match made in heaven.”

“But it wasn’t?”

“The first year was more or less smooth,” Yulian recounts. “At least as far as I could tell. They probably fucked so much that there was no time to hate or argue. Hard to pick a fight with a dick in your mouth, right?”

I grimace. “Gross.”

But he ignores me like I never spoke. “But when the sex got stale, they must have realized that they were too alike to actually get along. That’s when the fights started. Nasty fights, too.”

“Violent?”

“Sometimes.”

He says it in a matter-of-fact way, as though violence toward someone you love is normal and they were just doing what was expected of them, what they’d been taught.

“My brother is not one to air dirty laundry in public, but Marina loved a scene. Probably because she knew how much Anton hated it.”

“She sounds unhinged.”

Yulian shakes his head and looks at me as if seeing me for the first time. “I think she was just unhappy.”

“But why?” I ask. “From what you’ve told me, she had everything. Looks, wealth, and a powerful husband.”

“Except she didn’t really have him,” Yulian says, giving me a secretive smile.

I raise my eyebrows. “He was cheating on her?”

Yulian doesn’t answer me. “It was doomed from the start. After the first major fight, they both walked away with scars.”

“Literal or figurative?”

He chuckles. “Both, most likely. Marina wasn’t afraid to draw blood.”

“Jesus,” I breathe.

Yulian pulls out a pack of cigarettes and offers me one. I decline, so he lights up. Smoke stings my nostrils, but I’m too invested in this conversation to walk away now. It’s a morbid curiosity, like rubbernecking at a deadly car accident on the side of the road, but I can’t stop, despite the last scraps of my sense of self-preservation screaming at me to run as far away from this family as I can.

“How did he find out that she was dead?” I ask, hoping I’m not being too obvious.

“I told him.”

My eyes go wide. “Really?”

Yulian nods, his eyes turning sad. “I found her body right outside the boundaries of Anton’s property.”

“Oh my God...”

“It’s strange what death does to a person. All her beauty... it had turned dark. Like some unholy beast had possessed her in her final moments. She still looked like her, but it wasn’t Marina anymore.”

“How did Anton react when you told him?”

“Honestly?” he asks. “He was relieved.”

I’m getting colder by the minute. I may never feel truly warm again. “He was relieved his wife was dead?”

He tuts and crosses his arms over his chest. “Well, well, well. Look at you judging all of us.”

“You’re not the one on trial.”

“Aren’t I? Aren’t we all in Jessa’s little mental courtroom?” he says. He taps the side of my head and says in a high-pitched mocking voice, “*Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Off with their heads!*”

I cringe away from him, annoyed and more than a little creeped out.

“I’m not judging anyone,” I say, hoping I sound convincing. “I just want to survive.”

He laughs bitterly. “Don’t we all?”

“If you’re looking for sympathy, keep looking. You won’t find any here,” I inform him.

“Don’t be fooled, Jessa. Not everyone who lives this life is thriving. Not all that glitters is gold.”

His words feel like they come with extra weight. Things I can’t see, lurking just below the surface. Like staring at a foreign language and knowing that it means something, if only I could figure out what.

“If I return his phone, will he really leave me alone?”

“Maybe.”

I blink. “I’m gonna need a little more reassurance than that.”

“If you’re looking for reassurance, keep looking,” he says, throwing my own words back in my face. “He’s got a taste of you now. He might just let you go once he’s bored of it and needs fresh meat.”

I shiver at his crudeness and take a reflexive step back. “Is that really how men like you think about women?”

“More or less.”

I shake my head. “You can’t fool me, Yulian. You can’t make me forget what I heard when I walked in here.”

“And what was that?” he asks cautiously.

“A man who cares about a woman,” I assert. “A man who has genuine feelings for another person and expects nothing more than her love in return.”

His expression turns sour, but I can only laugh, because I’m right.

“You think that makes you look bad?” I press. “That’s your whole damn problem, Yulian. In my eyes, it only makes you

more of a man.”

He watches me carefully, and then he nods, almost to himself.
“It would be a shame.”

“What would be?”

“To lose you to the underworld,” he says. “You don’t belong here, Jessa. You deserve a nice, normal life.”

“I agree.”

He nods. “Then give my brother back his phone and you can have it.”

I shake my head. “Anton’s lucky to have you.”

“Tell him that next time.”

“I’m hoping there won’t be a next time.”

He smiles. “Wishful thinking, little lamb.”

“Speaking of the lion, where is he?”

“Gone,” Yulian says. “I put him in a car myself not too long ago.”

I nod as I angle my body towards the door. I’m done with this conversation, with these people. I want to go to bed and sleep forever.

“One more thing, Jessa,” he calls after me.

I stop in place but I don’t turn around. “Yeah?” I say over my shoulder.

“Would it make a difference to you to know that he got into the car with Jhené Torino?”

My body gives me away. I go rigid. But I pretend like I’m unaffected by the information. “Why would it make a difference to me?”

“If you’re smart, you’ll pretend it doesn’t matter to you at all. Because lambs that fall in love with lions get eaten.”

I don’t want him to see my goosebumps. Or my fear. So without deigning to reply, I turn and walk away as quickly as I can.

I'm on autopilot, my feet carrying me who-the-fuck-knows where. I don't even know how I get out of the Plaza, but when I look around again, I'm standing on the curb, watching cars whisk by.

It's almost three in the morning. Getting a cab is going to be a bitch and it's too far to walk home.

So, because I need comfort more than anything else right now, I call the one person I know will drag himself out of bed at three in the morning, even when he's mad at me.



Fifteen minutes later, Chris pulls to a stop in front of me. His eyes are still puffy with sleep. My heart clenches when I see him.

I get into the passenger seat, lean over, and envelop him in a desperate hug.

He must sense my fear, because he strokes the back of my head and says, "Jesus, Jessa. Are you okay?"

I don't tell him about what happened tonight. I don't tell him that Anton was the one who made sure to hire me, just so he could get me fired. I forget the details and focus on the bigger picture.

"I think you're right," I whisper into his warm chest. "I should give the phone back."

Chris sighs with relief. "Thank fuck. This will all be over soon."

ANTON

“The garden looks nice,” Yulian says, looking out over the expanse of green. It’s been expertly maintained by the absurdly large group of gardeners I keep on staff. “Lilies are really popping this year.”

I raise an eyebrow as I turn to my younger brother. “Since when do you notice shit like that?”

He shrugs. “I notice things. Sue me. You got Papa’s gene of only giving a shit about world domination.”

“Don’t be so sensitive,” I laugh, shoving him in the shoulder. “You make it way too easy to ruffle your feathers.”

Yulian rolls his eyes. “And you’re supposed to be the mature one.”

“No, I was *expected* to be the mature one. There’s a difference.”

“Is that why then?”

“Why what?”

“Why you hate him?”

He asks the question with a smile, same as how he does everything, but I can see the seriousness behind it.

I look away. “I don’t hate him. He was my father as much as yours.”

“But... ?”

“But he tried to control me. You’d resent him, too.”

“Even now?” he asks. “No one controls you anymore.”

“Doesn’t stop everyone from trying.”

Yulian throws me an incredulous look. “Please. You’re too damn stubborn to even be worth the attempt. I’m speaking from experience here.”

I laugh. “There have to be some perks to being don.”

There’s a brief pause before he lobs the next grenade. “Is Jessa Gilmore one of those perks?”

I sigh. I figured we’d end up on this topic sooner or later. As it turns out, it’s sooner. “Do you like her, brother?” I ask pointedly.

“Do I even have the option?” Yulian asks. “You’ve set your sights on her. I assumed she was off-limits to me.”

I shrug. “That’s never deterred you before.”

Yulian just rolls his eyes. “It doesn’t matter either way. The girl is into you.”

“That’s an interesting assumption.”

“It’s not an assumption,” Yulian says. “I’ve spoken to her enough now to be able to tell. I don’t know how far her feelings run, but she likes you. More than she knows.”

“Must have been some conversation.”

“Like I said, I notice things.” He shoots me one of his most charming smiles. “And you know I’ve got a way with women.”

“Your one talent.”

“Oh, I’ve got more talents,” he says confidently. “I’m just waiting for the right moment to unveil them.”

I snort. “I won’t hold my breath.”

He rolls his eyes again and exhales in a huff. “How worried are you about Rodion?”

“Not at all,” I say. “The man won’t move against me. I’m more sure of that now that I’ve met with him.”

“How did he seem?”

“Wary,” I admit. “He doesn’t want things to escalate.”

“But does that mean you will inherit the Ivanov Bratva?”

“I’ll get it one way or the other,” I reason. “I don’t need the old man to make a ceremony of it. Once he’s no more, his Bratva will break into factions. A large part of them will fall in line behind me.”

“And the rest?”

“If they don’t choose me right off the bat, I have no interest in bringing them into the fold at all.”

“Manpower is one thing,” he says. “What about the Ivanovs’ assets? Investments? Businesses?”

“I’ll buy them out. The ones worth buying, that is. The rest can go to hell.”

Yulian looks at me with clear shock. “You would go through all that trouble when you could simply get it on a platter?”

“A platter?” I repeat. “Is that what you would call sucking up to a man who thinks I murdered his daughter?”

“Small price to pay—”

“You and I have very different definitions of what certain costs represent,” I snap. “My pride is not for sale.”

Yulian’s lips snap shut. I know I’ve hurt him. It isn’t the first time. He’s learned to roll with the punches, though. And he doesn’t wait for an apology. He knows one isn’t coming.

“Heard any chatter lately?” I ask, if only to smooth things over a little bit.

He shakes his head. “Not much. Everything seems to have settled.”

“So the dinner worked.”

He shrugs. “So far.”

When did my little brother get so level-headed? So cautious? Maybe I’m not giving him enough credit. In my head, he’s still

the same snot-nosed ten-year-old who cried every time he lost a fight to me.

“You think I still need to watch Rodion?”

“Yes,” he says firmly. “The man hasn’t let her death go.”

I shake my head. “Say what you want about the old bastard, but he loved Marina. He may have been the only person to truly love her.”

“That’s harsh. She was quite charming when she wanted to be,” Yulian reminds me.

“She was seductive,” I growl. “There is a difference. She could win over any man with just a smile. But men are easily won.”

“I liked her at one point,” Yulian reminds me. “Do you remember?”

“Of course I do. You were the one in there defending her when shit went south.”

He has the grace to look embarrassed. “It was a good match. I wanted it to work. And I knew how stubborn you could be.”

“In terms of stubbornness if nothing else, it was a very good match indeed.”

“Which is exactly why everyone thought it would work.”

“Everyone thought wrong.” I scoff. “She wanted too much from me.”

“She wanted your love,” Yulian murmurs.

For a moment, it sounds like an accusation. Then I realize I’m just projecting. Because deep down, I know the truth. And the truth is, I’m the reason she spun out. I’m the reason she broke. Bit by bit, part by part.

But it would serve no purpose admitting that now.

She’s dead and there’s no bringing her back.

“She wanted too much,” I repeat, quieter this time.

“What makes you think Jessa will be any different?”

I glance at him, wondering why the feisty chef has made such an impression on him. “The difference is that I won’t be marrying her. I’ll throw her back into her mundane life the moment she starts to bore me.”

The words taste strange coming out. Like I’m reading a script rather than committing to the scene. But Yulian is too wrapped up in his thoughts to notice.

“I told her as much,” he muses out loud. “That night, when you were busy with Rodion... we talked.”

He’s waiting for me to ask a follow-up question, but when I don’t, he supplies the answer anyway. “She looked disappointed. A little heartbroken, actually.”

“I doubt that. You’ve always had a flare for the dramatics.”

He smiles. “And you’ve always been an expert at hiding how you feel. But I’ve known you my whole life, big brother. You can’t hide from me.”

“What were you doing talking to Jessa anyway?”

He shrugs. “I was stepping out to smoke a cigarette and she followed me onto the balcony. Probably looking for you. I figured you wouldn’t want to be disturbed.”

I nod and reach for my drink. Was she really looking for me? Yulian has a habit of conflating the truth to serve what he calls a “higher purpose.”

But really, he just likes to fuck with people. It’s the one iota of control this life offers him, so he does it whenever he feels he can get away with it.

“I heard about the job you offered her,” he says, pushing the conversation along. “Aren’t you concerned?”

“What do I have to be concerned about?”

“She already knows more than she should. What if she finds out more?”

“Like what?”

“Like the real truth of your marriage with Marina? Like the events that led up to her... suicide.”

I hate that he hesitates over the word, as though he's not sure if it's even appropriate. But he knows he's annoyed me and he doesn't want to push the topic.

"How would she find out?" I ask. "Unless someone told her."

"The staff talk."

"Not my staff."

Yulian shakes his head. "That's your problem, you know. You seem to forget that, as perfect as you may be, the rest of us mortals are fallible. We make mistakes, even where you're concerned."

"None of them will breathe a word about what happened," I reiterate.

Yulian exhales with exasperation. "Okay then. What about the tapes? If you remember correctly, you record every official meeting you have on the premises."

"Those tapes are kept in a locked drawer in a locked cupboard in a locked room. And even if everything was out in the open, she doesn't know there's anything to find. She'll be confined to one part of the house."

Yulian nods, seemingly reassured. "I suppose you've thought it all through."

"The fact that you're surprised is insulting."

He offers only an apologetic smile. I don't mind. At last, the silence stretches on long enough for me to collect my thoughts.

The dinner was a success. It strengthened ties and reinforced old alliances. It also served as a reminder to any who'd been stupid enough to forget: the might of the Stepanov Bratva cannot be so easily overlooked.

Rodion showed up late, but he showed up. He paid homage. That's all I needed.

"What do you think Papa would say if he were here?" Yulian asks suddenly, breaking the silence.

I glare at him. "I thought we were done talking."

He grins sheepishly at me. “Sometimes, I wonder. That’s all.”

“I don’t have to wonder. I know what he would say.”

“Which is?”

“*You’re doing everything all wrong.*”

Yulian purses up his lips. “You think Papa was hard on *you*? He gave you everything. His entire legacy.”

“And if you were the firstborn, he’d have done the same. It had nothing to do with his opinion of me.”

“He respected you. Even when we were boys, he looked at you differently.”

“Is that what you saw?”

“How many times do I have to tell you that I notice things?”

He waves a hand in disgust. “For fuck’s sake, you’re the only don in history who doesn’t take a single ounce of pleasure from his position.”

“You want me to drink and indulge and fuck my way through life?”

“It wouldn’t hurt. Maybe you’d smile more.”

I shake my head. “I never trust people who smile too much. They look like idiots.”

His smile drops into a glare when he realizes it’s him I’m talking about. “Christ, you’re such an asshole, Anton. I have no idea why every woman fawns all over you.”

“Every woman except her,” I mutter without thinking.

He smirks at me. “It’s weirdly attractive, isn’t it? When women don’t give a shit? Especially when they should. Does she already have you pussy-whipped?”

“Hardly. I’m just... curious.”

“About what exactly?”

“Curious to see how long it’ll last.”

“Is that the real reason behind the job offer?”

“Maybe this is my way of having some fun. Ever thought of that?”

He sighs. “You’re such a disappointment.”

“You want to be don instead?” I ask, chuckling.

He shrugs. “Wouldn’t mind a crack at it, to be honest. I think I’d be pretty great.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What would you do in my position?” I ask. “What would you do about Rodion?”

“Well, first of all, I would have made sure his daughter was happy,” he says. “And I would have gotten his Bratva under my control before I offed the wife.” He freezes for a moment, realizing what he’s just said. “I mean... not that you—”

“Shut up,” I growl. “Just go.”

He gives me an apologetic smile, but he knows that I’m serious. He leaves me, but the relative peace I felt all morning is nonexistent now.

Gritting my teeth, I go back inside to the sitting room and divert to the fully stocked bar.

There used to be a huge photograph of Marina and me hanging over the mantel. It was removed days after her funeral at my request.

“What should I do with it?” Lev had asked me.

“Destroy it,” I told him. “I never want to lay eyes on it again. Burn it, shred it, mail it to Siberia with no return address. Bury it with her, for all I fucking care.”

I’m pretty sure a few of the maids heard that line. But I didn’t give a shit. What was I supposed to do? Weep at her grave and pretend like I was in mourning? I’m no fucking hypocrite.

I won’t deny that Jessa shares certain similarities with Marina.

Marina was a beauty. There was a time when I appreciated that beauty. Just like I appreciate Jessa’s now.

But the two women couldn’t be more different in the ways that truly matter. Jessa has fire. Marina was fiery and passionate,

yes, but she was also demanding, controlling, and cruel. She was manipulative at the best of times. And she had expectations in her head that no one could live up to.

All that is verifiably true. And yet there's a tiny voice inside my head that talks back.

You weren't so innocent yourself.

Regret twinges uncomfortably in the back of my head. That day will always be planted in my memory. If I could carve it from my brain, I would.

But what's done is gone.

I lost myself to anger. I didn't care about who I hurt in the process. It was worth it at the time. It *felt* worth it at the time, at least.

I didn't lie to Yulian before: I know exactly what Otets would say if he were here now.

No man can be prepared for the collateral damage when he doesn't know what he's sacrificing.

JESSA

The restaurant I've picked is loud, the kind of place I usually avoid. But tonight, I want noise. I want conversation and laughter and life. I want to forget that I'm contemplating leaving my life behind and to forget the exceptionally bad decisions I've made in the last few months, one after another after another.

Freya scopes the place out when we arrive, looking less than thrilled about my choice of venue.

"The food is good," I promise, reading her expression. "Their dumplings are to die for."

"They better be," she mutters.

Her words are half-drowned out by the boisterous table of frat stars hanging out opposite us. She rolls her eyes. "I could put up with that shite if even one of them was cute. Sadly, that is not the case."

I smile, thankful that I have someone like Freya in my life. It's because of her that I haven't really felt Salma's absence quite so painfully.

Not until this morning, at least, when Salma herself had actively reminded me.

"Guess what? Salma texted me this morning."

Freya sips on her drink and frowns. "Who?"

"Salma," I repeat. "My so-called maid of honor."

Her eyes go wide. "Oh. Right. Shit. What did she say?"

“That she was sorry and she never meant to hurt me.”

Freya groans. “God, I hate when people say that. *I never meant to hurt you.* How does that even make sense? When you’re actively doing something you know is hurtful to someone else, it is, by definition, fucking hurtful!”

I smile. It’s the whole reason I’m so grateful to have Freya in my life. I love Chris to death, but he would never give me a response like that.

Sometimes, he doesn’t realize that what I want is not just to vent, but to hear him vehemently agree with me. I want him to bash the people that screwed me over and imagine creative forms of despicably violent revenge for them.

“Why are you smiling?” Freya asks.

“Just... it’s nice to talk to someone who gets it.”

“I think most females would get this situation pretty damn easily,” she points out. “You don’t steal another woman’s man. It’s black and white.”

Her eyes flash with anger. I can feel in my bones just how deeply she sympathizes with me. We haven’t really spoken much about her past since she first told me about her abusive relationship. I’ve kind of monopolized the conversations.

When dinner gets to the table, we dig in, but I notice that Freya mostly just shoves the food around on her plate. She’s contemplative tonight.

“Were you ever cheated on?” I ask Freya on a whim.

Her expression falls flat for a moment. A cloud of hurt passes over her eyes. I wave my own question away. “We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t—”

“No,” she says quickly. “It’s okay. I don’t mind. I...”

I wait in silence until Freya is ready. She takes a deep breath and looks up at me.

“I followed him one day when he told me he was going to be working late,” she says. “He told me it was just a run-of-the-

mill ‘business meeting’ and that he had to hobnob with important clients.”

“But you suspected something?”

“I heard some of his friends talking,” she explains. “They mentioned this club. It struck me as odd. I knew that oftentimes he would take his clients to non-traditional places and that was all well and good, but I just had a bad feeling this time. So I went to the club and found him in one of the private rooms. He was there with his friends. Surrounded by naked women.”

“Oh God...”

She shakes her head. “I accused him of cheating and he didn’t deny it. Instead, he told me that I could never give him what he wanted. So he had to find it elsewhere.”

“Oh my God, he sounds like a complete fucking asshole.”

She sighs and reaches for her drink. “Got that right.”

I watch her sipping, trying to figure out the expression on her face. It takes me a moment, but I finally place it. “Freya?”

“Hm?”

“Do you still have feelings for him?”

Her eyes dart up to meet mine. She turns away almost immediately, but it’s enough to reveal to me how she really feels.

“You do,” I whisper. “You still love him.”

She shakes her head vehemently. “No, no, don’t be ridiculous.”

“Freya,” I say, leaning across the table and grabbing her hand. “I thought we discussed this already. We can trust each other. You don’t have to feel embarrassed to admit certain things to me. God knows I’ve aired all my dirty laundry to you a thousand times over.”

She frowns. Her beautiful eyes look sadder than I’ve ever seen them. “I just...” Her voice fades away and all she can do is nod slowly.

“Can you tell me why you love him?” I ask.

She chews on her lip for a moment. “Can anyone explain love? It’s not something you can describe. It happens when you least expect it. And it stays with you even though you want it gone. I hate that I feel this way, but it’s there inside me still. I try to kill it... I tried when I moved here. I thought the distance would erase my feelings for him, but I was wrong.”

“Give it time,” I advise. “I know that’s a pretty lame piece of advice, but it’s true. Plus, it’s all I’ve got right now.”

She glances at me, almost nervously for a moment. “Do you love him?”

I lean back in my seat. “Honestly? I haven’t thought about Dane in so long. It makes me think that maybe I never really —”

“No,” Freya says, cutting me off. “I’m not talking about him.”

I blink. “I don’t understand.”

“Anton,” Freya whispers, like he might hear her if she gets too loud. “Do you love him?”

The question takes me by surprise but only because it’s strange to hear the thing I’ve been asking myself for the last twenty-four hours voiced out loud by someone else.

“Well... love is a crazy word.”

I hesitate, realizing just how right she was about explaining certain feelings. Some things just defy logic.

She gives me a knowing smile that’s still sharp around the edges with her own remembered pain. “Circle of trust right here, remember?” she says, waving her arms around the table. “I won’t judge.”

I reach for my own drink this time, feeling a strange fear spreading through my chest. “He... fascinates me.”

“Men like him usually do.”

“Men like him?”

“Strong, powerful, confident. The hormones go wild for that shit.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I nod. “It’s more than that, though.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Tell me.”

“I’m not naïve. I know he’s a bad man and he could do bad things to me. I’ve seen him do bad things to other people. But... before I knew who he was, before everything happened... we had this conversation.” I drag my eyes up to hers. “It was the most amazing hour I’ve ever spent with a man.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say. “We just talked. I felt comfortable opening up to him. He listened. He was interested in what I had to say. He made me feel so *seen*.”

“I’m sure he’s like that with a lot of women.”

“That’s the thing,” I say. “I watched him last night with his people. Don’t get me wrong: he was charming; he knew exactly how to talk to each person. He knew how to praise the men and compliment the women without once laying it on too thick. But that night on his boat, he wasn’t trying to charm me. I mean... he wasn’t ‘on’ like he was last night. He was just being... himself.”

“And?”

“And I kind of got the feeling that he rarely gets to be himself.”

She considers that, her face twisting with concern and curiosity. I feel a rush of anxiety. “Is that insane?”

“A little,” she says with a dry laugh. “But I also get it. He’s an extremely handsome man.”

“It’s not about his looks,” I insist with a huff of frustration. “I mean, of course it’s undeniable that he’s handsome. But my attraction to him is about more than that. I feel... I know it sounds stupid insane to admit this at all, but I feel comfortable with him. I feel safe. And that should most definitely not be the case. He’s threatened me multiple times.”

“But you don’t believe he’ll follow through?”

“No,” I admit. “In fact, I think he’s trying to give me what I want, under the guise of controlling me.”

She wrinkles her nose. “What do you mean?”

“He wants me to be his personal chef,” I explain. “In his home.”

“Whoa...”

“He says it’s to pay off my ‘interest.’ But it’s just an excuse. I can feel it.”

“Wait, so you actually want to accept his offer?”

I lean back in my seat. “No,” I whisper—and it feels like the hardest thing I’ve ever had to say. My whole body shudders with tension. “I spent the whole night thinking about it, Freya. I think I need to return his phone. And then I need to leave.”

“Leave?”

I nod. “If I don’t go, if I don’t just return his phone and cut ties with him forever...”

I leave the sentence unfinished. The final words are too thorny to get out of my throat.

Freya doesn’t have the same hesitation, though. “You’re scared that you’re in too deep. That you might actually fall for him.”

She looks unnecessarily stunned by that fact, which does nothing to help alleviate the shame that’s wracking me since the Plaza debacle.

Anton was right about me: I crave the drama and the excitement and the rush of the unknown. And if I want that to change, I have to do something different.

I have to leave.

“I know it’s a lot.”

“I’m just glad you’re telling me instead of pulling a Harry Houdini,” says Freya, patting the back of my hand.

“What did you think I would do?” I ask. “Just up and leave? Irish goodbye?”

She shrugs. “We haven’t been friends that long. You don’t owe me an explanation.”

“It’s not about the length of the friendship,” I tell her. “It’s about the strength of the friendship.”

She gives me a touched smile. “Yeah?”

“Of course.”

“Even though Chris didn’t exactly approve of me?”

I wave her concern away. “He’s just possessive of me sometimes.”

“Yeah, that and the fact that he’s in love with you.”

I give her a warning look. “Freya.”

“It’s true.”

“It’s not.”

“You should explore that,” she says. “He’s a good man. And he’s good for you. Unlike Anton Stepanov.”

My attention snaps up. I frown at her. “Have I mentioned his last name to you before?”

She looks guilty for a second. “I... I may have done some research.”

“Did you actually find anything?” I ask incredulously.

She nods, but I can tell by her expression that whatever she’s found is not good. “A thing or two, yeah.”

“Oh God. What is it?”

“It was just some obscure little article tucked into an online newspaper. It reported on his wife’s death.”

“What did it say?”

“That her death was ruled a suicide but there was quite a lot of skepticism surrounding it. The article was more about the prestige of power. The fact that you can literally get away with murder if you have enough money.”

I frown as that processes in my head. “Oh.”

“It had obviously been buried in the annals of the internet, Jessa,” she tells me regretfully. “I had to do a lot of digging to find it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I’m telling you now,” she says. “I only found it last night. I figured the more we know about the guy, the better.”

I’m touched that she’s gone to such great lengths for me. “Okay, but the article wasn’t, like, definitive, was it?”

“How could it be? It was written by some amateur with a readership that probably consists of blood relatives exclusively. I bet no one took the article seriously, so she published it on the only online rag willing to take the risk.”

“Maybe they didn’t take it seriously because it’s just a rumor.”

“There’s no smoke without fire, Jessa.”

“You think he did it?” I ask, feeling my heart start to race.

“I’m just looking at what we know,” she hedges. “We know he’s a murderer. You saw that with your own eyes. So it’s a possibility that he killed his wife, right?”

“Right,” I say hesitantly. “But—”

“Jessa,” she says, reaching out to take my hand, “listen to me. I’ve been in the exact same position you are now. Torn between my feelings and my instincts. Trust me, I understand how they can pull you in two different directions. He’s a beautiful man, but he’s deadly. And I think leaving might be a good idea.”

My heart sinks, despite the fact that it’s exactly the plan I’ve been contemplating since the dinner last night. “Yeah.”

“But do you think returning the phone is the best idea?” she asks. “It might still be nice to have some insurance when you run.”

“You think I should keep the phone?”

“Well, not if you don’t want to. You could leave it with me,” she suggests. “I’m sure Chris doesn’t want the fear. And I would bury it someplace no one could ever get to it. No one would suspect me, either. Most people don’t even know we’re friends.”

I consider it for all of five seconds before I shake my head. “No, I can’t do that. I don’t want to put you in danger. It’s bad enough that I involved Chris in all this.”

“I’d do it willingly, love.”

I smile. “I know you would. But I just... If I’m leaving, I’m leaving with a clean slate.”

Freya frowns. “But what if he suspects you’re planning on running?”

“Once he has his phone, he’ll have no reason to come after me.”

“Unless he thinks you’ll go to the cops,” she argues.

“He knows I won’t.”

She frowns. “You talk as if you know him. As though you know each other.”

I bite my tongue to keep from confirming what is probably written all over my face. There are moments when it really does feel like I really do understand Anton, and he really does understand me. Like our souls speak a language no one else can translate.

Freya is about to say something else when her phone beeps. She reads the text quickly. For a second, I think something’s wrong. Then she smiles.

“Sorry about that,” she says. “Um... I might have to bail right after we pay the bill.”

“Oh?”

She gives me a secretive smile. “I sort of... met someone.”

“Freya!”

“Don’t get excited,” she says quickly. “It’s purely casual. But I like him. He’s a good distraction.”

“I’m glad.”

“If you need me, though—”

I hold up my hands. “I’m good. Don’t worry about me.”

She nods. “Okay, but you’ll call me if you need anything?”

“Of course,” I say, even though I have no intention of disturbing her tonight. She deserves the distraction she’s looking for.

Heck, so do I.

But I already know that nothing will distract me from the change I’m about to make. We pay the bill and walk out of the restaurant together.

“You’ll tell me when you’ve made a decision about what you’re going to do?” she asks.

“I think I’ve already made a decision,” I admit. “But yeah, I’ll tell you. Don’t worry.”

She pulls me in for a hug.

“I expect to hear details about this guy later,” I tell her when we pull apart again.

She laughs. “I’m not sure you want these kinds of details.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Good point.”

“Stay safe, Jessa,” she says before walking down the road. I watch until she disappears around the corner.

I stand there, feeling an overwhelming sense of loneliness. I’m not sure I want to start fresh somewhere new. I’m not sure I have it in me, to be honest.

But I’m also not sure I can survive Anton Stepanov.

Which is how I end up standing in front of Chris’s door, one twenty-minute cab ride later.

“Hey,” he says, pulling on a sweatshirt as he opens the door. “Come on in.”

I shake my head. “I’m not staying. I just came for the phone.”

He raises his eyebrows. “You’re giving it back?”

“Yes.”

He disappears immediately and returns a minute later with the phone in hand. “For the record, I think you’re doing the right thing. How are you going to return it?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle that part.”

“Jessa—”

“Chris, I can take care of myself, okay?” He looks skeptical. That only makes me dig my heels in. “Can you please just trust me?”

“I do trust you,” he insists. “I just don’t trust that shady motherfucker.”

“He won’t hurt me.”

Chris frowns. “You’re confident about that?”

“Yes.”

He looks like he wants to ask a follow-up question, but he decides against it. “Alright. Well... good luck, J. Love you.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

His face shifts with some unreadable expression. Maybe Freya was right. Maybe Chris has feelings for me. But I don’t have the mental bandwidth to deal with that possibility right now.

“I’ll let you know when I get it off my hands.”

Chris nods and then lets out a sharp sigh. “I don’t like you doing this alone.”

“I’ve been doing it alone this whole time,” I say without thinking.

His eyes narrow. “I’ve been with you the whole time, Jessa. I picked you up in the middle of the night and held onto this phone for you even when I thought it was a bad idea. I’ve been right here every step of the damn way.”

“I’m sorry,” I say quickly. “That’s not what I meant. I appreciate everything you’ve done.”

The disappointment doesn’t leave his face. “Let me know when it’s gone.”

“Chris—”

He pauses at the threshold. I search my brain for something to say that will restore our relationship back to how it used to be. Easy and simple.

“You’re my best friend, Chris.”

They’re not magic words, but they draw a smile out of him at least. “Don’t you forget it.”

Feeling buoyed by Freya’s and Chris’s support, I head back to my apartment, confident I’m doing the right thing.

Then I open my front door—and stop cold when I see Anton sitting in the chair by the window.

“Hello, Jessa,” he says.

And suddenly, I’m not sure of anything at all.

ANTON

Jessa tenses for mere seconds before her shoulders relax and she steps into the apartment.

She moves around casually, like I'm not even there, turning on the lights and ditching her coat on the hook behind the door, before walking over to the sofa.

There, she drops down into the cushions and throws her feet up. "It's been a long fucking day."

"Really?" I ask. "I would have thought being unemployed would give you a little downtime."

She grimaces, too to even glare at me the way she usually does. "Do you know how hard I worked to get to sous chef?"

"If you worked half as hard to become sous chef as you have at fighting me, then I'm sure you earned it and then some."

She closes her eyes, lets her head loll back, and exhales deeply. "It's necessary to fight back against a bully. Strength is the only language they understand."

"Now, you're starting to sound like my father."

"He must've been a wise man."

"There were times when he was," I admit. "But more often than not, he let his greed blind him."

"What was he greedy for?" she asks, sitting up and looking at me.

"What most men are greedy for," I say. "Power."

“You know all about that.”

“Unlike my father, I don’t need to control the world in order to prove how powerful I am,” I tell her. “Power, like everything else, is an illusion.”

“What an intelligent and well-rehearsed answer,” she drawls. “So why don’t I believe you?”

“Because deep down, you know I’m not the stereotype you seem to think I am.”

“You? Never. You’re special. Nuanced. So freaking *deep*,” she seethes sarcastically.

“A less nuanced man would’ve cut your throat before you ever set foot off my boat.”

The blunt truth does what I wanted it to do. Jessa pales visibly, shifting back and forth on the couch.

“Just to be clear,” I add, “stealing the phone is not what saved you.”

“No?” she asks, trying to maintain her calm, neutral tone. “What did?”

I pause. “Would you like the truth?”

She nods. “Please.”

“Your smile saved you,” I tell her. “The dimple in your right cheek saved you. The birthmark on the nape of your neck saved you. You were flawed in ways that are unspeakably beautiful to me.”

She stares at me for a long time. The silence is thick, but it morphs as the seconds tick past, becoming something less fraught, less confrontational. “You really expect me to believe that?” she breathes finally.

“Why would I lie?”

“To manipulate me,” she says. “To... to fuck with my head.”

“Have I managed to get under your skin, Jessa?”

Her scowl turns determined. “You caught me in a vulnerable moment on my worst day. Don’t think for one moment that

that means you have control over me.”

I smile. “You’re strong. I like that about you. That’s another thing that saved your life.”

“Maybe I’m alive because you couldn’t bring yourself to kill me.”

“I already told you: I do my own killing.”

“How comforting.”

I crack my knuckles and my neck. “Is comfort what you’re looking for?”

She hesitates. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

This woman... She impresses me with her bold strength one moment and then disarms me with her naked honesty the next. I used to think it wasn’t possible for a woman to be both confident and vulnerable at the same time. That was before I met Jessa.

“You’re not the comforting type, though, are you?” she asks.

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never tried.”

She gawks at me as though I’ve just been beamed down from another planet. I suppose in some respects, that’s how vast the differences between us are.

“What was your childhood like?” she asks suddenly.

I raise my eyebrows, but she doesn’t back down. “You know a lot about me,” she points out. “It’s only fair that I know something about you in return.”

“For what purpose?”

“For the purpose of reciprocity.”

I smirk. “My childhood was... different.”

“That much I figured. I was looking for something more specific.”

“In order to understand me?”

She frowns. “Maybe.”

“It will be harder to hate me if you understand me,” I warn.
“You taught me that lesson, remember?”

Jessa shrugs, but it looks too practiced to be authentic. “I’ve considered that, but I’m curious, anyway. And I already don’t hate you. Not like I should.”

“No? Even though I stole from you a job that you loved?”

“Don’t you dare apologize to me or I’ll dislike you even less.”

I shake my head. “I gave you enough warning and enough chances. Those are luxuries I don’t afford anyone else. You should have been smarter.”

She sighs. “That’s better. Now, I’m back to disliking you the right amount. Asshole.”

I smile, holding her gaze. “And all was right with the world.”

She laughs, then the silence swallows it back up. “Hate is a useless emotion, you know,” she says after a while. “It serves no purpose other than to turn you bitter and angry all the time. It hurts you way more than the person you hate. Pure poison.”

“That’s a convincing theory.”

“Who have you hated in your life?” she asks softly.

I wonder if she knows. I wonder if she can smell it on me. “My father, at times when I was a child. And also the woman I ended up marrying.”

I expect her to ask about Marina, but she chooses to focus on my father first. “Why did you hate your dad?”

“He was a hard man to love.”

“He was hard on you?”

I nod. “He had to be. He had to raise a don.”

I can tell she’s frustrated by my vague, noncommittal answers. But what she doesn’t seem to realize is that I’m giving her so much more than I’ve given any other woman in my life.

“And your wife,” she presses, sitting up a little straighter and angling her body towards me. “Why did you hate her?”

“She was a cold-blooded bitch.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “You’re gonna have to do better than that.”

I laugh and cross my ankle over my knee. “We were not right together. We brought out the worst in each other.”

“Did you... hurt her?”

“Are you trying to get me to confess to something, Jessa?” I chuckle. “Much scarier people than you have tried and failed.”

“Failed because there’s nothing to confess? Or because you outwitted them?”

“Take your pick.”

She sighs and falls back into her relaxed position on the sofa. “Why did you even marry her if you hated her?”

“It was a political alliance. ‘No’ was not an option.”

She snorts. “Please. You don’t strike me as the kind of man who does anything that he doesn’t want to.”

“True enough now,” I say. “But I wasn’t always the don of a powerful Bratva. I used to be the son of the don. And the son of the don does whatever his don wants.”

“Hm. Did she want to get married?”

“Yes.”

She frowns. “You sound confident.”

“I’d known Marina for years. Our fathers were allies and friends. She was half in love with me before it was even arranged. So yeah, she agreed to the match right away.”

She rolls her eyes. “Then what? Did your ego get to her?”

“Her ego was as much of a problem as mine. She was not used to not getting what she wanted.”

“And what did she want?”

“Far more than I could give her.”

Jessa’s eyes sparkle under the lights of her cheap Ikea lamp shades. “I don’t hate Dane, you know,” she confesses. “Or Salma.”

“You’d be justified in hating them.”

“I know,” she murmurs. “But why give them that kind of power over me? My dad used to say, ‘*Don’t let anyone live rent-free inside your head. It only hurts you.*’”

“Your father and I don’t sound like we’d get along.”

She bursts out laughing. I watch her with fascination. The way her eyes close, wrinkling at the corners. The way her cheeks crease and her mouth falls open.

She looks fucking beautiful.

“No,” she says when she finally stops laughing. “You’re right, you two wouldn’t get along. My mom would hate you, too.”

“Why is that?”

“Too handsome,” she says without missing a beat.

“Excuse me?”

Jessa nods. “She doesn’t trust men who are too handsome. She says they’re the ones who’ll cheat on you and not feel guilty about it. She actually warned me about Dane when I first brought him home.”

“Dane?” I scoff. “That motherfucker looks like he fell out of the Ugly Tree and hit every branch on the way down.” She stops short and looks at me curiously. I just shrug. “I was curious about the man you agreed to marry. I did my research. He didn’t impress me.”

“Yeah, well, you’re smarter than I am then. He impressed me when we first met,” she says with a sigh. “And he was the best-looking guy I’d ever seen.”

“Present company not included, I’m sure.”

She shoots me an annoyed glance. “That first night I brought him to family dinner, Mom and I were doing the dishes after we finished eating and she asked me if I was sure about him. When I told her that I was, she told me to be careful because some men were ‘too pretty to be faithful.’”

“Is your father a good-looking man?” I ask.

She nods. "He was when he was young."

"That explains her theory. He cheated on her, didn't he?"

Jessa nods. "Yeah... You know, she might have a point."

I roll my eyes. "Of course she doesn't."

"No?"

"There are men who cheat and men who don't," I say. "It depends on the man, not his bone structure."

"What about you?" she asks. "Which category do you fall into?"

"A class all my own."

"Jesus. Do you ever dial it down, your whole shtick?"

I smirk at her intensely annoyed face. I know I made the right decision by demanding she pay me "interest." I'm not ready to throw this woman back into her boring world.

I'm not sure she's ready to go back, either.

I leave the chair I'm sitting on and join her on the sofa. She tenses when I sit down next to her. Only a few inches separate us. Her heat mingles with mine.

Her phone lights up on the coffee table, but she completely ignores it.

"Want to get that?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "No."

"Seeing someone?"

"The only relationship I'm in at the moment is a non-consensual one with a man I can't seem to escape from."

I smile. "'Non-consensual' is harsh."

"But accurate."

"You had the option of leaving and never seeing me again," I remind her. "Then you decided to steal my phone, forcing me to follow you. I gave you the option of returning it and ending things there. Then you chose to keep it. In my view, that

doesn't sound like the actions of a woman who's trying to avoid me."

She glares at me, but there's no denying the truth of what I'm saying. "You're good," she says bitterly. "But then again, you're a professional."

I chuckle under my breath. "Are you going to keep the phone or not, Jessa?"

She sighs deeply and reaches into her jean pocket. "Here," she says in defeat.

The moment the phone is placed in my hand, I feel a small trickle of relief. It's vastly outweighed by the regret that this part of our little dance has come to an end.

"Are we done now?" she asks.

I raise my eyebrows. "That's up to you. You haven't answered my offer."

She frowns. "You can't be serious about the whole private chef thing."

"I am always serious," I tell her. "More to the point, it wasn't actually a question."

She straightens up and stares at me. "You've already cost me my job. Isn't that punishment enough?"

"Not by a long shot, *kotyonok*."

She stands up and starts pacing right in front of me. "So you really want me to come to your home and cook for you, day in and day out?"

"Why are you repeating things that I've already made clear?"

"For how long?" she snaps.

I've given that some thought since I last saw her. "Three months."

Her mouth falls open. "Three months?"

I sigh. "Are you intending to make this a habit? Repeating everything I say?"

"Three fucking months? That's a lifetime!"

I roll my eyes. “Don’t be a drama queen.”

Her eyes flash dangerously. “You... you’re such a... a...”

“An asshole?”

“Asshole!” she yells. “Three entire months of my life and—”

“You’ll get paid far more than you could possibly make anywhere else. You’ll live in the finest mansion in the city. And at the end of it, you’ll get a recommendation letter from me that will help you get hired in any restaurant in town,” I tell her.

She falls silent at that. “Wait... seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because I believe in incentivizing my employees.”

She bristles at my word choice. “I am not your employee.”

“Yes, you are. Or do I need to explain everything to you again?”

She crosses her arms and glares at me over the coffee table. “Interest is not paid off this way.”

“I do things differently.”

“What if I refuse?”

“Then I’m afraid I’m going to get much less accommodating than I have been.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you will remain unemployable in this city. And any city you attempt to flee to. I’ll put a lock and chain on the door of every kitchen in the country.”

She shakes her head, trying to find an argument that’ll get her out of the corner I’ve backed her into. She clearly comes up blank because she just looks angrier and angrier.

“Three months,” I say again with a grim sense of finality. “I brought the contract with me.”

“I didn’t think you were the kind of guy who gave a shit what some piddly little contract says.”

“I’m not. It’s for you, of course. To keep you in line. I’ll do whatever I want regardless.”

She scowls. “Gonna ditch me as soon as you get bored?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

I let that sink in for a moment, waiting—no, fuck, *hoping*—that it will get a rise out of her. Her cheeks are flushed, her breath coming quick.

“I’m not the type of woman you just get bored of and cast aside,” she says, pride flaring in her eyes.

“Then why did your fiancé start fucking your best friend?”

The air between us stills. It feels like we’re in a vacuum. Silence churns.

Then Jessa flinches.

For a moment, I think she might do something really bold. Slap me, maybe. But the sparkle at the corner of her eye catches my attention. It’s not fury I see.

It’s tears.

I can feel the contract folded up in the pocket of the jacket I’m wearing. Ripping it up suddenly seems like a good idea. I didn’t think the sight of Jessa crying would matter.

But fuck me, it does. It matters more than I ever thought possible.

JESSA

The tears running down my cheeks sting. The man in front of me doesn't give a shit, though.

Why the hell does he have to look so good while he hurts me? His dark hair is short and thick. His gray eyes are eerily calm as he watches me with a removed expression.

"Did I hurt you, Jessa?" he rumbles.

His voice is deep, but this is the first time I've heard him sound gentle. He's speaking softly, like I'm fragile. And it should make me feel better, because after everything I've been through, who could blame me for being close to my breaking point? But it just makes me feel pathetic.

"You don't have the power to hurt me," I snap. But my own tears have already betrayed that lie.

"I expected a biting retort," he admits. "I didn't expect you to take it to heart."

"Why would you say something just to get a rise out of me?"

He shrugs. "Maybe I like the drama as much as you do."

I almost smile, but I manage to stifle it. "Believe it or not, I'm trying to avoid drama. I don't want any part of this."

"And yet here we are."

"I'll sign your damned contract," I tell him. "And after it's done, do you promise me you'll leave me alone?"

His answer doesn't come immediately, but it is confident when it does. "Yes."

"And I won't see you ever again?"

"You will not."

I nod. "And I'll be employable in the city?"

"Any restaurant owner in the city will throw themselves at your feet and beg for you to work there."

I sigh. "Let me see the contract."

He pulls it out of his jacket pocket, unfolds it, and hands it over. I rake my eyes over the words, but with Anton watching me and my heart thrumming in my chest, I barely process what they're saying. Still, I know better than to ask for more time to look it over. It doesn't really matter anyway. This whole contract might as well be a Post-It note in Anton's handwriting that says, *I MAKE THE RULES*.

So I grab a pen from the kitchen counter and scribble my name at the bottom. "I have one request, though."

"Which is?"

"I'm not willing to be your prisoner. I will come and work for you for the next three months, but I want to stay in my apartment. I'll commute from here to your place every day."

"You're looking at a long commute," he says.

"I'll wake up early."

He shrugs. "Suit yourself."

I hand the contract back to him. "Are you really a man of your word, Anton?"

"When it matters."

"That's not that reassuring, believe it or not. But I suppose I can't expect much from you."

He smiles, completely unfazed by my shade. "That might change soon enough."

"I want my life back. You may have been right before—maybe I do crave drama to a certain extent. Maybe I do chase

excitement. But thanks to you, I want to do everything in my power to change that now.”

“Have I proved to be too exciting for you?”

“You’ve reminded me that I’m not invincible. There are situations I won’t be able to survive.”

He looks intrigued. “Say more.”

“Not today,” I say, turning towards the door. “I’ll see you first thing Monday morning, boss.”

He nods. “If you need some help in the kitchen—”

“I won’t,” I say quickly. “I prefer to work alone.”

“The last few years must have been tough for you then.”

“I’m not picky when it comes to paying my rent,” I shrug. “The catering company paid well, and having a roof over my head was more important than my personal preferences. Not that you would understand that struggle.”

“I understand struggle far more than you could imagine, *kotyonok*,” he murmurs.

That pet name does what it always does to me: sends a ripple down my spine of alternating heat and cold. It’s possessive and tender at the same time. Like an optical illusion that won’t quite fall in line.

“Maybe, but I no longer have any desire to understand you.”

He raises his eyebrows and stares at me for a moment longer, as if he’s trying to memorize my face. Then he leans forward and whispers in my ear, “Very convincing, Jessa. But it still needs some work. You can practice resisting me for the next three months.”

He leaves, closing the door behind him.

And I stand there, staring after him long after he’s left.

Eventually, I collapse onto the sofa and curse my poor judgment, my traitorous feelings, my fickle, idiotic heart. Despite my best impression of indifference, he can still see right through me.

Could he tell that my feelings for him go so much deeper than they should?

Could he tell that signing that contract sent a wave of electricity coursing through every nerve?

Could he tell that he alone has encompassed my thoughts and my dreams for the last few days?

I go to the fridge and grab some mandarins that I bought almost a week ago. I make a juice and add a fresh twist of lemon. It reminds me of Chris, oddly enough.

I bartended at a shitty little dive during my sophomore year of college. I had my heart set on this gorgeous teal blender I'd seen in a Williams & Sonoma window display. Although, when Chris asked why I was working in such a dump, I told him that I was saving up for some kickass black leather boots. The truth felt too embarrassing. Still does, honestly.

I pick up my phone and dial his number. He answers almost immediately, as though he's been staring at his phone waiting for my call.

"Jessa?" he asks nervously.

"Hi. You free?"

"For you, always."

I smile. He used to answer my calls the same way in college. It does make me wonder if my judgment is clouded where Chris is concerned. Is Freya right? Has he had feelings for me this whole time and I just never noticed?

"I... um... I wanted to tell you something."

Unlike the boots and blender situation, I owe him the truth this time around. He kept Anton's phone with him this entire time, regardless of the danger it put him in. And he did it willingly. Because he is always there to help me, even when I don't want it or ask for it or think I need it.

"Is it about the phone?" Chris asks urgently. "Did he show up? Did you give it back? Is he finally gonna leave you alone?"

The moment the questions burst out of him, I realize how badly he wants this to be over for me. How do I possibly explain to him that a very big part of me is terrified of never seeing Anton again?

“Jessa?”

“Sorry,” I mumble. “No. No, Anton, uh, he didn’t show up tonight. I was just—I just needed to talk to a friend.”

“Oh. Gotcha.”

I could swear he sounds bitter. I push down the guilt. He’ll never understand why I would agree to the contract with Anton. Plus, he’ll try giving me solutions I don’t want to take. Lord knows I’ve spent enough time thinking about ways out of this nightmare.

Right now, I’m not interested in advice. I just need someone to offer me space to breathe. A shoulder to lean on.

“If you’re busy, I can—”

“I told you, Jess: I’m never too busy for you.”

The guilt twists in my chest like a knife. I change the subject as quickly as I can. “Did I tell you that Salma contacted me recently?”

“You didn’t.”

“Oh, I must have told Freya then.”

There’s a loaded pause. “Seeing a lot of her, are you?”

“Can you please try and get along with her? She’s really great, actually. And she’s been helping me through all this just as much as you have.”

“You barely know her.”

“Seriously, Chris,” I sigh. “We’re not in high school anymore.”

“You think this is, like, a clique thing? I’m jealous of the cool new girl?”

“No, of course not. I just think that sometimes, you can be a little... possessive about our friendship.”

“Jesus Christ, we’re not in high school anymore, Jessa,” he says, throwing my own words back in my face in a cruel, mocking tone I’ve never heard from him before. “This is not about resenting the fact that you’ve invited another person into our circle. For God’s sake, give me more credit than that.” He sighs and eases up. “I just don’t like that she was giving you bad advice that put you in harm’s way. Like telling you to keep that damn phone with you.”

“She changed her mind about that.”

“Is that why you decided to return it, then?”

“Ouch. How about *you* give *me* more credit than that, Chris?”

“Sometimes, I forget how long we didn’t talk for,” he whispers in a sad voice. “I figured once Dane was gone, we would pick right up where we left off. But maybe it isn’t as easy as that.”

“What are you—I think we’re fine. Things aren’t different!”

“Feels like we’re on different pages, J. Maybe even different books.”

“Well, we’re different people. That’s normal. It’s okay.”

“It didn’t used to be like this,” he reminds me. “Before Dane, things were so much simpler.”

I exhale. “Okay. I can’t deny that.”

“You’re so much better off without him, you know?”

“Oh, you don’t have to tell me that. I know.”

“I just...” Chris clicks his tongue a few times. It’s one of his nervous tics. “I just don’t want you replacing one bad guy with another.”

I fall silent. “I... I didn’t ask for this, you know,” I remind him, because it’s all I can say right now without outright lying to him. “It just... happened to me.”

“True, but your choices after the fact are on you, Jessa. I don’t want you to... shit, never mind.”

“What, Chris? Just say it.”

“I don’t want you choosing wrong again.”

I bite back a snappy retort. Anton is already getting inside my head, because I can feel a sort of simmering anger boil up at the thought of someone telling me what to do. I have to remind myself that Chris is on my side. He's a good guy, he wants what's best for me, and he's just giving me his perspective in the hopes that it'll keep me out of trouble.

Those are all good things. He's not the enemy.

"Can we talk about something else?" I mumble.

He laughs, though it's sort of melancholy. "Like what? We can talk about me if you want, but my life is boring as hell."

"No girls on the horizon?"

"Not a single prospect."

I chew on the inside of my cheek for a while. "Chris, can I ask you a question?" I say once a few minutes of silence have passed.

"Always. Shoot."

"You used to have girlfriends all the time. Sandra, Casey, Jane, Rebecca. They were all freaking awesome. Why didn't it work with one of them?"

He groans. "On second thought, let's not talk about me."

I smile. "Don't even try to change the subject, buster. I'm genuinely curious."

"They were all... great," he says after a tense beat. "But in the end, we just weren't compatible. There's a lot that goes into that, but bottom line is, they just weren't right for me. The right girl is out there somewhere. Probably right under my nose."

Freya's observation bubbles to the surface. For a second, I wonder if asking Chris about his feelings outright is a smart idea. But the moment I seriously contemplate it, I swallow the question whole.

I've never felt that way about Chris. Nothing good can come out of bringing it up. Because if Freya is right and he admits to having feelings for me, then that might end our friendship.

And I need to avoid that at all costs.

I've lost enough as it is lately.

"Well, I hope you find her soon."

"Yeah," he says solemnly. "Me, too."

Suddenly, I wish I hadn't called him at all. "Thanks for talking to me, Chris. I needed this."

"Calling it a night?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'm tired."

"Okay. Let me know when the phone's off your hands."

"I will. Goodnight. And thanks again."

"Anytime, Jess. Anytime."

The line goes dead and I toss my phone on the sofa. Not long ago, I'd been looking forward to a very different life. A husband. A little house just outside of the city. An exciting career with an upward trajectory.

Now? Well, now, I have no idea where I'll be in five days, let alone five years. I have no husband and no job. No hope, either.

So much for my planning. So much for my dreams.

I should feel disappointed, let down, heartbroken. But instead, all I can feel is... excited.

And every time that feeling takes hold of me, all I can think of is a pair of haunting gray eyes.

ANTON

“She’s here,” Lev says, walking into the room.

I can see as much on the large monitors facing me. I like to keep an eye on things, and from the moment she walked up to the gates at the end of the driveway, I watched her.

She gawked at the mansion beyond, dumbstruck until my security guard, Mikal, directed her inside. He drove her up the long drive in one of the rugged black golf carts used to traverse the property. Cameras hidden amongst the foliage tracked her all the way to the front door and inside.

Now, she’s standing in the main foyer, looking extremely uncomfortable.

She’s wearing dark jeans and a white t-shirt that fits her snugly. She’s also got a sports bag strapped over one shoulder.

“You can show her to the kitchens,” I tell Lev.

He hesitates. “Don’t you wanna do that yourself?”

“No, I don’t intend to see her yet.”

He gives me an amused smile. “That’s gonna piss her off.”

“I’m counting on it.”

Shaking his head, Lev heads out of my office and goes back to the main foyer.

When he reappears on the screen, I’m annoyed that I can’t quite get a clear view of Jessa’s face. But her body language is plain enough.

She's tense and watchful. Like she's worried that something is going to jump out at her at any moment. I turn the volume up so I can catch their conversation.

"... Anton is in a business meeting," he informs Jessa. "I'll show you to the kitchen myself."

Disappointingly, she doesn't say anything as she follows Lev from the main foyer into the back annals of the mansion. I switch camera feeds when they walk into the kitchen.

Her eyes go wide as they scour the place. Even by her standards, it must seem over the top. There are two massive islands, each outfitted with large sinks and induction cooktops. The pantry is big enough to rent out to a family of four. And the whole space is suffused with natural light from the arched windows that overlook the garden.

"Are these marble?" she asks, running her fingers across the countertops.

"Calacatta marble," Lev replies. "I'd tell you how much it costs, but I don't think you'd believe me. Anyway, I think you'll find everything you need here."

"Wow." I don't hear her say it, but I can see her lips form the word. "This is quite the kitchen."

She turns around to face Lev, which means she has her back to me. I don't mind at all. Her jeans hug her ass to perfection, and it doesn't take much for me to picture what that ass would look like naked and bent over.

My cock jumps to life in my pants. I keep my eyes glued to her figure as I listen to their conversation.

"What's this?" she asks, pointing at the small stack of white paper on the counter.

"That's your menu for today."

"Menu?" She sounds confused.

"Yes, I believe Anton has curated the meal plan. You won't need to worry about breakfast or lunch. So there's only dinner to think of."

“He planned the menu... *for* me?” she asks, sounding extremely affronted.

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

She scoffs. “I really shouldn’t be surprised. He struck me as a control freak from day one.”

Lev smiles. “Comes with the job.”

“He must drive you crazy.”

“You get used to it.”

I squint. Bastard.

“Look at you playing the diplomat,” she says. “Do they train that into you, too?”

“No, that comes naturally,” he says. He clears his throat. “Anton told me that you preferred to work without any staff?”

“I’m only cooking for a few people. I can handle that on my own.”

“Alright then. There are quarters you can use through that door over there. There’s a shower, too, in case you need it at the end of the day. If you have any more questions—”

“I won’t,” she says curtly, cutting him off. “I know my way around a kitchen.”

He nods. “Then I’ll leave you to it.”

He bows out and leaves her alone. The moment he goes, however, her entire demeanor changes. She goes from unimpressed and detached to genuinely excited. It’s honestly fucking adorable.

She runs around the entire kitchen, opening cupboards, checking out the pantry, pulling out random ingredients from shelves and smelling the contents. She looks like a kid at an amusement park.

“She’s in the kitchen now,” Lev says, walking into my office. “Oh, right. I don’t need to tell you.”

I keep my eyes on the monitor as she opens the fridge and pulls out a bottle of caviar that a new contact from Russia sent

me recently as a gift. She pops the top and tries a little with a teaspoon. Then she does a dance around the first kitchen island that makes me laugh out loud. Even Lev joins in, and he's not really a laugh-out-loud kind of guy.

I wait until she's disappeared into the staff dressing rooms before I turn to Lev.

"It would be wrong to turn on the camera in the dressing room, right?" I ask, only half-joking.

Lev smirks. "Is this gonna be your whole day?"

"Why not?" I ask. "I haven't taken a day off in fucking forever."

"True," he concedes with a nod. "You deserve some downtime." He glances towards the monitors. Jessa still hasn't reemerged. "What do you hope to gain from this? I mean, the girl gave back the phone. She has nothing on you anymore."

"Except what she knows."

"A risk you decided to take the moment you decided to let her live. So what is all this really about?"

I stay silent. Because what the fuck am I supposed to say to that? Of course, Lev is an expert at reading silences. It's why I keep him around in the first place.

"You care about her, don't you?" he guesses.

"She's interesting."

"Lots of women are. But don't duck the question. You care about the girl."

"There's something endearing about her," I say, still smiling at the memory of her happy dance after she tried the caviar. "Not like the others."

"Of course not. You've spent your whole life surrounded by Bratva women. They're a different breed altogether."

"You don't have to tell me. I'm still trying to avoid Jhené after that fucking dinner."

Lev chuckles. "She's set her sights on you."

“The woman thinks that I’m looking for a new wife. I’d rather shoot my dick off.”

Lev is silent for a second. Then I see his eyebrows rise thoughtfully.

“No fucking way, Lev,” I growl before he can even make the suggestion.

“What?” he asks. “She’d be a good fit.”

“If I wanted a pretty woman with no personality, I’d buy a fucking statue.”

“You don’t have to talk to the poor girl,” Lev points out. “Just marry her, pop out a couple of kiddos, and give her a comfortable life.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You’re starting to sound like my father now. Not a good way to try and convince me of anything.”

Lev purses his lips. “I guess that didn’t work for you the first time.”

“It did not. And I’m not going to make the same mistake twice.”

“Jhené is different, though,” he points out. “She’s young and…”

“Stupid?”

“Adaptable,” Lev corrects diplomatically. “She’s not going to expect much from you, apart from a cushy life. That you can give her.”

“She’s a child.”

“She’ll be fertile.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Fucking hell, Lev. You’re disappointing me right now.”

“If you don’t have children—”

“I have a younger brother,” I remind him. “If I don’t have children, then the Bratva will pass to Yulian.”

“You’d really do that? Hand the Bratva over to Yulian?”

“Why do you sound skeptical?”

“I’m not skeptical about you doing it. I’m skeptical about Yulian running this whole show.”

I smirk. “You don’t think he’s up to the task?”

“He might grow into it,” Lev muses. “But I don’t know. He’s a good man, Anton. I just don’t know about leading an entire Bratva. Running several businesses. Managing colleagues, clients, suppliers, allies, enemies. It’s a delicate balancing act. I’m not sure Yulian has the patience.”

“It’s the plan for now. I’m not getting married any time soon, Lev,” I say. “My wife hasn’t even been dead a year. I’ve sworn off marriage indefinitely.”

My attention is diverted a second later when Jessa reappears on the screen. She’s swapped her white t-shirt for a blank tank top and pulled her hair up into a high bun at the back of her head.

She looks...

“Oh boy.”

“What?” I ask.

When I turn to Lev, he’s looking at me with raised eyebrows and a sympathetic expression.

I frown. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Is she gonna be a problem?”

“I already told you, I’m just having a little fun. I’ll get bored of her soon.”

“You sound confident,” Lev says. “So why don’t I believe you?”

I could tell Lev the truth about what the little *kotyonok* does to my cock, about that weird clenching feeling she ignites in my chest, but I’m not interested in explaining shit to him.

It’s irrelevant, anyway. Jessa’s sudden intrusion into my life changes nothing. The trajectory remains the same.

No matter how sexy she is.

No matter how alluring that smile of hers may be.

“Probably because you make it your job to worry,” I suggest acidly. “Now, get out of here. I need to handle some paperwork.”

“Oh, is that right?” Lev asks suspiciously. “Is that what you’re calling jerking off now? ‘Handling your paperwork?’”

“Get the hell out.”

Chuckling, Lev leaves.

I turn off the cameras, but Jessa is still on my mind. I’m rock fucking solid and I badly need a release. But I already know the only release I’ll be satisfied with is one that involves her.

This is not good.

I’ve never felt this kind of craving for a woman before. She’s nothing like my past fare. She’s awkward and clumsy. She’s vulnerable and emotional. She’s confused and uncertain—and despite all that, she is brimming with untapped fire. Each of her reactions have been as unexpected as my feelings for her.

Just knowing she’s downstairs in my house, humming under her breath and singing as she cooks for me, is enough to bring me to the edge of coming.

No, not good at all.

I think, probably not by accident, about Marina. She’d have done anything to dominate my thoughts like this. Hell, she tried. She used to show up to my office in lingerie, whisper filthy promises in my ear, beg and plead and cry.

None of it worked. The Bratva was all that mattered.

But now, as blasphemous as it is, I’m thinking, *Fuck the Bratva. All I want to do is storm down the stairs and make that little kiska scream my name.*

I’m on my feet before I even know what I’m doing. Operating on pure autopilot. I don’t even think about it—I just go straight to the kitchen.

When I round the corner, she’s got her back to me, washing dishes in the sink and wiggling her hips to the tune of the song

she's singing to herself. The room around her is bursting with life. Bowls and strainers are strewn across the counters between culinary devices I've never seen used for as long as I've lived here. Spoons and spices and the smell, *the smell*, oh fuck me—the smell is fucking divine.

I can feel her good mood from here. Evidently, she can feel my presence, too, because she whirls around suddenly—and that good mood withers on the vine.

“Jesus,” she gasps, her hand on her heart. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to be able to tell that you can't sing.”

She frowns. “As if you have the voice of an angel.”

“So some have said.”

She rolls her eyes. “Did you threaten someone before you asked them for an opinion? Because, knowing your style, I'm not sure you can trust what they told you under duress.”

I move into the kitchen and look around. “Not exactly a clean chef, are you?”

“Guess you're not the only one with a messy professional style.” She narrows her eyes. “Did you just come here to criticize? Or is there another reason you're in my kitchen?”

“*Your* kitchen?” I laugh. “That was quick.”

“So long as I'm the chef here, it's my kitchen,” she says firmly.

I nod slowly. “I can respect that. So long as you've respected my menu. I'm looking forward to steak tonight.”

Her expression hardens into determination. “You really expected me to follow your bullshit, paint-by-numbers menu for the night?”

“Are you telling me you disobeyed?”

“Of course I did,” she snaps. “I'm not your dancing monkey; I'm a chef. I used my professional experience to make you a great dinner. Better than the one you had planned yourself.”

I take a step toward her. She pretends to stand her ground, but I don't miss how she subtly scoots backwards until her ass hits the edge of the counter. I don't miss the fear in her eyes, as much as she tries to hide it. I don't miss the quickening of her breath.

"I'm paying you to do what I want," I growl in her face.

"Well, then you picked the wrong chef. I make my own menus."

"You'll make me a steak."

Her cheer wilts instantly, but I can see the lingering brightness in her eyes. Say what you want about the girl, she likes a good fight.

"You'll eat what I put down in front of you and you'll like it, asshole."

"This is the battle you want to go down fighting?" I ask, amused by how stubborn she's being right now. Infuriated, yes, but also amused.

She scoffs up at me. "*I'm* the one fighting a stupid battle? What about you? '*Anton want steak,*'" she says in a caveman-skewed imitation of me. "'*Give Anton steak.*' For fuck's sake, you're such a spoiled brat!"

I raise my eyebrows and inch closer to her. "You wanna say that again?"

Her eyes flit around the kitchen and then she grabs a knife from next to the sink. "I'm not above stabbing you in the neck, you know."

I laugh. "Do you even know how to use that thing?"

"Hello? I just spent the last hour filleting fish. I know exactly where your spine is."

She raises the knife like she's prepared to use it, but I stride right into it on purpose. She gasps, pulling back, trying to twist the blade away from me so that she doesn't actually cut me.

I grab her hips and hold her in place so she can't escape me.

“Stop it,” she exclaims. “You’ll hurt yourself.” The blade is poking in my chest. Any more pressure and it will break the skin.

“Would you care?”

She stumbles a little, trying to think of an appropriate response to that. “I don’t want to be killed by your people,” she huffs eventually. “That’s the only reason I wouldn’t want you dead.”

“Mhmm. Very wise.”

She pushes back and sets the knife back on the table as though she regrets picking it up at all. Then she turns to me and smooths back the loose strands of hair that have fallen out of her bun.

“Dinner will be served in a few minutes,” she tells me in a prim and proper voice. “Now, get out of my kitchen.”

When Marina ordered me around, it just pissed me off. But when Jessa does it, it has the opposite effect. It makes me want to bend her over this countertop and tease her until she’s ordering me to fuck her. And then fuck her until she’s ordering me to make her come.

Those are orders I wouldn’t mind taking.

I let my hands fall from her warmth and step back. “The fish better be good,” I tell her. “Oh, and by the way, you’re going to be serving me yourself tonight. Since you said you liked to work alone, I dismissed the waitstaff.”

Before she can protest, I walk out of her kitchen with a satisfied smile on my face.

It’s not as good as sex, but it’s pretty damn close.

JESSA

His ability to piss me off and turn me on at the same time is nothing short of incredible.

The moment Anton leaves the kitchen, I clutch the corners of the marble island and take a few deep breaths. I had the most amazing day cooking, trying out different ingredients and experimenting and generally just doing what I wanted for a little while.

It took him all of three seconds to change my mood.

But it's not... totally bad? Like yes, he's a fucking prick, and yes, he ruined the good vibes I'd been cultivating. But I can't deny that I feel wired and jittery in a strangely satisfying way, like I'm running on pure adrenaline. Even when he grabbed me, effectively walking right into the knife I had pointed at him, something inside me shivered to life.

Lust.

Chris was right: I can no longer deny that I have a serious problem resisting men like Anton Stepanov.

I try to channel my energy into plating dinner, but I can't turn my mind off. How long will this feeling last? Maybe I'll grow immune to him. I'll have to. Because I've got three months ahead of me and not nearly enough willpower.

"He might have killed his wife," I whisper to myself as I place little dabs of caviar around the tiger prawns on the plate. "He's a murderer. He's a Bratva don. He's not the kind of man you

can bring home to meet your parents. Not unless you want them dead.”

I repeat these facts to myself, but by the time I’m ready to serve dinner, nothing has changed. The adrenaline is still pumping. A tingling in my stomach and... lower. The verbal sparring and arguing between us functions an awful lot like foreplay.

“Stop it,” I hiss to myself as I walk the tray of food down the hall and towards the dining room.

When I walk in, there’s no one there. The light is off. But there’s a glow coming through the crack in the door to the right.

I follow it, opening the door to reveal a much smaller, much more intimate dining room. Anton is sitting at an antique table. French doors lead directly out to the pool.

He looks like he’s just stepped out of the shower. He’s in casual pants and a t-shirt, a glass of white wine in his hand.

I’m not used to seeing him like this. It should be a letdown after getting used to suits and sculpted hair, but I can feel new heat between my legs.

What the hell is wrong with me?

“Tonight’s meal,” I tell him, placing the plate down right in front of him. “Seared tiger prawns in a lobster bisque with truffle foam and caviar.”

He scrutinizes the plate. So much so that I start getting nervous. But I tasted everything before I plated up. I always do. I need to remain confident in my abilities.

“Looks good,” he says finally.

“I’ll leave you to it then,” I say. The less time I spend with him, the better.

He raises his eyebrows. “Leave me to it?”

“That’s what I said, yeah.”

“Have you forgotten? You’re my waitress tonight.”

“Consider yourself waited on.”

He wags a finger in the air. “Not so fast, little one.”

I put my fists on my hips. “You expect me to stay and... do what? Spoon-feed you?”

“Serve me,” he says simply. “Is it so hard to be around me?”

But I can see that evil glint in his eyes. He’s doing this specifically to get a rise out of me.

Most obnoxiously of all, it’s working like a goddamn charm.

He can tell, too. “I’m going to need another glass of wine in a moment. You’ll have to pour it for me.”

“Where do you want me?” I sigh, regretting the phrasing the moment the words are out of my mouth. *In your bed? On the table? Against the wall?*

“You can just stand in the corner for the time being,” he answers, suppressing a smile. No need to make the obvious jokes, I guess.

I ignore him and take the seat opposite him.

He gives me an amused look, but he doesn’t bother arguing. Instead, he digs in. I watch, though I’m pretending not to give a shit, as he cuts off a large bite of the tiger prawn, ignoring the caviar. I’m tempted to tell him to take a bite of everything together, but I refrain. That’s not a hill I’m willing to die on.

I watch as he takes the first bite. It’s difficult not to watch his lips as he chews. Who knew that watching a man eat could be so arousing?

I’ve never experienced this before. When Dane would eat, I’d look away. He chewed with his mouth open, always dribbling bits onto his chin and beard. It was weirdly cute when we were dating. I’d tease him and wipe his face. But it quickly became embarrassing.

Watching Anton eat my food, though... It has me squirming in my seat, inventing new ways to fake like I’m not ogling him.

“Well?” I ask, waiting for a compliment that will never, ever come.

“What’s next?”

I sigh bitterly. Shame on me for getting my hopes up for so much as a crumb of a “good job” or “tastes nice.”

“I’ll go get your next course now,” I say, shoving away from the table.

“No,” he says firmly, forcing me back into my seat with the simple power of his gaze. “No, I’m going to need a refill first.” He rubs the rim of his wine glass in a way that shouldn’t be but somehow is suggestive.

“The bar is right there,” I point out. “I can see the bottle of wine on the counter. You can walk three feet, can’t you?”

“I prefer to watch you walk.”

Okay, he’s definitely flirting with me now. But I’m not sure what his motive is. Does he want to sleep with me? Or is he just trying to make me uncomfortable?

Or worse still, is he expecting me to betray my feelings for him by reacting? Whatever the case, I give him nothing. I stand up and walk over to the bar to retrieve the wine bottle.

It’s a beautiful vintage. The moment I pop the cork, the fragrance wafts out to greet me. I don’t think I’ve ever smelled a Sauvignon Blanc this summery as this before.

“Anything else?” I ask through gritted teeth once I’ve filled his glass almost all the way to the rim.

“I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

“Right. Well, have at it. I’ll just pop into the kitchen.”

“You will do no such thing. You’re going to stay right here and do as I ask,” he tells me.

“What am I supposed to do, twiddle my fucking thumbs in the corner?”

Eyes flashing, Anton takes the stem of the wine glass in his supple fingers and pours a single, crystalline drop onto his napkin. He stays locked on me the whole time, not even blinking.

“Oops,” he says. “Looks like I’ll need a new napkin.”

I grit my teeth.

This is not about service.

This is about humiliating me.

“You’re evil, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told,” he replies lazily.

“I’m not waiting on you anymore.”

He just sits there, looking up at me with mild amusement. “Are you negating our contract already? Because that’ll cause some problems.”

“You want a problem?” I ask, feeling myself spinning out. “I’ll give you a problem.”

Then, acting on pure instinct, I grab the half-finished glass of wine on the table and hurl it in his face. Like they do in movies.

It’s dramatic and sudden. Even I’m shocked at myself.

He doesn’t really move. Just sits there, looking... well... looking like he hasn’t just gotten a faceful of wine. Somehow, he makes it look good. The liquid dripping down his strong nose, winding past those full lips. The flicker of his tongue as he tastes it.

Fuck me.

“You’ve just made more work for yourself,” he tells me in an icy growl.

“I... I’m sorry,” I hear myself saying. “I didn’t—I really shouldn’t have done that.”

“No, *kotyonok*, you shouldn’t have,” he says.

His voice is a low, dangerous snarl. More animal than man. It does something to me, like it’s bypassing my normal person filters and speaking directly to the cavewoman part of my brain. I’m shamefully wet.

“I’ll—I’ll clean up.” I reach for the partially soaked napkin on the table.

“No.”

I freeze, wondering if I’ve succeeded in actually pissing him off this time. “No?”

“Forget the table. You’ll need to clean me up first.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me, Jessa. Get on your knees.”

ANTON

Her eyes turn a dark hazel as she stares at me. She looks both terrified and expectant. She wants something to come of this night—she just hadn't bargained for quite how much.

I wonder for a moment if she's considering defying me. Part of me hopes she does. I'd take a savage pleasure in breaking this little filly.

But then, slowly, she sinks to her knees.

She's moving on autopilot. I feel like a puppet master, with a fistful of Jessa's marionette strings held firmly in my hand.

"Unbutton my shirt," I rasp.

She swallows hard. I watch her throat ride up and down. So fragile. So beautiful. So utterly naive.

Her hands float up towards me. They undo the first button with difficulty, then the second, the third, until my torso is bared before her. The wine has trickled down to run between the grooves of my abs.

"Now, clean up the mess you made."

She starts to reach for a napkin at the unused place setting. But before she can even get halfway there, I shoot my hand out and snag her wrist.

"Not with that," I correct. "You're going to lick me clean."

Her eyes are huge. Caramel brown and emerald green flowing together. A lock of hair has fallen over her face. I reach out and smooth it back behind her ear.

“It wasn’t a question, *kotyonok*.”

The air in the room is impossibly tense. She looks up at me for a long time. Ten, twenty, fifty beats of our hearts. Well, of hers, at least. Her pulse is going a mile a minute. Mine is as cool as ever.

I wonder again if she’s going to make me show her what happens when I am defied.

But then, she does what I thought she’d never do.

Submits.

She leans in and drags her tongue over my skin. My cock is stiff and it’s hard to concentrate on anything other than my need for her.

She laps the wine up until the scent of it is replaced with hers. But she doesn’t stop there. Her uncertainty seems to dissipate as she licks her way down my body to the button of my pants. Slowly, she unzips me.

My cock nearly hits her in the face, but she doesn’t seem to mind. In fact, she doesn’t hesitate as she runs her tongue over the head of my dick.

I shudder as the sweet warmth floods through my body. I’ve had thousands of blowjobs in my life, maybe more.

But not a single one like this.

She licks my head for a few seconds before she practically swallows my cock. I’m not expecting her to take me so deep so soon. I press a hand to her head and push her down a little further, losing myself to new sensations.

It’s been a while. Maybe that’s why it feels so intense.

But somehow, I doubt it. I have a feeling this has more to do with the woman on her knees before me than anything else.

She pulls out, gasping. I expect her to stand and claim she’s done as I asked, but she dives back down and starts sucking on my balls. I wince as she finds a sensitive corner between them and consumes me.

And then I’m done waiting.

I need to sate the desire coursing through me. This isn't enough. Not even close. I grab her and yank her upwards. She yields easily, her eyes wide with uncertainty and desire.

I force her to a standing position in front of me and then I start stripping her. She doesn't move. She just stands there and lets me remove her clothes.

She's wearing white panties and a black bra. Both are practical, functional, not designed to be seen by a lover.

But on her, they're the sexiest fucking thing I've ever seen in my life.

Once she's standing naked in front of me, I sit back and stare at her. She tenses, but doesn't attempt to cover herself.

I reach out to roll her breasts in my palms, enjoying the weight of them, the way she sighs at the friction. I follow the indentation that carves a straight line down her body to her belly button.

The V between Jessa's legs looks freshly shaven. Her pussy on full display. I reach out and run my fingers along her slit.

She's wet. Absolutely soaking wet.

"Looks like you missed me," I growl.

She opens her eyes to glare at my throbbing cock. "Right back atcha."

I smile and lift her leg at the same time. Hooking it around my hip, I line myself up with her entrance...

Then I ease into her.

"Oh God..." she gasps, her face twisting in pleasure. "Fuck."

I pull her onto the chair with me, then raise her hips up and down, helping her ride me for the first few minutes until she gets used to my girth inside her.

"Fuck, you're so big..." she whimpers.

It takes several more thrusts before she's stretched herself comfortably around my cock. And then she seems to gain her bearings. She puts her hands on my shoulders and starts

bucking her hips against me. Her breasts bounce in my face as she rides me wildly.

Her lips part and her eyes squeeze shut as she chases the orgasm I know is coming. I'm glad it's happening quickly because I'm not sure how much longer I can contain myself. The need to come inside her is too great to hold back.

"Oh God," she moans. "Oh God..."

I grab her breasts and twist her nipples between my fingers as she throws her head back and comes shamelessly on my cock. Her body shudders uncontrollably and then she collapses against me.

I grab her and pull her to me as I thrust into her hard from below. She lets out a few defeated whimpers before I explode inside her. Again and again, it gets wrung out of me, until I have nothing left to give.

Jessa keeps her forehead on my shoulder for a long time before she finally pulls back. She doesn't meet my eyes as she gets off me, her legs wobbling.

I watch as she picks her clothes up off the floor. At one point, she bends and my cock flickers to life again. I notice my cum sliding down her inner thighs.

I grab the napkin from the table and stand up. She freezes when I come up behind her, but she doesn't move when I start wiping her legs clean.

She turns around slowly after I'm finished. "Thank you."

Her cheeks are flushed with color, but she looks more shell-shocked than embarrassed.

My cock has never been happier.

"I... I should get home," she stammers as she pulls on her clothes.

I nod. "As you wish."

"I'll just get my things and..." She meets my gaze and her words trail off into the ether.

I stand and tuck myself away. "It's late. I'll drive you."

She frowns. “Oh. Really? You don’t have to do that. I can just call a cab.”

“I said I’ll drive you.”

Jessa swallows. “Okay.”

I head for the driveway and she follows behind me. She doesn’t make any comment about the red Ferrari I choose to take her home in. My guess is she’s still processing what just happened.

I keep the top down and wait until she’s strapped in before I start the car and pull out. For the first time in my life, I find myself driving slowly.

“You really didn’t need to do this,” she says softly.

“I’m aware.”

I can see her glancing at me every few seconds as we move through the streets of Los Angeles. The quiet is broken when her phone starts ringing. She stares at the screen for a moment and then declines the call.

I look over her shoulder at the caller ID. “Who’s Chris?” I ask.

She stiffens. “Just a friend.”

“The friend in the picture you’ve got hanging up in your bedroom?”

She glares at me. “Of course you snooped through my bedroom.”

“You stole my phone.”

She lets that one go. “Yes, he’s the guy in the picture. Back in college.”

For a moment, I think that’s all she’s going to say, but then she continues.

“He’s my oldest friend. He knows me better than anyone else in the world. Honestly, he knows me better than I know myself sometimes,” she says with a sigh. “He warned me about Dane. Said I couldn’t trust him. Said I could do better.”

I snort. “Anyone with eyes could have told you that.”

She gives me a half-smile. “At the time, I hated him for it. I thought his job as my friend was to support me no matter what. When I told him that, he told me his job as my friend was to protect me.”

“I suppose I understand now why you stashed the phone with him.”

She glances at me in sheer terror out of the corner of her eye, but she’s already given herself away. “How did you know that?”

“I didn’t. Not until a second ago.”

Fear twists her expression. “He doesn’t know a thing about you.”

“I doubt that.”

“Anton—”

“Don’t worry,” I tell her. “I’ll leave the man alone. I can’t fault him for wanting to make sure you’re safe.”

She’s silent for a long time. “You really won’t hurt him?” I nod, but she doesn’t seem mollified. “He’s... he’s my best friend, Anton. And a good man. He keeps his word and he promised me that he would keep his mouth shut about what happened that night.”

“Like how you promised me?”

Her eyes go wide. “Anton—”

“I hope his word is stronger than yours.”

“I was scared,” she says defensively. “I was emotional and terrified and... I needed someone I could trust. Chris is the only one I could trust. You can’t hurt him.”

“I’ve already told you I have no intention of hurting him. You’re going to have to learn to trust me, too, Jessa. Or else you’re not going to sleep much tonight.”

She sighs. “Trust doesn’t exactly come easily for me anymore.”

“No, I imagine not.”

“It’s funny... Chris was the first real friend I ever had. All my other friendships fell apart when I moved away or when college ended. But Chris has always been there for me.”

“Seems like he has a vested interest in sticking around.”

She gives a little start as she glances at me.

“Stumbled across a secret, have I?” I ask, as something dark twists in my stomach.

“No. Of course not. It’s just...”

“Yes?”

“Another one of my friends—well, neighbor, friend, I’m not sure... She suggested the same thing after she met Chris.”

“Do you think it’s true?”

“I hope not. If I can’t reciprocate, I’d rather he not feel that way about me. It would just end our friendship. And I don’t want to lose Chris under any circumstances.”

The darkness inside me releases slightly and I feel lighter. I shouldn’t give a fuck about what she just said, but I do.

“He was the first person to suggest I become a chef,” she says. “For me, it was more of a hobby. Then I cooked dinner for Chris one night while we were both cramming for finals. He told me it was the best meal he’d ever had and that I should switch my major and become a chef instead.”

“Did you?”

“No,” she laughs. “I’m stubborn, in case you haven’t noticed. I finished my business degree, which in hindsight was a waste of money. Then I took a two-year culinary course that my parents weren’t happy about. But it turned out to be the best thing I ever did. At the end of the course, the best students were placed in different restaurants in the city. I was one of them.”

“How did you start cooking in the first place?”

“Out of necessity,” she says with a shy smile. “My parents were always busy. I was left on my own from the moment I was old enough to take care of myself. I used to just pour

myself a bowl of cereal and call it a day. But then I got bored with eating the same thing day in and day out. So I learned to cook. And then I kinda fell in love with it. I realized I liked not knowing what I was going to end up with. The mystery of it. It feels like magic, sometimes.”

Her face softens as she talks. Even her voice changes. It gets a little dreamier, a little more tender. Perhaps she’s not as bitter as she makes herself out to be.

“You’re beautiful when you talk about what you love,” I murmur.

Jessa does a double-take. “Do I need to get my ears checked?”

I laugh. “Life is cruel and cold and ugly. Passion makes it worthwhile.”

“Right,” she scoffs. “Cause you’d know a ton about passion. You’re, like, Jack Frost himself. The Abominable Snowman. Ice-cold all the way down”

“You’re not the first woman to voice that complaint.”

“Did Jhené beat me to it?”

I can tell she regrets asking the question at all. Her eyes squeeze shut for a moment before she bites down on her bottom lip.

“You noticed Jhené, I take it.”

“Please,” she scoffs. “How can you not notice that woman? She’s a knockout.”

I snort. “First of all, she’s not a woman. She’s still a girl. And also... I’ve seen better.”

“Seriously?” she asks. “You’ve seen better than Jhené?”

I nod. “My ex-wife was far more beautiful.”

I take a long, indulgent look at her features, which are screwed up so tight I know she’s uncomfortable with my description of Marina.

“But,” I add, “Marina was also fucking insane. Which detracted a bit from her beauty.”

“She must have had some redeeming qualities,” Jessa suggests quietly. “You did marry her, after all.”

“I didn’t marry her for any of her personal qualities. She was a good option.”

“Jesus, that’s harsh,” Jessa mumbles. “No wonder you had a bad marriage.” I glance at her and she looks away quickly. “Sorry, I’m just saying. It doesn’t really help a relationship to hear stuff like that. Especially if she... cared about you.”

“She didn’t.”

“What makes you say that?”

I shrug. “The secrets she hid. The fights she picked. It was like she wanted the marriage to fail.”

“And what about you?” Jessa asks. “What did you want?”

I weigh my answer for a while. “I wanted the marriage to endure,” I say at last.

“What does that mean?”

“It means I expected to stay married to her, at least legally.”

“But you wanted to live separate lives?” Jessa asks, eyebrows raised.

“It sounds ugly when you put it like that.”

“I’m guessing it would sound ugly any which way. I’m not surprised she was miserable.”

I glare at her. “Are you her spokeswoman?”

She gives me a small smile. “I can’t speak for your wife, but I think I know what most women want at the end of the day.”

“Which is what?”

“To be seen,” she replies quietly. “To be heard. To be valued.”

I fall silent, but she continues to observe me. I can tell her interest is piqued. She wants to know more about my marriage to Marina, but she is too uncomfortable to ask outright.

“Despite everything that happened with Dane, I think I’ll still want to get married one day,” she says. “Do you feel the same

way after Marina?”

“Marriage is not high on my priority list,” I tell her honestly.
“Does that disappoint you?”

“Why should it?” she snaps.

I suppress a smile and keep my eyes on the road. She looks pointedly out of her window, pretending to watch the scenery as we drive. Neither of us says a word the rest of the way.

Five minutes later, I come to a stop outside of her building. The streetlights are on and they cast a ghostly pallor over the rest of the street.

Jessa twists her body towards me and gives me an awkward smile. “Thanks for the lift.”

I nod. “My pleasure.”

She hesitates, unsure how to say goodbye to me, considering we just fucked barely an hour ago.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she says. “Um, I mean... maybe. Not that I expect to see you or anything. Though, I will be cooking for you, so I just assumed I will be... seeing you, I mean.”

She stops talking and turns an adorably endearing shade of pink.

“Sorry,” she murmurs when I don’t say anything.

“Go in and get some rest, Jessa,” I say. I hesitate before I add, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Her shoulders relax just a little. She’s about to get out of the car when she stops abruptly and turns back to me. “You should know... I never do this kind of thing.”

“What kind of thing?”

She exhales sharply. “Don’t make me say it.”

I shake my head hopelessly. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Sleeping with my employer,” she says through gritted teeth.
“This was a first.”

“Ah, that.” I smile. “I guess I did know what you were talking about.”

She rolls her eyes. “Asshole.”

Then she gets out of the car, slams the door hard, and walks into her building without turning back to glance at me. But I know she wants to.

Because I’m under her skin now.

Just like she’s under mine.

JESSA

At the door to my building, I turn back and watch as his Ferrari disappears up the sloped hill.

“What is happening to me?” I whisper.

No answers are forthcoming from the night. I sigh and walk inside.

The stairwell is dark, and I don’t reach out to flip the light switch. There’s something comforting about the darkness. Turning on the lights would just shatter the moment. Would reveal that I’m back in my depressingly normal life instead of in the lush fantasy world Anton calls reality.

Do I want to live in that fantasy? One night with him and I’m already completely immersed. He makes it seem possible for me to live that kind of life, too.

Even when my head knows that my heart is being stupid.

My phone rings, slicing through the silence. I jump about ten feet in the air with a stifled shriek, and when I land clumsily, I come within a fingertip’s grip on the railing of tumbling two flights of stairs to my death.

When my heartbeat finally gets back below two hundred, I pull it out of my purse and see Chris’s name on the screen.

“Hi.” I know I can’t avoid having this conversation with him, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to try.

“Jessa?” He’s trying and failing to hide his worry. “Where are you?”

“I’m out. Or, that is... I just got back home.”

He hesitates for a second. Suspicion suffuses the pregnant silence. “Well, which is it?”

“The second one.”

“Is that supposed to be convincing?”

“Sorry,” I say with a sigh. “It’s just been a long day. I really did just get home. I’m in the stairwell of my building right now.”

“You really are home?”

“Yes, why?”

“I just wanted to know if you’ve gotten rid of the phone yet,” he says. “You’ve been so quiet and you didn’t text me back.”

I frown. I didn’t even realize he’d texted me. “Where are you?”

“What do you mean? It’s past eleven. I’m home.”

“Wanna come over?”

He hesitates. “Now?”

“Yeah. Just to talk.”

I don’t know why I think it’s a good idea to have him come over to explain this. It would be so much easier to tell him over the phone. That way, I could hang up when things got too heated. Which I have every expectation they will.

But I want to try and be a better friend to Chris than I have been in the past. He deserves to be looked in the eye when I tell him what’s going on now. And if he disapproves—which of course he will because he has sense in spades and apparently I have less than none—I’ll just have to take it like a big girl.

“This sounds serious,” he says nervously.

“I think that depends on how you look at it.”

“I’ll be there in ten.” He hangs up before I can say anything else.

Sighing, I climb up to my apartment and almost run into Freya. She's on her way down with a bag of trash in hand.

"Hey, lady!" she exclaims.

"Hey," I mumble back.

"You didn't return my call," she says. "And I came by this morning. You weren't in."

I can feel myself flush with more guilt. "Right, I wasn't at home today. I... I have a job..."

"You got a job?" she asks. "Well, say more!"

"It's a long story. Tell you about it later?"

Her eyes go wide. "Oh my God!" She drops her voice to a whisper and says, "You accepted his contract, didn't you?"

How the fuck did she guess so quickly? Am I that transparent?
"Well—"

She looks shocked for a moment, but she composes herself quickly. "Are you sure about this?"

I nod. "The first day wasn't so bad, at least."

She leans in close and sniffs. "What are you doing?"

Her eyes narrow and a small smile plays across her lips. "You smell like a man."

"Excuse me?"

"Did you fuck him?" she gasps.

I hate that she says it like that. *Fuck him*. Like what we did was cheap and salacious. But I don't want to correct her in case she gets the wrong idea.

Though, looking at her expression now, it's clear she's already locked onto the wrong idea.

"I... that's not quite—"

"You fucked him!" she squeals. "I knew there was something funny going on between the two of you. Did he initiate it or did you?"

"Freya... listen—"

“Oh my God, is he good in bed?” she asks. “What was it like? Tell me everything.”

“Listen, Chris is on his way over and I’m going to have to explain a few things to him. Can we talk about this another time?”

She frowns. “Urgh, his timing couldn’t be worse.”

“I’m the one who called him over.”

“Then your timing couldn’t be worse. I can’t believe he’s gonna get the details before I do.”

“First of all, he’s not getting details of anything. I’m just trying to explain to him why I decided to accept Anton’s ‘contract.’ After I tell him there’s a contract in the first place.”

She winces. “Oh boy, he’s not going to like this one bit.”

“I’ll just have to explain it to him calmly.”

“Great. And when you’re done, you can come explain it to me.”

I hesitate. “You think I’m crazy, too?”

“Completely,” she says with a smile. “But I’ve seen the man, so I can’t exactly blame you. I wonder what’s in it for him, though?”

I feel as though she’s just poured cold water down my back. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, there has to be a reason he seems intent on keeping you around, right?”

“Well... maybe he likes me?” I feel like a complete idiot having to make the suggestion myself. As if I’m the only person delusional enough to think Anton could like me.

Freya catches her slip, too. She looks embarrassed for a minute. “Of course! Of course he must, honey. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to imply that...”

She trails off and we stare awkwardly at one another. Then she sighs and touches my shoulder apologetically. “You’re

awesome, Jessa. But this guy... he's not like the men we're used to. He can get any woman he wants."

"So why me, huh?"

"That's not what I'm saying." She shakes her head. "I just think you need to be careful."

I don't like hearing it, but I know I need to. Still, I don't think I have the energy to deal with both Freya and Chris tonight.

"Can we talk later?" I ask for the third time.

"Of course. I'm just gonna take the trash out."

I nod and we move past each other on the stairs. I continue up to my apartment as Freya disappears down the stairwell. I have only enough time to discard my coat and grab some water before my doorbell rings.

I'm already regretting asking Chris to come over. I feel drained and deflated. The high I'd been riding when Anton dropped me off has dissipated completely.

I answer the door with a forced smile. "Thanks for coming over so late. Did you see Freya on the stairs?"

He frowns. "No. Should I have?"

"She was taking down the trash."

"Maybe she hid to avoid me," he grumbles. "I would have done the same if I'd seen her coming."

I glare at him. "Come on, you could make an effort."

He scoffs. "She's annoying."

"You've barely given her a chance."

"There's a lot of drama with that girl."

"How can you tell?"

He shrugs. "Instinct."

"Sorry, that's not a legitimate reason to dislike her."

"I just... I don't like how close she got to you so fast," he admits wearily.

I stiffen a little, remembering what Freya observed about Chris. Is it true that maybe her assumption that he has feelings for me is dead-on? No, no, no. Don't know, don't care. Most importantly, don't have the energy to deal with that tonight.

"Sit down. Can I get you anything to eat?"

"No, thanks."

"Drink?" I ask.

"C'mon, J," he sighs. "Just tell me what's going on. You didn't call me over here for a cup of tea and a chit-chat."

I gulp. "Alrighty then. Right to it. Let's sit."

He drops onto the sofa, eyes boring into me. I sit down beside him, perched on the edge like I might run at any moment. And who knows? I might.

"I... gave back the phone."

"Thank fuck for that."

"But—"

"But?" he growls, turning towards me. "There shouldn't be a 'but.'"

"I accepted a job with him," I blurt.

He blinks at me for a few moments. "I'm sorry, did you just say what I think you said?"

I nod. "I'm head chef now. It's a step up."

I don't know why I skip over the part where Anton basically forced me into the gig. It just sounds better this way. It puts the onus on me, instead of Anton. Makes me feel like I'm the one in charge of my life.

"I just have one question, and my question is, what the fuck? What the fuck, Jess?"

"I know it sounds stupid—"

"Maybe because it is stupid!" he suggests. "Not to mention dangerous. This guy is a murderer. You saw him shoot a man right in front of you. He's been stalking you for weeks now and the moment you manage to get him off your back, you—"

He stops short, his eyes going wide with realization. “Wait, did he threaten you into saying yes to this shit?”

“No,” I say quickly.

But Chris stares at me until I look away in shame. “He did!”

I shake my head. “I wanted to take the job.”

“Did you have a choice?”

No.

“Yes.”

“You’re doing it again,” he says. “You’re making the same damn mistake all over again.”

“He’s not Dane,” I snap.

“I know—he’s worse!” Chris spits.

“He—”

“He’s a fucking Bratva don, Jessa! A very bad dude who may have murdered his own goddamn wife!”

“We don’t know that!”

“Why the hell are you defending him?”

“Because...”

His eyes narrow. “Because what?”

“Because I don’t want to believe he did it, okay?!”

The atmosphere in the room gets so thick that I struggle to breathe. I get up off the sofa, storm to the window, and pull it open to let some fresh breeze in, but it doesn’t help.

“Jessa?”

I turn to him, feeling incredibly tired.

“Do you have feelings for this guy?” he asks softly.

I can still feel Anton’s cum inside me, staining my panties. If I concentrate, I can pick out his scent on me. Musky and masculine, just like Freya said. I can imagine his gray eyes boring into mine. The way his hands laid claim on my body. The way he said my name.

Like it all *meant* something to him.

You're beautiful when you talk about what you love.

“Holy shit, Jessa.”

Chris’s angry curse snaps me out of my reverie. I can’t even bring myself to deny anything anymore. Not just because I know I won’t sound convincing. But because I know he won’t believe me even if I do.

“It... it’s out of my control now, Chris,” I tell him. I don’t even know what I’m talking about.

He walks right up to me and grabs both my hands. “It’s all in your control, Jess. You just refuse to believe you have the power to choose. Don’t let this son of a bitch get in your head.”

I don’t say a word, but it’s pretty obvious what I’m not saying: *he’s already in my head.*

“Fuck,” Chris spits, letting go of my hands and running his palm over his face. “Even after you saw him murder a man, it’s like that?”

“It’s not like he was an innocent victim,” I say, despising the justification even as it comes out of my mouth. “He was an arms dealer.”

“So he deserved to die? Is that it?”

“It’s a different kind of world, Chris,” I tell him. “It works by different rules.”

“Do you even hear yourself right now?”

“He’s not going to hurt me,” I protest. “If that’s what you’re worried about. He won’t hurt me.”

“Because you think he cares about you like you care about him? Or are you just hoping that’s true?”

“Is it really so hard to believe that he could care about me?” I ask.

First Freya, now Chris. Maybe I am pathetic.

“Maybe right now, no. But long term?” Chris asks. “Seriously? Genuinely? Yes, I think it’s going to be hard for you to keep his interest. He’s going to use you and when you stop amusing him, he’s going to get rid of you.”

I cringe. A second later, I hear Anton’s own words in my head.

“*Gonna ditch me as soon as you get bored?*” I’d asked.

He just shrugged. “*Maybe.*”

I swallow and shake my head to clear the cobwebs. “Chris, look—I know that this could possibly be the stupidest decision I’ve ever made in my life. And I’m including Dane in that, just for the record. But I have to do this.”

“No, the fuck you don’t.”

I sigh. “Just trust me.”

“Trust you?” he says. “Not likely.”

That stings. I can’t keep the hurt from my face, so I drift away from him. His grimace falls. “Damn it, Jess, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“Yes, you did. And I can’t say that I blame you.”

I collapse back on the sofa, feeling completely defeated. And still, I’m aware of my longing for him. For the gray-eyed god who dropped me off like Freya’s trash and drove away without looking back.

Exactly how he’ll leave when he is finished with me for good.

“Can I ask you to do something for me?” he asks gently.

I nod and turn to him. “What is it?”

“Try and find out what happened to his wife,” Chris says. “What *really* happened to his wife.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“You’re a smart girl,” he says. “I’m sure you can figure something out. If you find that he really had nothing to do with her death, then go ahead and work for him as long as it suits you. Or him. But if you find out that he was responsible, whether directly or indirectly, for her death...”

I nod as he leaves the sentence unfinished. It makes sense. If I'm being honest, I should have thought of this myself, instead of deciding to just blindly trust him.

It's those gray eyes. They managed to hypnotize me when I wasn't paying attention.

"Okay."

"Okay?" he asks, staring at me hard.

I nod. "I'll see what I can find out."

He exhales softly. "Just be careful."

"He won't hurt me," I repeat again. But this time, I don't even manage to convince myself.

"I really, really hope that's true, Jess. But I don't want you taking the risk either way. He's not worth it. No man is."

I consider those words. They make sense in my head, but my heart is speaking a whole different language. With every irregular beat, it seems to be asking the same question, over and over again.

What if this man is worth it?

ANTON

I don't know what I'm doing with Jessa. I'm certain she'll keep her mouth shut about Benjamin's death. I have my phone back. So with all that in place, letting her go should be the easiest decision in the world.

And yet...

I drive back home, lost in thought and suppressed memories. I still remember the day that my father told me that I was going to marry Rodion Ivanov's daughter.

"She's beautiful and young. She'll make a fine wife. More importantly, a fine Bratva wife," he said. *"Make her happy and she will deliver you children and an empire."*

It was an impressive little speech at the time. I nodded once and that was the end of it. I resigned myself to the fact that I would not have the freedom to choose my own woman.

At the time, there wasn't any disappointment that accompanied the realization. It wasn't like I hadn't heard the two old men plotting my future since I was a teenager.

And he was right. Marina was beautiful. She had a powerful father. She'd grown up in the Bratva; she knew the life.

It made sense.

Then again, everything always makes sense on paper. Plans are beautiful because everyone assumes nothing can ever go wrong.

I drive through my rolling black gates and park right in front of the entrance. There are a few lights on throughout the house, but it feels empty. Deserted.

I walk into my office and close the door. The lights are off, but the blinds are open, ambient light from the garden adding just the tiniest bit of visibility. It's all I need.

Before I turn the television on, I walk to the matte black cabinets against the wall and grab the silver combination lock. I turn the dial until the code is complete and the door pops open. There's a neatly organized line of video tapes inside. I don't have to read the labels to find the one I want.

I pull it out, shut the drawer and head back to the television. A minute later, the screen flicks on and the video rolls.

The last time I watched this video was maybe a day or two before I met Jessa. But it feels like it's been ages. I don't know why I want to see it again tonight. Probably just masochism, plain and simple.

An image flickers into life. A conference room. Men sitting around an oblong table. The meeting starts the same self-important way that all Bratva meetings start. We were welcoming a new faction into our ranks. They'd been vying for the privilege for some time. It was an alliance I needed, but I'd been playing hard to get to make them come to us.

And of course, they had. Just as I'd intended.

The footage is clear, the pixels small enough that you can pinpoint details. Like the fact that the leader of the group, Horus, was wearing gold cufflinks. He'd dressed to impress. So had his men. Another reason I knew I had it in the bag.

That is, until...

"You fucker!"

Her voice is quiet now only because I have the volume turned down, but in the moment, her words sliced through the air like a blade.

I watch my expression onscreen twist to darkness for a flash before past-me composed myself. Lev was standing behind my

right shoulder. The moment he heard her, he moved for the door.

But he wasn't fast enough.

He was only halfway there and I was only halfway to my feet when the door burst open and Marina stormed in.

I stared at her face, trying to remember what I used to find beautiful about the woman. Her blonde hair was as immaculate as ever, but her eyes were cloaked in rage.

Lev likes to make fun of the fact that I have a "type." And in truth, there are a few similarities between Jessa and Marina. The hair being one.

But right now, all I can see are their differences.

Marina's hair was long and thick, a bright, sunshine blonde that was closer to yellow than gold. Jessa's hair is shorter, thinner, and darker. A rich honey blonde with dark roots.

Marina's face was thinner, harsher, more aristocratic. Jessa's face is softer, more prone to smiles and laughter. If Marina ever smiled, there was something twisted in the way her lips curved. Something maniacal in her features. A shadow in the corner of her smirk.

"Marina."

My voice booms from the tape. The gathered men shifted in their seats.

"You fucking bastard!" she screamed again.

"We're in a meeting."

"Do I look like I give a fuck? Dismiss them. Send them away. We need to talk."

"Not now."

That had been my first mistake. I should have dismissed them immediately, before she asked. I'd know better now. But back then, I was determined not to let her change my plans. Plans she knew I'd been making for months.

She approached me, her eyes wild, and slammed her fists into my chest. I let her get in three good hits before I grabbed her and twisted her around so her back was pressed against my chest.

She screamed hysterically and tried to break from my grasp. Her legs kicked out at the chair I'd just vacated. It hit the table and some of the men leaned back in their seats in alarm.

"Let me take her," Lev hissed urgently.

"You touch me, Lev, and I'll fucking kill you!" spat Marina.

"Out!" I roared. "Get the fuck out of here. All of you."

No one needed to be told twice. I noticed the glance that Lev gave me as he followed the men out of the office on the second floor. A space I haven't been in since.

As soon as we were alone, I watch myself fling Marina on top of the table. Her legs dangled pitifully over the side and for a moment, I wondered if I'd gone too far. She was making an unholy, animalistic noise of pain.

But then she bolted upright, her teeth bared, and lunged for me. "Who the fuck is she?" Marina roared as she made a swipe at my face.

I easily dodged her first hit without even having to try. The woman was wild, but she was predictable. After a few physical confrontations with her, it was easy to predict where her next strike would go.

Usually, I let her tire herself out before I'd step in and shut down the tantrum. But that day was different. There was something desperate in the way she came at me. At the time, I was ignorant to what had pissed her off.

"Who the fuck is who?"

"The woman you were with last night," she demanded, coming at me slower, more cautious this time around.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"The fuck you don't!"

Her eyes flared as she lashed her hand out, meeting the very corner of my jaw. My head snapped to the side. She wanted more—more blood, more pain—but the next time she tried to claw at me, I was ready.

I caught her arm and twisted it back. She screamed, but it didn't seem to slow her down at all.

My eyes slip from the screen for a second, and my hand rises to my jawline. She left a scratch that day. It didn't scar or anything like that. Within a week, it was gone altogether.

But sometimes, when I think of her, the spot where she marked me still tingles.

“I'm going to fucking kill you!” she shrieked.

She lunged at me again, but I stepped to the side and grabbed her by the hair. She gasped as I jerked her backwards and swept her feet out from under her.

She went down and I landed on top of her with her long blonde hair still tight in my grip. “Listen to me, you psychotic bitch. You cannot come in here. You may be my wife, but it's in title only.”

“You have my father's support and money because of me!”

“What makes you think I need your father's support or money?” I asked her.

“You need me... You need me...”

But she doesn't sound so confident anymore. The pixels break apart for a moment and the screen goes fuzzy. This part of the video has always been like this. It'll clear up in seven, six, five...

I close my eyes and count. But when I reach zero, I force myself to look again. I don't need to see the footage to be reminded of what happens next, but like an addict who can't stop shooting up even though it's killing him, I watch.

I remember the look in her eyes when I stared down at her, holding her blonde hair like a rope. The desperation, the unhappiness, the wild anger. It was all a mask to cover up how deeply unhappy she was. How thoroughly broken.

“You know how long I’ve been working on this alliance,” I growled at her. “You know how much work it’s been.”

“Which is exactly why I came in here,” she snarled at me. “I wanted to destroy something that you care about.”

“Why, Marina?” I asked. “You don’t care about this marriage any more than I do.”

Her face was shielded by the side of my arm. I can’t see her expression on the camera, but I remember it all too well.

The flat darkness in her eyes. The way she’d searched my face for something.

Even now, I don’t have a fucking clue what she was trying to find there.

“I’m going to destroy everything you love,” she threatened. “You so much as look at another woman and I’ll murder you and your entire Bratva.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“I have bigger balls than you do, you motherfucking—”

I wince and turn away. When I look back at the screen, I can see her hands on my face, trying to claw my eyes out.

I slapped her hands away and pinned her to the table by her throat. “Don’t make me do this, Marina,” I warned her. “You keep this up and I will end this marriage and throw you back to your father, like I should have done a long time ago.”

Her eyes widened. “You wouldn’t…”

“Watch me. The Ivanov connection is not worth this hell I have to live in every day. Seeing your face is not worth any amount of money or power.”

Her jaw went slack as she stared at me. That settled something for her. Maybe she realized I was truly beyond redemption.

I sighed and let go. Turned away.

Then she pulled a knife out of her boot leg and came at me with decisive intent. I turned back just in time to see the

weapon. Just in time to bat it out of her hand and pin her wrist to the table.

She screamed like a woman possessed. Now, as then, her words are unintelligible.

For the second time, I threw her hard onto the table and twisted her around so she was looking up at me.

“Stop it!” I yelled. “Fucking stop it, Marina!”

“I will never stop!” she screamed right back at me. “*I will never fucking stop!*”

And that’s when I lost it.

As I watch myself give in to the beast that was growing inside of me, I can remember perfectly how I felt. I can remember the turmoil and desperation that engulfed me when I realized that she wasn’t lying: she would never stop.

My hands wrapped around her neck and I started to squeeze. Her screams went flat. Her eyes bulged when she realized that I wasn’t going to stop, either.

I was going to fucking kill her.

“No... no...!”

She struggled, but I wasn’t going to let up. Even when she started flailing her arms around and shaking her head. Even when she started choking... I wasn’t going to stop.

Then she whispered something.

She managed to choke out a single word. You can’t hear it on the tape. It’s too soft and too strangled. But I remember the word I heard that forced me to back off.

Baby.

I released her in horror and took a few labored steps back. My face isn’t visible, but I remember being frozen with shock.

She supported herself on her elbows, pushing herself upright. Her fingers were shivering hard. “You want to kill me?” she croaked, the words soft but audible. “Then know you’ll be killing your unborn child, too.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m six weeks pregnant. Don’t you remember that drunken night about six weeks ago? We had a fight and it turned... ugly. Violent. And then... Do you remember?”

Her voice was croaky and labored, but she forced the words out as though her life depended on it. I suppose they did.

“What are you doing?”

This voice doesn’t come from the television or the past, but from behind me in the here and now. I turn and see Lev standing just inside the doorway.

I turn back to the screen and switch it off. “Nothing.”

“Jesus,” Lev says, moving in front of me and taking the small green armchair adjacent. “I thought you’d stopped torturing yourself with this shit. What do you get from watching it?”

“Closure.”

“If that were true, one watch would have been enough.”

I shake my head. “I just... needed to see it again.”

“You keep tapes of important meetings. This is not one of those. Let me destroy it.”

“No.”

“Why?” he asks.

“Because I’m not ready to destroy it yet.”

“But why?” He sounds almost desperate.

“That’s my business, Lev.”

He gives me a long-suffering sigh. “You know why I got on board with your strange fascination with the pretty chef? Because she distracted you from this self-inflicted torture. It seemed like you were moving on.”

“Maybe I am.”

Lev glances at the now-black screen. I can see both of our shadowy reflections staring back at me.

“Anton—”

“You want the truth, Lev?”

He nods. “That would be great.”

“Before Marina, I’d never experienced guilt. I haven’t felt it since, either. But when I think about her... I feel it. I feel guilty for—”

“Don’t,” Lev says, cutting me off. “We don’t need to go there, brother. It’s in the past now.”

“I should feel sorry,” I say, letting my innermost thoughts get the better of me. “I should feel terrible that she’s dead. But I don’t, Lev. All I feel is relieved.”

“I know, brother,” he sighs.

He speaks with the kind of understanding that can only come from someone who has stood in the eye of the storm. Who endured the chaos and the carnage and knows what it’s like.

“The problem is... I think other people know that, too.”

JESSA

I wake up feeling strange.

At first, I think it's all in my head, but my body definitely aches a little as I get into the shower. Nausea has settled in the pit of my stomach. Nausea and... excitement, maybe? I can't deny that I'm eager to go into work today. I'm excited about the possibility of seeing Anton.

I know so much and so little about him. I know that the darkest part of him is capable of murder, but... I also know there's more. So much more.

And I want to uncover all of it.

My skin tingles when I think about him. I keep replaying little moments from last night. As I get out of the shower, I remember the way his breath quickened in the seconds before he came. I remember the way he'd buried his face in the crook of my neck as he filled me again and again.

I'd been too involved in the aftermath of my own orgasm to pay much attention to what he was doing and experiencing, but I realize that I'd stowed away little gems tucked away under more dominant memories.

Once I've toweled myself off, I dress in a pair of black jeans I usually reserve for nights out with my friends. The shape is flattering and they're just slim enough to draw attention to my ass. I pair the jeans with a long-sleeved white shirt. It's seemingly modest, but it's skin-tight. I finish the look with my beige ankle boots and the tiniest bit of nude lip gloss to finish.

I know it looks like I've made an extra effort. Maybe too much of an effort. I certainly don't want to come off like I'm trying too hard—Anton will see that from a mile away. So, on my way out the door, I swipe the lip gloss off. It's overkill.

Then I grab my jacket and purse and head into the lion's den.

On the train, I check my phone and see messages from both Chris and Freya. It's amusing that they don't seem to like each other very much, because their texts are almost identical.

FREYA: *Hey girl, just wanted to check in and see how you were doing. Will you call me after your shift tonight? Let me know how things are going with the brooding hottie?*

Chris's message is slightly more serious. Just like he is.

CHRIS: *Hey J. Was worried about you all last night. Will you let me know how your day goes? Just want to make sure the jerk behaves himself.*

I smile while replying with smileys and thumbs up to both of them and then try to people-watch for the rest of my journey. But all I end up doing is thinking of him.

Gray eyes.

Sinful smile.

The kind of jawline that makes a woman go weak in the knees.

By the time I'm walking up the road that leads to Anton's incredible mansion, all I'm thinking about is what might happen during service tonight. Food be damned. I'm hungry for *him*.

Then my phone rings, pulling me back to reality.

"Hi, Chris," I say, picking up reluctantly.

"Hey. You there yet?"

"Not yet. It's a long commute."

"Will he be there today?"

I suppress a sigh. "Not really sure, Chris. He doesn't give me a rundown of his schedule."

“Just do me a favor and make sure you’re never alone with him.”

I frown. “Why?”

“Why?” he says incredulously, as though I’ve just asked the stupidest question on the planet. “Because he’s a freaking Bratva don, Jessa! That’s why. Christ, I feel like a broken record.”

“I’ve been alone with him plenty of times before, Chris.”

“It only takes one bad moment.”

“For what?” I ask, feeling slightly defensive all of a sudden.

“It takes one moment for what, Chris?”

He exhales in frustration. “I just want to make sure you’re safe.”

“I know that.”

“Then stop acting as though I’m the enemy,” he snaps.

I bristle at the accusation in his voice. This feels dangerously similar to our relationship after I told him I was engaged to Dane. The reason for our rift in the first place.

“I’m not.”

“Okay, then stop acting like I’m crazy for being worried. You’re willingly walking into this monster’s house.”

“And you know where I am,” I point out. “If I go missing, you can go to the cops.”

“I don’t want justice for you after you’re dead. I want to prevent you from dying in the first place,” he retorts.

I hear the phone beep as I’m speaking to Chris, and I realize I’m getting another call. I check to see who it is, and I feel a smidgen of relief when I see Freya’s name.

“Why do we think I’m dying today?” I can’t keep myself from asking.

“Seriously?”

“I have to go, Chris.”

“Just remember what we talked about last night. You need to figure out what happened with his wife. Maybe if you find out the truth, it’ll be easier for you to walk away.”

My gut sinks at the thought. It’s obvious Chris wholeheartedly believes that Anton murdered his wife in cold blood. He’s just waiting for me to figure it out for myself.

“Someone else is calling. I have to go.”

“Jess—”

“I’ll call you tonight when I’m back home.”

I end the call while he’s still talking and answer Freya. “Jessa?” she says.

“Hi, Freya,” I say as the black gates of Anton’s mansion come into view.

“How’s it going?”

“Fine. I’m heading into work.”

“Riiight... ‘work’,” she drawls.

“What is that tone?”

“Nothing,” she says. I can’t tell if she’s teasing me or if she’s as worried as Chris is. “Just wanted to make sure everything’s okay with you after last night.”

“Everything’s fine. Chris isn’t happy, but he... well, he isn’t happy,” I say, realizing there’s no way I can sugarcoat his reaction. Not that I need to.

“I’ll bet.”

“He does not have feelings for me, Freya.”

“No, you’re right. I think he’s just straight up in love with you,” she replies. “He’s way past the feelings stage. And I, for one, think you should go for it.”

“You don’t even like Chris.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t see how great the two of you will be together,” she says. “And at least you have a shot at a future with Chris. I mean, the don is hot and everything, but he’s not long-term.”

I wince. Why does it hurt so badly to hear her say that?

“Um, Freya, I should get going now.”

“Okay, just be careful, okay, sweetheart?”

“I always am.”

“Right,” she says. “Okay then. Bye.”

I can hear it in her voice. She wants to say something else to me, but she’s holding herself back.

“Freya?”

“Yes?” she says, jumping back into the conversation.

“What’s up? You sound weird.”

“Do I?” she asks a little too innocently.

“Yes. Is there something you’re not telling me?”

There are three seconds of silence on the other line before she finally speaks. “I’m just not a fan of telling my friends what they should and should not do. God knows I never appreciated it when my friends tried to advise me.”

“Are you trying to advise me?” I ask, mildly amused.

I make eye contact with the security guard inside the little box house beside the black gates. He nods and waves me through the side gate. The blacked-out golf cart is waiting to take me up to the entrance since the driveway is so damn long.

“Well...”

“Just say it, Freya.”

“I know we haven’t been friends for very long—”

“But we are friends,” I tell her. “So you can say what you need to say.”

“I just assumed that your feelings for this guy were superficial. Like, lust, you know? But it feels like you’re getting in deeper and deeper. That worries me.” She sighs. “I’ve known men like him my whole life, Jessa. They’re toxic. Everything they touch turns toxic, too. I would know. I was in an abusive relationship for the better part of two years.”

“He’s not abusive.”

“Not now. But he’s a powerful man. Men like him crave control. It’s only a matter of time, I guarantee it.”

Between my conversation with Chris and now Freya, doubts are creeping in. The excitement is fading, leaving dread in its wake.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I cringe at my own lame words. “I’ve got to go.”

“Be safe.”

She hangs up just as the golf cart stops in front of the main doors. I thank the security guard, who apparently speaks exclusively in monosyllabic grunts, and step out onto the driveway.

The home is magnificent. Fluted columns, gargoyles leering from the roof. Its bones are Gothic, but the huge planes of glass that break up the beige masonry give the whole place a modern feel.

I stare up at the gorgeous facade, wondering if he’s in there somewhere. Wondering if he’s waiting for me like I’m waiting for him.

But the feeling is tainted now. Freya and Chris are in my head, and I can’t shake the feeling that they’re both right. I can’t ignore my instincts for a pair of incredibly beautiful gray eyes. That’s not the kind of girl I want to be.

Not if I want to survive Anton Stepanov.

One foot in front of the other, girl, I tell myself. I head straight for the kitchen. I expect to find it empty, but when I walk in, there’s a maid wiping down the counters. She looks to be in her forties, maybe fifties. Brunette with a streak of gray, petite, pretty in an understated sort of way.

“Hi.”

She turns to me, looking extremely curious. “You must be the new chef.”

“Jessa,” I say, offering my hand to her. “And you are...?”

“Vinita,” she says.

“Nice to meet you, Vinita. How long have you worked here?”

“Seven years.”

I raise my eyebrows. She’ll have definitely met Anton’s wife, Marina.

Vinita immediately goes back to cleaning the counters and I wonder how to bring up the topic without making it obvious that I’m prying.

I decide to play the long game, take my time. I tell myself I’m not procrastinating. Going slow is strategy, not cowardice.

I go to the dressing room to drop off my bag and put on my “work” clothes. Which in this case, is essentially a t-shirt that I don’t mind getting dirty. It makes me feel even more ridiculous for picking out my outfit so carefully this morning.

When I walk back into the kitchen, Vinita is still there mopping the floors. “I didn’t expect you so early,” she says. “I only need another fifteen minutes.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” I say, realizing I need to make fast friends in order for this conversation to take off. “Can I help?”

She looks at me in surprise. “Sorry?”

“Can I help?” I repeat.

“Oh. That’s nice of you to offer, but it’s not necessary.”

“I really don’t mind,” I say. “Apparently, I don’t have breakfast to prep today, so I can take it easy this morning.”

“Why would you come in so early then?” she asks.

“I was told to.”

The message appeared on my phone last last night. It came from a number that wasn’t Anton’s.

Whoever sent me the message gave me no indication of who they were. Just that they managed affairs for Anton’s “estate,” as they put it, and I needed to come in early. I knew better than to ask questions.

“You sure I can’t help?” I press.

Vinita squints at me, gauging how serious I am. I give her back what I hope is a pleasant smile. “You could mop that side of the room,” she relents. “I have a second mop in the cupboard over there.”

“Consider it done.”

I head straight for it and pull out the second mop. It’s got a stainless steel handle. Even the cleaning equipment looks fancy as hell.

“You said you’ve been here seven years, right?” I ask as I get to mopping.

“That’s right.”

“You must like working for Anton, then.”

She gives me a strange look. “Mr. Stepanov,” she corrects pointedly. “He’s a good boss. But he keeps to himself.”

“Was his wife like that, too?”

I know it’s a bold and direct first attempt, but I figure she’s almost done with her side of the floor. I don’t have much time.

She stiffens instantly. Her spine goes straight as she turns to me. “Mrs. Stepanov was... different,” she says shortly, before turning her back on me.

She’s making it very clear that she wants to end the conversation, but I’m not sure I’ll get the opportunity to talk to another member of staff any time soon. Not without listening ears or watching eyes, at least.

“Different how?”

“I don’t talk about her.”

“Why is that?”

She turns to me with one raised eyebrow. “Because I don’t like to gossip about my employers.”

Ouch.

“I... Shoot, I’m sorry. I’m just curious. I want to know who I’m working for,” I say. Then I realize that sometimes, the best stories are the ones that have an element of honesty in them.

“I’ll level with you, Vinita,” I continue. “I was nervous taking this job. I’ve heard things about An—Mr. Stepanov. I just don’t know what to believe anymore.”

She stares at me for a long time. I fear I’ve already alienated her. Then she sighs. “You’re young. And he can be a charming man. He has never been anything other than cordial and polite to me.”

I nod, hoping Vinita’s words will give me some strength. I want to prove Chris and Freya wrong. I want to prove my own worst fears wrong.

“But I keep to myself, sweetheart,” she continues gently. “I keep my head down and do my work. Which is why I’ve lasted seven years. You want to do the same? You want to put food on the table and go home at the end of the day? Then I advise you to do what I do.”

She comes forward and takes the mop from my hand. Then she starts gathering up her things and placing them on the industrial-sized cleaning trolley.

“Vinita, whatever you tell me, I’m not going to repeat to anyone,” I say, making one last ditch attempt to get something useful out of her.

She stops at the kitchen door and turns back to me with a pinched look on her face. “Have you ever heard the expression, *‘There’s no smoke without fire’*?”

“Yes.”

“There you go then. Look hard enough and you might find flames.”

She nods and disappears down the hall, leaving me to ponder the expression. The nausea from this morning twists in my stomach, back with a vengeance.

As soon as she’s gone, I spin around and throw up right into the sparkling sink.

ANTON

“Everything good?” Yulian asks.

I slam the front door hard, rattling the windows on either side.

“I guess not,” Lev mumbles as I storm past him and my brother into the house.

They both fall into step behind me. I enter the foyer and make a left.

“Anton?”

“What?” I snap, glaring back at Lev.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“My office, obv—”

I realize I’m instinctively heading towards the kitchen.

Fuck.

I change direction and stride to my office. The door is locked. In my anger, it takes a minute to get it open. Which doesn’t exactly improve my mood.

“Is anyone gonna tell me what happened?” Yulian stage-whispers to Lev.

Wisely, Lev doesn’t answer. The three of us walk in and Lev closes the door behind us.

I ignore my desk and go straight for the armchair by the fire. It’s the only piece of furniture of my father’s that I kept. It reminds me of him—in that it’s a massive fucking pain in my ass. I sit down in it and raise my eyes to face Yulian and Lev.

I growl my explanation in one word. “Rodion.”

“Fuck. What did he do now?” Lev asks.

“He’s being passive aggressive as fuck, that’s what he’s doing,” I snap. “He’s pulling his capital on The Black Cat.”

Yulian frowns. “So we’re losing a ten million dollar investment?”

“That’s not my concern,” I say. “I can find the money elsewhere. My issue is the way this looks. Pulling his cash is another way of slowly peeling away his support. He’s feeding into the rumors that I murdered his daughter.”

“He gave you his support when he showed up at the dinner,” Yulian says.

“Late,” I point out. “He showed up late. If he had continued on like that, it might have been business as usual. But the more he withdraws from business with me, the more his allies will do the same.”

“I thought you said you don’t need his allies?” Yulian asks—rather smugly, in my opinion.

“I don’t. But I need to know if he’s going to retract his claws or if this is going to be an ongoing deal.”

“And if it is?” Yulian asks.

“Then it’s time to cut the Ivanovs loose.”

Yulian goes rigid with shock. “Are you serious?”

“I can’t have my businesses affected by his need for revenge. It doesn’t look good, and I don’t have the patience for it.”

“I thought he was going to be playing it safe?” Yulian asks. “That’s what you said.”

“He still is,” Lev points out. “Let me guess: his stated reason for pulling the investment was diplomatic?”

I nod. “He’s saying he hasn’t turned a profit this quarter. He’s not investing as much anywhere, not just with us.”

“Maybe that’s true?”

“Except it’s not,” I snap. “You don’t think I have men on that fucker watching his every move? I have someone on the inside. The Ivanovs are swimming in profits. It’s not a reason; it’s a lie.”

“The underworld won’t know that,” Yulian points out.

“Open your eyes, little brother. It doesn’t matter what the underworld knows. The point is, Ivanov’s allies will know. And if they’re coalescing—”

“They wouldn’t dare.”

“Why not?”

“Rodion doesn’t have anyone to hand the reins over to,” Yulian reminds me.

“He has a nephew,” I say. “Two, in fact.”

Yulian scoffs. “There’s no way. He might as well give it to the first guy he sees on the street with a friendly face.”

“The point is, the man believes I murdered his precious little princess. He’s not going to hand over his empire to me. In fact, I doubt he wants me to keep control of my own empire.”

“He’s not going to declare an all-out war on you, brother,” Yulian says somberly. “You’re too powerful. He knows that.”

“Does he? I’m not sure the old man is thinking straight.”

“Let me speak to him,” Yulian says suddenly.

I stop short. “You want to talk to Rodion Ivanov?”

“Why not?” he asks. “I may not know the man as well as you do. But I got along with his daughter a fuck-ton better than you did.”

“Only because you weren’t married to the bitch.”

“Whatever the reason, I can make him see sense. I can make him realize that his grief is clouding his judgment. I can make him see that crossing the Stepanov Bratva is not going to be in his best interests.”

I glance at Lev to see what he thinks about this. He seems intrigued, but I’m not convinced. “No offense, little brother,

but you lack subtlety.”

Annoyance flickers across his face. “You underestimate me.”

“Only because I know you.”

“Give me a chance and I’ll prove you wrong.”

“I’ll think about it,” I say. Mostly because I’m done discussing it.

I don’t want to engage Rodion’s misplaced anger, but if he keeps pushing me, I will. Maybe it’s the excuse I need to get the ball rolling on cutting ties with the Ivanovs.

That gets me thinking. “When is the signing for the new contract?” I ask.

“A week from now,” Lev says.

I nod. “Call Flemming. Tell him I’m interested in cutting a new deal.”

“What new deal?” Yulian asks.

“One that doesn’t involve the Ivanovs.”

“We’ve gone in on that deal with the Ivanovs for ten goddamn years,” my brother snaps.

I nod. “And it’s no longer necessary. I’m sick of tying my business interests with a lesser Bratva. It made sense when I was married to Marina. But it ends now.”

“If you push this, he will never name you as heir,” Yulian says through gritted teeth.

“I’ve told you before, I don’t give a fuck about his empire. I’ve built my own.”

“Jesus, are you hearing this?” Yulian turns to Lev for support.

He glances between the two of us and nods. “I... I think Anton has the right idea.”

“What?!”

“At least one other person here has some sense,” I drawl.

Lev looks at Yulian. “We don’t need to tie ourselves to the Ivanovs anymore. If Anton wishes to take it at all, he can do it

by force when the time is right.”

“Take the Ivanov Bratva?” Yulian asks, looking shocked by the very idea.

I shrug. “It’s been done before.”

Yulian stares at me for a moment and then a small smile flickers across his face. “You’ve got some balls on you, *sobrat*.”

“Always have.”

He relaxes slightly and falls back against the sofa. “This is going to be an interesting few months.”

“Lev, organize that meeting for me,” I tell him. “And while you’re at it, tell them to send in lunch. I’m fucking starving.”

Lev leaves and Yulian and I sit opposite one another, both lost in thought. Except that my brother rarely loses himself to anything, much less his own thoughts.

“Something bothering you, little brother?” I ask.

“I just remembered something.”

I know where he’s going with this. His long silences usually revolve around the same sore subject.

I sigh. “Do tell.”

“Papa used to tell me that you were going to be the greatest don there ever was.”

Nailed it, I think to myself. Out loud, I scoff. “You’re making that up.”

“Hand to my heart, it’s true.”

“You’ve never told me that before.”

“I didn’t want you getting a big head. But since that ship has already sailed, I’m telling you now.” I smirk and Yulian continues. “Every time you were in training, Papa would sit by me and tell me that. At one point, I really hated you. The golden child, the favorite son. I knew I would never make Papa as proud as you made him.”

“He was never proud of me,” I say gruffly.

“He never *told you* he was proud of you,” Yulian corrects. “But trust me, he was. He was proud before you ever did anything to be proud of. He knew you’d control the entire West Coast. And he was right.”

“I don’t control it completely.”

“But you’re on your way,” Yulian points out. “I just didn’t think you’d take it by force.”

“You disapprove?”

He frowns for a moment, considering. “Fuck no. I think you should do whatever you have to do to get whatever you want to get.”

I nod and lean in to clasp him on the shoulder. Just then, the door opens and Lev returns. Yulian scowls. “Way to ruin our brotherly moment, Lev.”

He smirks. “Sorry. Shall I leave you two alone to kiss and make up?”

I roll my eyes. “Is it all sorted?”

“The Flemming meeting has been moved. It will take place three days from now. Just our entourage and theirs. The Ivanovs will not be a part of it.”

“Great. Does that mean we can have lunch now?” Yulian complains.

“Jessa sends her apologies,” Lev adds. “Apparently, she was sick this morning, so lunch will be a little late.”

I get up immediately and walk past Lev. I hear one of them call after me, but I ignore it and keep going until I reach the kitchen. I find her sitting at the kitchen counter with her head cradled between her arms.

“Jessa?”

She jolts upright. “Shit. Sorry. I was just... taking a small break,” she says clearly flustered. “I’ve been a little off my game this morning.”

“What’s wrong?” I move forward and place the back of my hand against her forehead. She freezes at the contact, but I

ignore her reaction. “You’re burning up.”

“Don’t be melodramatic. It’s just a slight fever,” she says. “I checked my temperature earlier and it’s coming down.”

“You shouldn’t be on your feet.”

She’s got a couple of things bubbling over the stove, but the aroma suggests that nothing is quite finished. The countertops are especially messy, and she looks pale.

“I’m fine,” she says with determination. “Just give me an hour and I’ll—”

“You’re sick, Jessa,” I tell her firmly. “You need to be in bed.”

“What?” she gasps. “No. I have to finish lunch.”

“I can sort something else out for lunch,” I tell her impatiently. “You need to rest.”

“That’s... that’s nice of you to say, but I have to finish. This is my job and—”

I don’t let her finish. I scoop her up in my arms and carry her out of the kitchen. I know she’s sick because it takes her a second to figure out what’s happening.

“Anton, what the hell are you doing?”

“You don’t listen very well, do you?”

“Put me down,” she insists.

“I intend to.”

I head up the floating staircase that leads to the second floor. There are at least three guest bedrooms on this level, but I move past the landing and continue up to the third story.

“Where are you taking me?”

I don’t answer her. I just keep walking until I get to my bedroom. I kick the door open and walk in. The open windows flood the room in an ocean of bronze sun.

My bed is on a raised platform in the center that’s accessed by a single step. I carry her over to it and set her down on top of the perfectly fitted sheets. I slide them out from under her and tuck them around her shoulders.

“Is this your room?” she asks, glancing at the clothes strewn on the chair next to one of the windows. “I shouldn’t be here.”

“Just lie back and stop arguing. You’ll feel better once you stop talking.”

Despite how weak she seems, she still manages to throw me a glare laced with spirit. “Anton, this is really kind of you but...” She stops short, her expression twisting with discomfort.

“Jessa?”

“Oh God. I’m gonna be sick again...” She throws herself off the bed, a hand clapped over her mouth. “Bathroom?”

I gesture to the door on the far wall.

Nodding, Jessa careens around the corner of the bed, whacking her leg on the protruding frame. But she doesn’t even seem to notice as she sprints into the bathroom just in time to retch her guts out into what I hope is the toilet.

She must see me follow her out of the corner of her eyes because she raises her arm to keep me back. All I can see is the pale palm of her hand.

She shakes her head furiously as I move closer, but I just keep on coming. She’s working so hard to keep me back that she doesn’t have enough hands to hold back her hair.

I reach out and pull it back for her, getting it out of her face.

“Please... just... go...” she gasps between spasms.

Again, I ignore her. She doesn’t have time to protest because she starts retching again. She throws up a little bit more and then it’s nothing but dry heaves.

When even that settles, she flushes quickly and tries to straighten up.

“Calm down,” I tell her. “Take it slow. Do you want to end up with your head in the toilet again?”

She tries to brush away my hands, but I’m not ready to let her go yet. Not until I’m certain she’ll be steady on her feet.

I help her to the sink where she washes out her mouth and splashes some cold water on her face. I pull out a hand towel and hand it to her.

“Thank you,” she says softly.

“Feel better?”

She nods. “Sorry about that. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“It happens to the best of us.”

She gives me a searching look. “Somehow, I can’t imagine you sick.”

“I am still human,” I admit with a chuckle.

“Coulda fooled me,” she mumbles.

“Give me your hand.”

“I can walk just fine.”

“Don’t argue with me, Jessa.”

“Anton,” she says, giving me an incredulous once-over, “I’m a grown ass woman. Believe it or not, I have thrown up before and lived. I’ll live this time, too. I don’t need any help getting back to the room on my own.”

“Is this your way of getting me to carry you again?” I ask.
“Because it just might work.”

She sighs and takes my arm. With a self-satisfied smile, I lead her back into my bedroom.

I’m not quite sure why I brought her here of all places. Especially when there are perfectly good, perfectly vacant rooms in this mansion. Rooms that aren’t quite so... personal.

Not that I have a bunch of my things lying around. I’m not much of one for sentimentality. But this is the room where I sleep and shower and dress. There’s something to be said for bringing another person into your private space.

Jessa seems aware of this, too, because she walks through the room as though she’s scared to touch anything. In my opinion, it’s too late. Her scent has settled into the air already.

“I think I’m okay to go back downstairs and—” She breaks off when she sees the expression on my face.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I say firmly. “You’re in no position to go back to work. You need to lie down and wait until your strength is back up.” I point her towards the bed.

“This is completely unnecessary,” she complains with a pout. But she lets herself be led to the bed. Still, she doesn’t get in. “I’m not sure. Are you sure you don’t mind me being here?”

“I wouldn’t have brought you here if I minded.”

I realize that Jessa is the only woman I’ve ever brought to this room. Marina and I used to share a bedroom on the second floor when we were first married.

A few months later, the fractures in our relationship started to show, and I moved my things here. I’ve been here ever since.

Her hand trembles slightly, but I notice right away.

“Lie down.”

She gives a little defeated sigh and sits down on the very edge of the bed like she’s trying to take up the least amount of room possible. Rolling my eyes, I grab her feet and hoist them onto the bed.

I expect her to make a fuss, but she just lies there quietly and watches me. She still looks too pale. There’s a sallowness to her skin that I don’t like.

“Maybe I should get a doctor in to see you.”

“Like a house visit?” she asks. “If I don’t feel better soon, I’ll just take myself to the hospital.”

“We’ll see,” I say, not interested in arguing with her. “I’m going to go get you some lemonade. It’ll help with the nausea.”

“I’m the chef, remember?” she says. “There’s no one else to prepare it.”

I smirk. “If children can run lemonade stands, I think I can manage.”

She balks at me. “You’re going to make me lemonade?”

“Yes, I’m going to make you lemonade. I’m not a fucking genie, am I?”

“Seriously?”

“Why is that so shocking?”

“Because... I just... I don’t understand why you’re here,” she says finally. “Taking care of me, I mean.”

“Didn’t expect that from a cold-hearted murderer, did you?”

She blinks at me with her wide, innocent eyes. “Well... no.”

“There’s more to me than meets the eye.” I turn for the door. “I’ll be right back.”

JESSA

I have no idea what the hell is happening.

One minute, I was in the middle of making lunch. The next, I'm lying in Anton's bed while he goes to the kitchen to cook for me.

"The world has turned upside down," I mumble, turning my face into the pillow. It smells exactly like him, rich and warm. I want to sink into the sheets and never emerge, but I force myself to prop up against the headboard.

I'm already feeling slightly better, though I'm not sure if that's because my condition has improved or because Anton's attention is giving me a much-needed high.

As soon as he walks back into the room, I feel myself leaning towards the latter explanation.

"Here you go," he says, offering me a tall glass of lemonade.

"I should probably go."

He ignores me. "Drink it."

I do as he says, and I have to admit the tang of the lemonade does push back that queasy churn that's settled into the pit of my stomach.

"Not bad," I say, holding up the glass so I can take a closer look at the contents.

"Believe it or not, I know my way around a kitchen."

"Do you really?"

“Does that surprise you?”

“Of course it does. I mean, you don’t really strike me as the type who cooks. You hired me, after all.”

“Well, I haven’t had to cook for a while now,” he admits. “But when I was a child, I used to.”

“How come?”

He shrugs. “Our mother wasn’t around and our father worked constantly. Most of the time, it was just Yulian and me on our own. And sometimes, we used to break out of our rooms at night and go down to the kitchen. I’d cook. Yulian would mostly just be a nuisance.”

I smile at the image, but I can’t quite picture Anton as a little boy. “Those must be fond memories for you.”

He shrugs. “I don’t think about it much.”

“Why?”

“It was a long time ago.”

I squint at him, trying to figure out if he gets sentimental about anything in his life. But considering the state of his room, I’m guessing not.

It’s a beautiful room filled with beautiful furniture, beautiful clothes, beautiful views of the gardens. But it has the same impersonal spirit as a hotel room. Apart from a few clothes strewn about the floor, there are no personal items on the shelves or pictures hanging on the walls.

The only painting is a huge, black canvas with a splattering of red across the surface. It doesn’t exactly scream “happy inner sanctum.”

“Why wasn’t your mother around much when you were children?” I ask.

I’m not really expecting an answer. But apparently, my employer is in a talking mood. “She and my father divorced when Yulian and I were very young. She left shortly after. Her calls became less and less frequent as we got older.”

“Do you still keep in contact with her?”

“Not for some time now. I have Yulian deal with her when she calls.”

“Deal with her?” I repeat. “You make it sound like a chore.”

“It is a chore,” he says without mincing his words. “I don’t know who the woman is at all. She’s a stranger who calls us up when she wants something. Ten grand for a new nose, fifty grand for a new car, two hundred grand for a new house.”

I frown. “That can’t be easy.”

He looks puzzled by that. “It’s the easiest thing in the world. Throw money at the woman and she disappears into her life. Then I don’t have to see or speak to her for another few years.”

“She’s your mother,” I point out. “Surely, it hurts that she only stays in touch because she wants something?”

“Why should it? I never really knew her. I never even began to care.”

“I don’t know how you do it,” I admit. “My parents lived with me my entire life, but I’m still resentful of how absent they were when I was growing up.”

“Were they working?”

“Yeah, they both worked.”

“Then their absence was justified.”

“Not really. Even when they were around, they didn’t really make any attempt to spend quality time with me. Mom was always with friends she met at some charity or the other. Dad was the silent type. He preferred solitude to anyone else’s company. Even if I walked into the room and asked him a question, he’d grunt at me rather than having a conversation.”

“He was there for you when you were getting bullied,” he reminds me.

I raise my eyebrows. “You remember that, do you?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

I shrug. “Just... I’m never sure how much attention you’re paying me.”

“What does that mean?”

I regret saying anything now. I don’t know how to say this without it sounding weird. “I mean that my life is so boring compared to yours. And it would make sense if you didn’t care or bother to remember things I’ve told you.”

“Have you always had such a low opinion of yourself?”

“No, that’s not—”

My phone starts ringing and I grab it gratefully. Of course, the relief dies on my face when I notice that it’s Chris calling.

I put it on silent and turn the screen around, but I’m pretty sure that Anton has seen it already. “Um... it’s getting late, Anton. If I’m not cooking today, I should really get going.”

“You’re in no position to go anywhere,” he says firmly.

“I can’t stay here.”

“Why not?”

I look around the room, trying to find an excuse he would accept. “Well, because this is your home, for starters.”

“And?”

“And... it’s not appropriate.”

He raises his eyebrows and stares me down at me with those steely gray eyes. I can feel the blush coming on instantly. “Jessa, you realize we fucked last night, right? Right after you brought me dinner. Or was that something else you thought I ‘wouldn’t bother to remember’?”

I bite my bottom lip and try desperately to avoid his eyes. “I... that was... that shouldn’t have happened.”

“And yet it did. So, seeing as how that’s the case, I think you’re okay to sleep in my bed.” When I don’t say anything, he adds, “Just get a good night’s sleep. If you’re better in the morning, then you can get back to work.”

It sounds extremely logical when he says it like that. Impossible to argue. But I feel a little bit like an animal that's fallen into a trap. The only difference is that it's a really nice trap. The kind of trap that you want to nuzzle up and stay in.

Oh God.

I think about my promise to Chris, and I realize that apart from this morning, I've done nothing to try and uncover the truth about Marina's death.

And I feel even worse when I realize I don't feel guilty about it at all.

"Anton?"

"Hm?"

"I don't have any clothes here," I point out. "All my things are back at my apartment."

"Don't worry," he says. "I'll get you what you'll need for tonight. And then tomorrow, we'll sort something out."

I have no idea what that means, but I decide to just let it go for now. If I'm being honest, it has been a hassle making the commute from my apartment to the mansion, just like he warned it would be and I stubbornly refused to acknowledge. It makes for early days and late nights. It's just more reasonable for me to stay put, especially because I do feel tired and weak.

"I'll leave you to rest," Anton says as he exits the room.

The moment he's gone, I grab my phone. But I hesitate over the call button under Chris's name. I don't want to have to deal with the explanation.

So instead, I send him a vague text. *Hey Chris, super tired tonight. I'll call you tomorrow. I'm good, though. Everything's fine. Don't worry.*

I second-guess the wording for a full minute before I decide to send it anyway.

Then I respond to Freya's string of beer, wine glass, and martini emojis with a similar message asking for a rain check.

But two seconds after the message sends, she calls me.

Sighing, I pick up even though I'm in no mood for a conversation. "Hey."

"Where are you?" she asks.

"Cutting right to the chase, I see. Yeah, I'm good, thanks for asking. I'm still at work."

"Oh, late dinner shift?" she asks.

I feel bad lying, but it's easier this way. "Something like that."

"Well, I don't mind. I'll wait for you. Could really use a night out with my girlfriend."

I hesitate, wondering if I should just bite the bullet and tell her. I decide to stop being a coward and just do it.

"Actually, I won't be coming home tonight."

"Why not?"

"Well... I was feeling a little off today. Anton asked me to spend the night here."

"Where are you?" she snaps.

"I just told you."

"No, I mean, which room?" she asks. "Did he put you in his room or did you get one of the guest rooms?"

I raise my eyebrows, uncomfortable with her suggestive tone. "Um... the guest room," I say, but I don't sound the least bit convincing.

"No way. You're in his room?" The woman is far too astute to let anything past her.

"I didn't—"

"Oh, cut the shit, Jessa. Maybe I haven't known you long, but I know you pretty well. You're totally in his bedroom, aren't you?"

"Okay," I say with a sigh. "I am."

"Damn." But she says it like a curse. "Jessa, are you sure about this?"

“Nothing is going to happen, Freya. He’s just concerned about me. I really have been sick today.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. And in fact, he’s been amazing this whole time. He spent most of the day just taking care of me.”

“Really?” She sounds extremely surprised, which makes me feel far too smug.

“Yes. It’s weird but nice. He’s genuinely being so... kind. And patient.”

“Okay, that’s... interesting.”

“You sound weird.”

She sighs. “Only because I’m worried about you.”

“We’ve established that he’s being nice,” I remind her. “He’s not going to hurt me. You and Chris are starting to sound like broken records now.”

“We’re only concerned about your safety,” she says.

Instantly, I feel like a bitch. “I know, I’m sorry. I’m just... like I said, I’ve been sick all day. I think I just need to get some rest.”

“Of course,” Freya says. “I’ll let you get some sleep. But Jessa?”

“Yeah?”

“Promise me you’ll call me in the morning? Just so I know you’re okay?”

“Of course.”

We hang up, and I keep looking around the room. My thoughts spin, trying to find an ending to this story that doesn’t involve pain or heartache.

Both seem inevitable.

“Here you go,” Anton says, walking back into the room. He’s carrying a fluffy white robe, fresh towels, a new toothbrush, and some toothpaste. He places it all next to me on the bed. “Everything you need.”

“I still need clothes,” I point out.

“You can borrow some of mine tonight.” He walks to the door on the opposite side of the room and slides it open. Behind him is a walk-in closet complete with under-shelf lighting. He pulls out a pair of sweats with a drawstring around the middle and a well-worn t-shirt.

“You can sleep in these.” He hands them to me and then raises a brow. “Unless you’d rather sleep naked?”

He’s teasing me. Annoyingly, I like it.

That’s the thing about today—I like how attentive and caring he’s been. I like that he seems concerned, even protective of me. I like that we’ve spent hours together and it’s felt easy, it’s felt natural.

But it also makes me wonder why he’s doing all this. Why is he here at all when he can just leave me to the care of his household—or, more likely, kick me out to fend for myself?

I know the answer I’m hoping for, but I don’t want to indulge the thought too long. I don’t want it to turn into hope.

“Rest up,” he says before I can think of a reply, getting into bed next to me.

There’s at least a foot and a half between our bodies on the massive bed, but this feels extremely intimate. “You’re going to sleep in here with me?” I ask in surprise.

“This is *my* room, remember?”

“I could use another room, you know. You’ve got plenty.”

“Why would you do that?” he asks.

I want to ask him the same question. But I’m terrified of what the answer will be. So I close my eyes and let myself drift off.

But even my dreams are of him.

JESSA

When I wake up the next morning, Anton is gone.

But I can see the faint indent of his body. It's still warm to the touch, proof that he slept by my side the whole night.

Pathetically, I run my hand over the disappearing lines, wondering why I feel this sense of longing. I pry myself out of bed and slink into his bathroom to wash up.

The shower is the size of my entire bathroom back in the apartment. There's still water on the tile floor, so I know he's showered already. I rinse and then exchange his sweats for the same clothes I had on yesterday. They're a little worse for the wear, but beggars can't be choosers. I spritz myself with cologne from the countertop and hope it will cover the sick stench that clings to my shirt.

I head downstairs to the kitchen, hoping to draw no attention. But before I get there, I'm accosted by Lev.

"Morning," he says. "Feeling any better?"

I feel mostly fine, even though the queasiness still hasn't quite left me. "Yeah, more or less. I was just on my way to the kitchen."

"No need. Anton's waiting for you in the driveway."

"Who is doing what in the where?"

"He doesn't like to be kept waiting."

I throw him an annoyed glance. "Well, I didn't know he was waiting."

“Well, now, you do. Better hurry.”

I roll my eyes and make for the driveway. Sure enough, I find Anton sitting in the same red Ferrari he drove me home in, tapping his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel.

“What’s going on?” I ask. “I was just on my way to the kitchen to get breakfast ready.”

“I’m not going to be here for breakfast.”

My heart sinks a little. “Oh... okay. I’ll just—”

“Neither are you,” he adds. “We’re going out.”

“We are?”

He nods. “Get in.”

I hesitate only for a second before I get into the front seat. He hands me a glass bottle filled with lemonade. “Drink that.”

I take a small sip. “Anton, where are we going?”

“You need clothes, don’t you?” he says. “And no offense, but the ones you’ve got on aren’t exactly fit for polite company. Not really fit for dogs, either, if I’m being honest.”

“Okay, offense taken.” I squirm uncomfortably in my seat. “We wouldn’t have this problem if you’d just let me go home last night.”

“You’d have puked the whole way there.”

“I would have held it in. Or, you know, barf-bagged it or whatever.”

He snorts. “Brilliant plan.”

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye. He spent the entire evening yesterday taking care of me. Now, he’s taking me shopping?

This feels like an alternate reality. A reality in which a normal weekday involves me driving around on a shopping spree with the most beautiful man on the planet in the most obnoxiously sexy car.

But that’s the thing—it doesn’t feel like an obnoxious car when Anton is behind the wheel. It just feels *right*.

“You really don’t have to do this, Anton.”

“So you’d rather stay in those clothes all day?”

I look down at the stain that covers part of my left breast. It’s slight, but I can still catch the smell of my regurgitated breakfast wafting off of it.

“Okay, fine,” I concede. “If you make a left at the next corner, there’s a department store. I passed by it yesterday morning.”

He takes his eyes off the road just so he can glare at me.

“What?” I protest.

“Jesus,” he mutters.

“What?” I ask again, but I don’t get an answer until Anton turns onto—

“Rodeo Drive?” I splutter, gawking at him. “What the hell are you doing, Anton?”

“Now, *this* street has some decent choices,” he says.

“Are you high?” I demand. “There’s nothing on this street I can afford. I can’t even buy a belt here.”

“You’re working for me now. You can afford whatever you want.”

“Um, I beg to differ. And even if I could pay for the stuff here, I wouldn’t blow my cash on a five-thousand-dollar dress.”

He parks along the curb. “I’d never let you get away with buying something that cheap.”

“I don’t think you can park here,” I tell him, pointing at the sign a few feet away.

He just waves me off. “I can park anywhere I like.”

“What is this, like, diplomatic immunity or something?” I ask.

Anton smirks. “Something like that. Now, come on.”

He slams his door shut and walks into the nearest store. It has an actual bouncer standing out front. I’m not kidding, an honest-to-goodness bouncer. He’s wearing a suit and everything.

It makes me feel especially conspicuous in my ratty, worn clothes. But I'm left with no choice but to follow Anton inside.

The space is dimly lit and surprisingly sparse. There are barely any clothes on display. The few pieces I do see are draped around anemic mannequins in strange poses. Everything is various shades of neutral colors in alien fabrics.

I move closer to Anton, mostly because I'm pretty damn sure I'll be thrown out of here like yesterday's garbage if anyone thinks I'm not with him.

"Is it weird that I'm intimidated by the mannequins?" I whisper.

He snorts with laughter before turning to the saleswoman who is fast approaching.

She's wearing a figure-hugging, black wraparound dress, blood-red heels, and a rainbow of colorful beads around her neck. Her hair is styled in an intricate nest of braids on top of her head and her makeup is heavy but expertly applied.

"Carolina," Anton says with a cool, familiar smile.

"Anton!" she greets enthusiastically. "How wonderful to see you again. It's been a while."

"It has." He puts his hand on the small of my back and pushes me forward. "I'm here to get my friend fitted for a new wardrobe."

Friend? He could have said "employee," so I suppose "friend" is a step up. But considering we've had sex and woke up next to each other this morning, it feels like a demotion.

But I focus on something else that caught my attention.

"Excuse me, a whole new wardrobe?" I say incredulously. "I don't need a whole new wardrobe."

"And yet you're getting one," he says with a shrug. Then he just walks away. Of course, the immaculate Carolina falls into step next to him, which leaves me trailing behind them like a sad, half-starved puppy.

"Anton...!" I hiss. But again, he ignores me.

“Why don’t you both take a seat?” Carolina suggests, gesturing to a huge, curved sofa that faces the dressing rooms. “I’ll bring out some options for your ‘friend.’”

She turns to me and gives me the once-over. For a moment, I’m insulted until I realize she’s trying to determine my size.

“Give me a moment.”

She disappears into the cavernous store and I’m left standing there, staring slack-jawed at Anton, who is making himself comfortable on the curved sofa like it’s his own damn living room.

“What the hell is this?” I demand, placing myself right in front of him.

“Is that a trick question?”

“I will not let you dress me up like I’m your little Barbie doll.”

“I’m not dressing you up.” He points at Carolina’s retreating form. “She is.”

“I want to go somewhere else. Somewhere... normal. Affordable.”

He rolls his eyes. “That’s not an option.”

“Because you say it is?”

“Precisely. You’re starting to get it. Now, pipe down and enjoy this.”

“I can’t enjoy it.”

“Why not?” he asks innocently.

“Because... because I’m not going to spend thousands of dollars on one piece of clothing, that’s why!”

“Then you don’t have to. I will.”

I groan. “I can’t let you spend this much money on my clothes.”

“Jesus. You’re always looking for a fight, aren’t you?”

I’m so tired at this point that I plonk myself down beside him. He gives me a little smile that suggests he knows he’s slowly

wearing me down.

“You should have figured it out by now, Jessa,” he says. “I always get my way.”

I smile, but on the inside, my chest tightens. Is that a friendly little reminder? Or is it a serious warning? Had he said something similar to his wife before she died?

The crazy part is that, even as I worry, I hope and wish and pray that I can trust him. That what happened to Marina won't happen to me.

That there's a happy ending out there somewhere.

Even when I know that's foolish, I can't stop thinking it.

“Something wrong?” asks Anton.

I look away. “No. I was just wondering...”

“Yes?”

I want to ask about his wife. The question is on the tip of my tongue. But as his sexy gray eyes bore into mine, I change the question at the last minute. “Why are you doing all this for me?”

His usually confident expression turns baffled for a moment, and for the first time in as long as I can remember, Anton Stepanov falters. “I... I don't know.”

He glances away as if in pain and says nothing else.

A second later, Carolina is back with two more people in tow. The man and woman who accompany her are younger, but they're both runway-ready and effortlessly cool.

“This is Margie,” Carolina introduces. “And this is Niles. They'll be assisting me to assist you.” She gives a high-pitched little giggle and pulls out an ivory dress in a material I don't think I've ever seen before.

“It looks like it was made out of French butter,” I whisper.

“It's all about food with you, isn't it?” Anton chuckles.

I bite back a snort, mostly because it's unladylike and I don't want to embarrass myself in front of Ms. Fancy Pants and her

two sidekicks.

“What do you think?” Carolina asks.

“That is beautiful,” I admit. “But I don’t know where I’d wear it.”

“Dinner,” Anton suggests. “With me.”

I throw him a glare. “Unlikely.”

“Just try it on.”

“No.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose in exasperation. “Jessa.”

I cross my arms. “You can’t make me.”

“Care to bet?”

I gulp. Actually gulp. Because I can see it in his eyes—he will make me if he has to. “Fine,” I growl under my breath. “But only because *I* want to. Not because you told me to.”

He just smiles at my pathetic attempt to save face as I stand up, snatch the dress from Carolina, and march into one of the dressing rooms.

“Come out when you’ve put it on,” Anton orders me.

The commanding lilt of his voice sends a shiver running down my spine. The good kind of shiver. I ignore it as I remove my clothes and put on the dress.

It feels straight-up amazing. And it’s incredibly flattering as it falls over my hips. The neckline is so deep I have to take off my bra, but the dress is so structured I don’t really need to wear one anyway. Of course, that means I have a serious amount of side boob revealed.

Which I suppose is the point.

I run my hands over the A-line shape that hugs my waist before flowing into the midi skirt. I can’t lie—I feel like a million bucks. I guess that’s how you justify the price tag. Paying a couple thousand to feel like millions is a good deal, right? If you can afford it, that is.

After one more glance in the mirror, I take a deep breath and walk out of my dressing room. Anton hasn't moved from his spot on the couch. But Carolina has joined him there, legs crossed high to show a shimmering slice of bare thigh beneath the hem of her skirt. I'm only partly mollified by the fact that there's a conspicuous two-foot chasm between them.

"Hm," Anton murmurs, his eyes running up and down my body. His gaze is not professional at all. It's pure sex, like no one else can see us. "Perfect."

I'm not sure if he's talking about the dress itself or me. I choose to believe what I want to believe.

"It's nice," I mumble. "But like I said, I don't know where I would wear it."

"Leave that to me," Anton says immediately. "We'll take it."

"What?"

"There's a couple more things for you to try on," he says firmly, gesturing towards the sidekicks.

"Anton—"

"Do you really want to fight me on this, Jessa?" he asks. "You know what they say: pick your battles."

I guess this is as good a way as any to spend a work day. I shrug. "Alright then. Bring on the next."

He gives me an approving nod, and my stomach does this little flippy thing that hasn't happened since Tommy Lawrence smiled at me for the first time sophomore year.

I spend the next two hours trying one sexy dress after another. Only after I insist does Carolina bring out a few trousers, blouses and, by some miracle, a sweatshirt or two. Of course, even the sweatshirts are incredibly chic and luxurious. They make cashmere look like a potato sack.

At some point in the middle of my forced shopping spree, I actually start enjoying myself. I forget that I'm still a little nauseous and I throw myself into the fairytale.

Never forgetting that it is, in fact, a fairytale.

That fact becomes all too clear when Anton's phone rings.

"What?" he barks into his phone. He actually sounds like he's pissed that he's been interrupted. That has to mean he's enjoying himself, too, right?

"Say no," he growls in response to whoever's on the other end. "What the fuck does he think he's doing?"

His expression turns darker and darker, and I can feel the romantic day slipping further and further away.

I move surreptitiously into the dressing room, ready to change back into my own clothes, when I realize that they're gone. I stick my head out to find Carolina standing nearby.

"Carolina, where are my clothes?"

"Um, Anton requested that they be... disposed of, Ms. Jessa."

"Excuse me?"

Before I can throw a fit that I wasn't consulted about this, Anton's voice drowns out my protests. "I don't give a fuck!"

I glance at Carolina, who gives me a reassuring smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. "Here you go," she says, passing me the designer jeans and sweatshirt combo I earmarked half an hour ago.

I change into them quickly, but I can still hear Anton's conversation filtering into my dressing room.

"... When is he coming? I fucking know that, Yulian... I'll get there when I get there. He can wait."

I step out of the dressing room and make eye contact with Anton. His mood has changed drastically in just a matter of minutes. His expression is lethal as he gets to his feet.

"Let's go," he spits.

He moves past the sidekicks without waiting for me to answer. I have to run to keep up with him. He doesn't even make an attempt to pay before he slams out the doors.

"Anton... we have to—"

“Don’t worry, ma’am,” one of the sidekicks tells me as they hurry to catch the doors for us. “It’s all taken care of.”

I frown. “What... how?”

“Mr. Stepanov has a standing account here.”

Jesus. I hurry after him and get into the Ferrari before Anton can tear off without me. A few seconds longer and he might have done just that.

“Anton, what’s going on?” I finally pluck up the courage to ask.

“Nothing that concerns you,” he replies sharply.

I glance at him from the corner of my eye. He feels like a completely different person. Someone capable of all sorts of horrible things.

Like, oh, I dunno... murdering his wife.

The thought pushes into my consciousness and once it latches on, it refuses to leave. I sit there, fighting a growing sense of foreboding.

The moment we arrive back at the mansion, Anton is out of the car and moving into the house. I follow him in, but I have no sense of what’s expected of me anymore. *Are we still ‘friends’?* a little voice in the back of my head asks pathetically.

“Jessa.”

I flinch when he says my name.

“Go upstairs and rest,” he says.

Then, without further explanation, he turns and disappears down the hall.

I stand there, staring after him, wondering what the hell could have changed his mood so damn fast.

Sighing, I turn towards the stairs. But I linger at the bottom for some reason. And when I hear voices coming my way, I act on instinct. I duck into the first room I see.

I wait for the voices to pass, but then they stop outside the door.

“Fuck me,” I whisper desperately to myself as I look around the room in a panic.

I try to find another way out of here, but the only door is the one I just walked through. There’s just one place to hide—behind the large bar that takes up almost a quarter of the room.

I rush behind it just as the door opens and I hear the shuffling of feet. I get on my hands and knees and inch closer to the side opening of the bar. I’m low enough that I think I can see without being seen.

It brings back a strong sense of déjà vu. I remember the last time I peeked in on a meeting I was not supposed to be a part of.

And just like that, the nausea is back.

ANTON

I make him wait. The old fuck is severely overestimating how much I need him.

“Rodion is waiting for you in the bar room,” Yulian says as he approaches me from behind.

“Does this look like a friendly visit to you?”

Yulian sighs. “It doesn’t look good.”

“He forgets: he’s not my father-in-law anymore. What we once were means nothing to me.”

“Maybe it should,” he says in a small voice.

“You think I should bend over for him?” I turn on my brother so he can see the naked fury in my eyes.

“No, no, of course not. I’m just saying there’s no harm in giving him a little more leeway. Grief can do things to a man.”

“Only to a weak man.”

“He is Papa’s oldest friend,” Yulian says in a tone that suggests he knows exactly what he’s walking into. “That has to mean something, even now.”

“The fuck it does. Business and friendship don’t mix.”

“Papa had a plan—”

“And his plan was shot to hell the moment Marina and I got married. That wedding was the single worst mistake of my life.”

He sighs and drags a hand over his face. “Surely you had your moments with her?”

“Each one worse than the last,” I snarl. “I’m not interested in a lecture about peace and harmony, Yulian. That may be your vision, but it isn’t mine.”

“If you retaliate, it’ll get ugly.”

“I’ve got news for you: it already is. Now, let’s get this over with.”

“Wait. What about Jessa?”

“What about her?” I snap. In my head, though, I’ve already got her location marked. Nothing will harm her. I don’t think I’d be able to bear that kind of pain.

“Where is she?”

“Upstairs,” I say impatiently. “Resting.”

I push past Yulian, making sure he knows just how annoyed I am with him. When I get to the bar room, Lev is the only one of my men there.

Rodion is sitting on the sofa next to a man who looks vaguely familiar, though his name is a complete blank.

“Anton,” Rodion says without bothering to get up. “Thanks for having me on such short notice.”

I give him a tight smile. “Of course, Rodion. You know you’re always welcome.”

“Am I really?” he muses.

I sit down opposite him. Lev, of course, resumes his usual standing position just behind me. Yulian takes a seat between Rodion and me.

“Why would you even ask?”

“Because I got word about a deal that was made behind my back,” Rodion says. “At your behest.”

Behest. Jesus. He really does mean business.

“What deal would this be?”

“Come on, Anton.” Rodion rolls his eyes. I can just make out the frustration underneath his simpering smile. “You know what deal. Flemming.”

“What about him?”

For a second, Rodion looks unsure. “Are you denying that you cut a deal with him that purposefully excluded the Ivanovs?”

“We have historically gone in together,” I acknowledge. “But there’s no contract that states it’s legally binding.”

“Because it’s always been a show of good faith.”

“Good faith,” I murmur, just so that he can really let those words sink in. “What a concept.”

He’s trying hard to keep his expression light and polite, but I can see the twist in his eyes. His rage is one insult away from surfacing.

He decides to change tactics instead of addressing the issue of our splitting loyalties. “I’m sure you remember my nephew?” He gestures towards the pasty-faced fuck by his side.

“I can’t say that I do.”

The man looks at Rodion like he’s not sure whether to speak or keep his mouth shut.

“Does he really have Ivanov genes?” I ask.

Rodion glares at his nephew. “My sister’s son, Yaromir. He hasn’t had the training I would have liked. But he’s family.”

I wonder how long he’s been waiting to say that. The message is subtle but clear: I may have been his son-in-law, but since his daughter’s death, the title has lost its power.

A nephew, even an inept-looking one, is still better than a man who doesn’t have any Ivanov blood in his veins.

“Do you speak?” I ask, turning to the man.

He isn’t much younger than me if at all, but there’s a wide-eyed naivete to him that makes my lips curl. He’s untested, pliable, weak. Disgusting.

“I... I’m just here be-because my uncle asked me to be,” he says, tripping over his own tongue.

“What a good little puppy,” I say with a dark chuckle.

I can feel the tension rolling off of Lev. I know I’m pushing buttons now, but I can’t help it. Rodion really thought I’d be threatened by this dimwit? Give me a goddamn break.

“He’s my nephew, Anton,” Rodion says, displeasure evident in the clench of his jaw.

He doesn’t actually care about me insulting his nephew. It’s all about the symbiotic nature of respect. Give some to get some. I’m doing neither, and I couldn’t care less.

“And I married your daughter, Rodion,” I say. “I would have thought you’d have a little more ‘good faith’ in me.”

“I might, if certain rumors didn’t continue to circulate.”

“I thought we’d put this *fignya* to rest.”

“I thought we had, too,” he says. “But then you choose to make questionable decisions like sidelining my family. It makes me question your motives.”

“My motives have and always will be the same. I do what is best for the Stepanovs and nothing else.”

“And what about me?” Rodion asks. “As your ally and father-in-law, where do I stand?”

I raise my eyebrows. “I think that depends on you.”

I gaze at the old man, realizing suddenly that he reminds me of Marina. Not in the obvious ways, of course. Marina was loudly opinionated, prone to drama and hysterical outbursts. Rodion is the polar opposite in that regard.

But there is something in his eyes that reminds me of his daughter. A shifting darkness. I realize suddenly that I despise him for it.

“Me?” Rodion asks. “No, I don’t think so. This is all about you, Anton.”

“Rodion.” Yulian jumps in despite my annoyed glance. “What are we doing here? We’re all family—”

“Family?” Rodion asks, cutting him off. “Is that what we are?”

“Like it or not, Anton is your son-in-law.”

“Is that true if my daughter is dead?” he asks, his voice going flat and dark. “Is it still true if my son-in-law has been accused of murdering her?”

“Accused by whom?” I demand. “Do you have a name to give me?”

“Of course not. No one would dare make such an accusation publicly.”

“Then maybe they shouldn’t be making it at all,” Lev growls, speaking for the first time since I walked into the room. He’s usually the silent observer. Which means he only speaks up when he feels like he has no choice but to.

“Lev has a point,” I say, turning back to Rodion. “You’re really going to take the word of some faceless rat who’s too afraid to come to you directly?”

“He might be scared for his life.”

“That fear might be legitimate where I’m concerned,” I say. “But you? He could approach you directly. You would surely protect the man. Unless of course he isn’t confident in your abilities...?”

The old man rises to the bait. “I am the fucking don of the Ivanov Bratva. We have survived generations and we will survive generations more, only ever growing in power.”

Not exactly the most historically accurate story I’ve heard about the Ivanovs, but I’ll throw the man a bone.

And they say I’m not charitable.

“You are powerful, Rodion. I don’t dispute that. But you are not the most powerful Bratva in this country. In fact you’re not even the most powerful Bratva in this city.”

His eyes go wide. “Is that a challenge?”

“It needn’t be,” I say. “Should I remind you of the plan that was put in place the day I married Marina?”

“Fuck that plan!” Rodion says, losing control for a moment. “The plan was that you would keep my daughter alive. The plan was that she would be happy!”

I have to admit that I feel a grudging sense of respect for the old man. He loved his daughter. He wanted her to be safe and happy.

Except that he didn’t raise her to be the kind of woman who was easily satisfied. She wanted things that no one could give her.

And yet, if I had a daughter, wouldn’t I want to give her exactly the kind of life that Rodion had given Marina?

I think about the baby... the child I lost. The child Marina lost.

On the rare moments when I allow myself to go to that dark place inside me, I feel the loss so deeply that it fuels the regret I feel about Marina.

“Rodion,” I say in a measured tone, “you need to put this rumor to rest once and for all. If you give it attention, it’ll only get stronger.”

“Convince me then,” Rodion says harshly. “Convince me that you had nothing to do with her death.”

“We’ve been through this before.”

“Isn’t our alliance worth anything to you?” Rodion demands.

Lev and Yulian are standing on either side, flanking me. I step forward. “You want the absolute, no-holds-barred, pure fucking truth, Rodion?”

“That is precisely what I want.”

I nod. “Okay. Then—”

“Anton.” Lev hasn’t moved, but he’s tense.

Rodion turns his attention to him. “No, it’s time I know the truth. Let your don talk.”

Like anyone could fucking stop me.

“The truth is that Marina Ivanov was a spoiled, selfish, violent, narcissistic whore.” Rodion’s expression goes black with anger, but I keep talking anyway. “She was as ugly on the inside as she was beautiful on the outside. And I realized within weeks of our marriage that I could never love her. But as much havoc as she caused, as close to hell as she made my life, I did not kill her. I was relieved when I heard she was dead, but I did not kill her. What I was planning on doing... was divorcing her.”

The revelation hangs in the air for a moment as Rodion processes that. “You were going to divorce her?”

“Yes,” I say. “And I told her so myself. That’s what prompted her to commit suicide. Though, in all honesty, I agree with you: Marina was not the type to take her own life. Like I said, she was too egotistical for that. My theory is that she wanted to scare me. She wanted to punish me for our last fight. So she tried to attempt a suicide in the hopes it would get my attention. I don’t think she meant to actually go through with it.”

Rodion looks like he doesn’t know how to react to any of this. Both Lev and Yulian are on edge. The little puppy, Yaromir, who has the unfortunate disadvantage of being the only heir Rodion has left, looks like he’s about to shit himself.

I appear to be the only calm one in the room.

And why shouldn’t I be? I’ve been waiting a long time for this moment. I’ve been ready.

Slowly, Rodion stands. I don’t follow suit. I was ready for this meeting to be over half an hour ago. His hands tremble a little as he adjusts his coat.

“Yaromir,” he says, addressing his nephew. “We are finished here.”

The young man stands, but he keeps quite a distance between himself and his uncle. Apparently, he’s worried that anger might be catching.

“I have made a decision,” Rodion tells me with the kind of self-righteous flare that reminds me of his dead daughter.

“From this moment, I am breaking with the Stepanov Bratva. All our joint business ventures will be liquidated. All our current contracts will be dissolved. And all my money will be pushed into other Bratvas and mafias in the city that are in direct competition with you.”

“I have no issue with the first two decisions,” I tell him. “That is your prerogative. But the third is an open call to war.”

“So be it.”

I laugh in disbelief. “Have you gone fucking mad, old man? You really want to come at me like that?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“And who’s going to run your Bratva after you’re gone?”

He glances grudgingly at his nephew and I burst out laughing. Yaromir twitches visibly, his expression turning sour.

“This one?” I cackle. “I’ll chew him up and spit him out.”

“You’re underestimating the strength of my blood,” Rodion says fiercely.

“Yeah,” I say, pulling out my gun. “And you’re underestimating the strength of my anger.”

Then I point the gun at the old man’s face and pull the trigger.

His brains hit the white wall behind him. His body collapses seconds later. Yaromir stares at Rodion’s crumpled form, his eyes wide with shock. Even Yulian seems paralyzed by what I’ve just done.

Only Lev seems to understand. He moves to my side and nods. “I’ll get the clean-up team in here.”

I nod. “Yaromir?”

The man pivots to face me, still drenched in pale-faced horror.

“Congratulations. You are now the don of the Ivanov Bratva.”

“I... I...”

“There’s no need to speak,” I say. “I just have one question. What is your vision for the Ivanovs?”

“My... my... vision?”

“That’s right,” I say. “Your uncle just gave me a list of things he had in mind. Are you planning on seeing them through?”

Yaromir blinks twice. I wonder how long it’s going to take him to recover. My patience is already stretched then.

“I’d speak soon, if I were you,” Lev adds just before he leaves the room.

Yaromir swallows his fear and shakes his head. “I... I will continue the Ivanovs’ alliance with... with you.”

I smile and offer him my hand. “Welcome to the extended family, Yaromir. I’m sure you’ll fit in well. Your men will be waiting for you outside.”

“My... my men?”

“I suggest you compose yourself first,” I tell him. “And get your story straight. The men won’t follow a weakling.”

With those words, I hit him on the back and direct him towards the door.

Yulian stares after him until he disappears from sight. “Did you really just do that?”

“It would certainly seem so.”

“Papa’s oldest friend, Anton...”

“And now, they’re reunited once again,” I snarl. He keeps his eyes on me, but I’m not in the mood to justify my intentions today. “Leave me.”

He turns, his lips pressed tightly together, and exits. I walk over to the bar immediately.

I find Jessa crouched down low, trying to make herself as small as possible.

“Stand up,” I tell her.

She struggles to her feet, her eyes wide with terror. “You knew I was back here?”

“The whole time.”

“And... and you shot him anyway?”

“I don’t tolerate betrayal, Jessa. It’s good for you to know that, too.”

Her color is draining fast. I take a step towards her, but she backs away. “He... he was your father-in-law...”

“He had it coming.”

“Did she have it coming, too?” Jessa snaps. “Is that how you justified killing her?”

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

“I know that you’re a cold blooded killer who removes anyone who gets in your way. Just like you did with the man on the boat and with your father-in-law. Why not your wife, too?”

“I wouldn’t deny killing her if I’d done it.”

Her eyes are rife with fear and disappointment. She’s created a different narrative in her head. Probably some fairytale version of me that’s so far removed from reality that all it can give her now is heartbreak.

“You need to sit down.”

“Don’t touch me!” she snaps.

Her voice is strong, but it must have taken all of her energy to stand up to me. Because a second later, she starts to shake. She tries to grab the edge of the bar, but she loses her grip. I catch her before she hits the floor.

“Jessa!”

She stirs. Her breathing is strong, but clearly, she’s seen too much. Her body is shutting down to protect her mind. I lift her into my arms and carry her back to my room.

The whole time, her fingers stay curled around the front of my shirt.

ANTON

“Anton, what’s going on?” Lev asks before he’s even through the door. When he walks in and sees Jessa unconscious, his eyes widen.

“She was hiding behind the bar during our meeting with Rodion.”

“Fuck,” Lev growls. “Did you know?”

“I figured it out.”

“And you didn’t get her out of there?”

“I thought it was important she stay,” I say vaguely.

Lev sighs and then gestures to the bed. “Do you still think that?”

“Just get Dr. Spegal in here,” I growl. “She was sick yesterday. I’m sure this is residual exhaustion, but I want to make sure it’s nothing serious.”

“It’s probably just shock,” Lev says dismissively.

“I didn’t ask for your medical opinion, *sobrat*. I want the doctor in here within the hour.”

He nods respectfully. “I’ll get on it.”

I know I should be downstairs talking to my men, preparing for the possible fallout of taking a major player off the board in such sudden and violent fashion. But I can’t bring myself to leave Jessa’s side.

“Anton...”

Yulian's voice comes from behind me. I hear his frustration, but surely he's not going to be stupid enough to question me about my preoccupation with Jessa right now. Surely not.

"Is she okay?"

"I don't know yet. She fainted."

"Understandable. This isn't her world."

I turn to him. "Is there something you want to say, brother?"

"I was with Yaromir just now when he addressed the men who accompanied Rodion here."

"And?"

He shakes his head. "They were pissed. And shocked. Obviously."

"And did Yaromir bring them into line or not?" I'm really not in the mood to kill anyone else tonight, so hopefully Rodion's incompetent nephew can do at least one thing right.

"Yaromir's speech was reasonably convincing," Yulian admits. "They'll follow him for now."

"Until they find a better option," I say.

"Am I right in guessing that the better option is likely to be you?"

I nod. "I never do anything without a fucking reason, Yulian. Remember that."

He sighs and runs a frustrated hand through this hair. "Why are you here?" he asks abruptly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you should have been down there observing Yaromir with the Ivanov men," he says. "But instead, I find you here. With her."

I glare at him. "If you have something to say, just say it, Yulian."

"I thought this girl was just a distraction," he says. "I didn't think she meant so much to you."

Yeah... neither did I.

“The fact that I’m here doesn’t mean anything. You and Lev are more than capable of handling the Ivanovs on your own.”

“Jesus, brother. Come on,” he spits. “I may not be you, but I’m not stupid, either. This girl... you care about her.”

“Is that a question or an accusation?”

“Admit it, Anton.”

I glance at Jessa’s face. Her eyelashes flutter softly. She’s pale, but she looks beautiful. My chest throbs with something like pain, but not quite. Like sticking a fork in a socket. A full-body throb of sensation without a name.

I push back the stab of guilt and turn to my brother. “I don’t know what this is yet.”

“Really? Because I think I do.”

“You can leave now,” I snap. “Send the doctor in the moment he gets here.”

Yulian nods and leaves me without another word.

I sit alone with Jessa, wondering what the fuck I’m doing with her at all. Yulian is right—I should have been down there, observing the atmosphere when the Ivanov men were told their don was dead.

Killed at the hands of his own son-in-law.

But the idea of leaving Jessa’s side... it felt wrong. Still does. Like someone is pulling me in the wrong direction. Leaving Jessa’s side now reminds me of the same feeling I had on my wedding day.

“Excuse me?”

I stand up as the doctor enters. Spegal is a short, balding man with a sour expression that doesn’t inspire a lot of trust. And yet, over the years, he’s been the most loyal and reliable of the Bratva doctors my father retained. The man is pushing seventy now, but he’s as sharp as ever. I move aside so he can examine her.

“What happened?” Spegal asks, setting his bag down on the floor and moving to the bed.

“Shock,” I say. “But she was sick yesterday. Could be related.”

Dr. Spegal leans over Jessa and checks her vitals. Then he brings out the stethoscope. At one point, he raises her blouse and starts pushing his fingers into the side of her stomach.

I frown, the sudden surge of displeasure tainting my eyes with red spots. I’m glad that Spegal is an older man. And I happen to know he’s a family man to boot. That’s the only thing stopping me from grabbing him by the collar and dragging him away from my woman.

I stiffen. *My woman.* The thought is like a bucket of cold water dumped down my back.

I can’t deny I’ve felt protective over Jessa in the past. But this is different. It’s possessive, in a way I’ve never felt before.

“Well?” I ask, mostly to distract myself from the conflict roiling inside me. “What is it?”

“I can’t say anything definitive right now,” he says, turning to me. “I can do a more thorough checkup when she’s awake.”

“How long will that be?”

“Hard to say. You said it was shock that caused her to faint?” he asks.

“I shot someone in front of her,” I admit.

“That’ll do it,” he says, though there’s no inflection in his tone. He might as well be talking about the weather. Bratva doctors are a hardy, trustworthy bunch.

“But I’m thinking this is because she’s been sick,” I say.

“What makes you say that?”

“She’s seen me kill before.”

The doctor frowns. “Is she usually around for that kind of thing?”

“Not usually. But she has a bad habit of eavesdropping.”

Dr. Spegal raises his brows like he perfectly understands my plight. Then he looks back down at Jessa. “You said she fell sick yesterday?”

I nod. “She seemed better this morning.”

“What were her symptoms?”

“Fatigue, dizziness, nausea.”

“Hmm.” The doctor turns back to Jessa and observes her with a thoughtful expression on his face. Then he leans in again and starts touching her stomach once more.

My hands clench into fists. “Is there a reason you keep doing that?”

He gives me an amused glance as if he knows exactly what I’m thinking. “Just trying to determine whether...”

He loses track of his sentence as he concentrates on her stomach.

“Is this how you get your rocks off, Spegal? I’m losing patience,” I growl.

“She’s a beautiful girl, Anton,” he tells me with a wry mirth. “But she’s about thirty years too young for me.”

Goddammit. Apparently, I’m that fucking transparent.

“You wouldn’t happen to know when her last period was, would you?” he asks.

It takes a full three seconds before those words compute. “Excuse me?”

“She might be pregnant,” he says.

I shake my head immediately. “She’s not pregnant.”

“So you haven’t had sex with her?” he asks, a knowing smile pulling on his usually dour expression.

“I... well...”

The man laughs. “This may be the first time I’ve seen you lost for words. And I’ve known you since you were a boy.”

I stare at Jessa. Her stomach is flat. I can see the thin definition of her abs. “She can’t be pregnant.”

“Did you use protection?” Doctor Spegal asks me. I stiffen and he adds, “Even if you did, it’s not always one hundred percent effective.”

I move closer to Jessa, pondering the possibility that she may be pregnant. If she is... that would change everything. I would have a second chance at being a father.

Maybe Jessa isn’t the only one holding out for a fairytale.

“Anton?”

I turn to the doctor with a distracted expression. “Yeah?”

“There’s no point staying here with your mouth hanging open. Go and get some fresh air. I’ve got her.”

“That better not be a euphemism.”

He snorts. “Just go.”

As much as I don’t want to leave, I need a second to think. To process. But even when I find myself in the dark comfort of my office, I can’t seem to get my thoughts together.

A baby. *My* baby.

It’s not just the pull of fatherhood that has me flustered. It’s the possibility of fatherhood *with Jessa*.

The mother-to-be had been the only needle in my side the last time this happened. The realization that I would have to raise a child with Marina was poisonous. It soured the joy I felt.

But this time? If this baby is real... I can’t find a single reason not to be euphoric.

“Anton?” Lev steps through and clicks the door to my office room shut. “You okay?”

“Not sure,” I mutter, eyes downcast.

“That’s surprising. I thought you’d be ecstatic to finally be rid of the old fuck. One bullet and you basically obliterated the Ivanov Bratva.”

“I’m not talking about Rodion.”

Lev frowns. “Then what—”

“Jessa.”

“What about her?”

“She might be pregnant.”

Saying it makes it real. Seeing Lev’s expression makes it real, too.

“Are you serious?” he asks.

“According to Spegal, yeah.”

He drags a hand down his face. “Jesus, man. Haven’t you ever heard of a condom?”

“I wanted to be in her without one. Anyway, I assumed she was on the pill.” I shrug. I’d given her plenty of opportunity to tell me to stop.

“You assumed?” Lev scoffs, sounding more and more incredulous. “You mean you didn’t make sure? That’s unlike you.”

“I didn’t think I would see her again after that first night on the boat. I didn’t think that far ahead.”

“You mean you didn’t think at all.”

“I just wanted her,” I say without thinking. Maybe I should be embarrassed, but I’m not. Wanting Jessa feels as natural as breathing. Back then, now, and at every moment in between. “Everything else paled in comparison.”

It’s Lev expression that tips me off to how fucking insane I sound right now. I fall silent, brooding.

“How do you feel about this news?” he asks after a long pause.

I don’t even have to think about it. “I want this baby to be real.”

“You wanted the last one, too... even with Marina.”

The last one. I run a hand over my face before I make eye contact with Lev. “I still think about the child. The one I...”

“Anton.”

I say it anyway. “The one I killed.”

“Stop,” Lev growls vehemently. “Marina miscarried. It happens.”

“I might have believed that if it happened in isolation,” I point out. “But it didn’t. She miscarried two days after that meeting. The one where I tried to strangle her to death.”

“You didn’t, though.”

“Because she managed to choke out that she was pregnant. And even then, I thought she was lying. I thought she was manipulating me.”

“She was the girl who cried wolf,” Lev says. “Of course you didn’t believe her.”

“I would have killed her that day,” I admit.

Lev laughs like I’m joking. When he sees my face, he stops short. “Listen, man... if this is going to turn into a confession, I don’t really want to hear it.”

I stare at Lev, the person who I consider a brother. The man I consider my closest friend and confidant. If I were going to confess anything, it would be to him.

“What do you think I’m confessing to, Lev?” I ask quietly.

He studies my face, searching for the answer before I can give it to him. “I honestly don’t know, brother. All I can say is that it won’t make a difference to me.”

I smile sourly. “No confession from me today. Just an acknowledgement of what you already know I’ve done.”

“It was a bad fight,” Lev says gently. “You were both pissed and emotional. She miscarried. Stuff like that happens. It was not your fault.”

“It feels like my fault. Divine fucking retribution. But worse than that, I feel guilty for all the things I felt right after it happened. Relieved. Unburdened. Set free.”

“Brother,” Lev says, with a tired sigh, “you’re only human. It’s a normal reaction to have.”

“Is it?” I ask. “Feeling relieved that your wife miscarried your baby?”

“She was also the one who emptied a million-dollar-wine cellar on your bed and tried to light a match,” he drawls. “Thank God she didn’t know wine isn’t flammable.”

I grimace. “Should have told Rodion that little tidbit before I blew his brains out,” I mutter. “Thinks his precious little girl was so fucking innocent.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered what you told him,” Lev points out. “He wouldn’t have believed you, anyway.”

I nod. “True enough.”

“You know it’s over, right?” he asks. “More or less. Yaromir isn’t going to move against you, especially after today. You’ve got his balls in a vise grip.”

“I know.”

“You’re a free man. From Marina. From her father. You’ve got the clean slate you’ve always wanted.”

“You trying to tell me something?”

“I’m trying to say that maybe you can start over,” he suggests. “With a woman you actually care about.”

I raise my eyebrows, wondering for the first time what a future with Jessa might look like. The moment I think about it, it feels inevitable.

What is my other option? To let her walk out of my life? That was never gonna happen, whether she was carrying my baby or not. She belongs to me now—forever.

“Is a fresh start even possible for someone like me?” I murmur, thinking out loud.

Lev chuckles under his breath. “You’re the one who keeps saying that anything is possible for you. Time to prove it.”

JESSA

“Who are you?” I rasp.

The man standing over me is old and balding, which helps my nerves. But not by much. Especially since he’s got something pressed against my stomach.

It’s cold. Which is what woke me up in the first place.

“What’s your name?” he asks instead of answering my question.

“Excuse me?”

“Your name, dear,” he asks again, softening his tone. “Can you remember it?”

“Of course I can,” I snap. “It’s Jessa Gilmore.”

“And do you remember what happened just before you fainted?”

I open my mouth to respond, but then realize... I actually can’t remember what happened. My mind is fuzzy, the memories just out of reach.

The man must read the confusion on my face, because he starts to say, “It’s okay. This is all perfectly normal after—”

“Where’s Anton?” I ask, trying to wriggle away from the man’s grasp.

My body feels heavy, sluggish. But I don’t feel any pain. Well, not pain, exactly. Just discomfort from the cold instrument that I can still feel at my side.

“What is that thing?” I demand. “What are you checking for?”

“When was your last period?” the man asks with a grim professionalism.

I frown and cross my arms. “That is a very personal question.”

“I’m a doctor.”

“I don’t care. You’re not my doctor,” I snap. “Where the hell is Anton?”

“Right here,” Anton says, striding through the door. His eyes meet mine and I feel an immediate sense of calm engulf me.

“Dr. Spegal, can you give us a minute?”

“Of course, sir.”

The balding man leaves and Anton sits down on the edge of my bed. His hand is inches from mine. The instinct to reach out and touch him is something I have to physically suppress.

“How are you?”

“Not sure,” I admit. “I woke up in your room with no recollection of how I got here.”

“You fainted.”

I frown. “Oh.”

“Do you remember why?”

“The old guy asked me the same question,” I say. “Who is he?”

“A Bratva doctor. He’s been working with my family for two generations.”

“Oh. Okay.” I look up at him. He’s watching me carefully, like he’s concerned. But there’s something else there that I can’t quite put my finger on.

“Are you gonna tell me what happened?” I ask.

The moment I ask the question, I feel a strange sense of déjà vu. Like I’ve been here before. Not long ago. Then there’s a flash of something. A memory.

“Wait... I was in a room...”

“The bar,” he offers me.

I frown, feeling an oncoming sense of dread. “Do I even want to remember what happened?”

He sighs. “Listen—”

Maybe it’s his voice. Maybe it’s the expression on his face. Whatever it is, it triggers something.

I hear the gunshot in my memory.

I see another body hit the ground.

Another man left dead in Anton Stepanov’s wake.

“Oh, God...”

“Jessa.”

“You killed him,” I gasp. “Your own father-in-law.”

“He was asking for war. I gave him what he wanted,” Anton says grimly.

I shake my head to dislodge the remaining images. The tense, twisting conversation that preceded the murder. The shock on the pale boy’s face. More horrible memories to suppress. As if I didn’t have enough of those already.

“How could you?”

“It had to be done, Jessa. This is the underworld. We live by different rules here. I ended this war before it started.”

“Are you trying to say you saved lives today?” I spit, cringing away from him even though he’s made no attempt to touch me.

“I don’t expect you to understand. You are not from this world.”

“And I’m glad about that. I wouldn’t want to be a part of your life. Not for anything.”

The silence feels oppressive. Anton stares at me, and I wonder if I’ve succeeded in hurting him.

“Does that really surprise you?” I scoff.

His gray eyes are watchful, pinned on me. “It might... if I believed you.”

“Why would I lie?”

“People lie to themselves all the time.”

“And what exactly am I lying to myself about?”

He cocks his head to the side. At the same time, I realize he’s touching my hand. His fingers brush against my knuckles, and I feel an involuntary warmth spread through my body.

“How you feel about me,” he murmurs.

I tense under his hand and of course he feels it. But he doesn’t comment. He just continues to stare at me with those intense gray eyes.

“I don’t feel anything for you,” I snap.

“And there’s the lie.”

I pull my hand out from under his grasp. “I... I *can’t* feel anything for you,” I clarify. “I won’t.”

“And why is that?”

“Because of who you are. Because of what you’ve done.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“It’s reason enough!” I snap. “You’ve killed two men right in front of me. One used to be your father-in-law.”

“And what about that frightens you the most?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I ask.

“Pretend it’s not and tell me anyway.”

How can he be so calm? I wonder. He’s looking at me like I’m the problem that needs solving.

“You killed your wife!” I blurt out clumsily.

He doesn’t seem bothered by the accusation. Just shakes his head sadly. “I did not.”

“You’re still sticking to that story?”

“It’s not a story; it’s the truth,” he says. “Why would I lie?”

“Because people lie to themselves all the time,” I say, parroting his words back to him.

His mouth tips in a barely decipherable smirk. “I’m not most people.”

I groan. “Okay, then you’re lying to try and convince me that you’re not the kind of man that you so clearly are.”

He snorts. “I don’t waste my time pretending to be someone I’m not. If I had killed Marina, then I would say so.”

“Despite the war it would have created with your father-in-law?”

“I’m not scared of a war. I’m not scared of the things I can control.”

“You can’t control everything, Anton,” I tell him softly. “You can’t control me.”

His eyes soften somewhat. “I’m not trying to, Jessa. Which is why I’m going to tell you the truth.”

An alarm bell sounds in my head. “So you haven’t told me the truth?”

“I meant I’m going to tell you the *whole* truth. About Marina and me.”

This is what I want. At least, it’s what I thought I wanted. But now, faced with his willingness to share his past with me, I’m scared.

But there’s no going back now.

So I swallow hard, summon up all my bravery, and rasp, “Tell me.”

His eyes flash silver, like a pair of full moons on some alien planet. “You know how we ended up together,” he says. “It was a marriage of convenience. Both our fathers planned the thing when we were still teenagers. I’d resigned myself to the fact that I was marrying Marina. I assumed it would be easy enough. She was an attractive woman; she understood my life. On paper, it was perfect.”

Even knowing how Anton feels about Marina now, jealousy swirls inside of me. I squash it down. She's dead. What's there to be jealous of?

"Then we got married and I realized how naïve I'd been." Anton shakes his head. "She had a temper. She was controlling and possessive and prone to fits of jealousy. If a woman so much as looked at me, she would fly off the handle. She went ballistic with a maid one day because she walked in and found us talking in the garden."

"Did she have anything to be worried about?" I ask.

Do I have anything to be worried about? feels like the more accurate question. The amount of women who must want him, who must throw themselves at him...

"No, and it didn't matter regardless. I didn't consider ours a real marriage. From day one, it was forced, unnatural, and filled with mines I needed to avoid. I lived my life and she lived hers."

"Is that a decision you made alone?"

"I tried to do it differently in the beginning," he tells me. "I tried to live as husband and wife. I took her out for fancy dinners. Bought her lavish presents. Gave her anything she could possibly think to ask for. But nothing was enough for her. She resented my absences. She hated that my staff answered to me first. She questioned my every move and decision. I wasn't sure if her goal was to make me hate her or to try to control me. Either way, she only got one out of two."

"Was she that bad?" I hear myself asking, leaning into his story.

"I didn't think so. Then I found the maid's body in the dumpster."

I recoil in horror. "How did you find out it was her?"

He looks like he doesn't want to say. For my sake, I'm sure. Given what I've seen him do, I know Anton doesn't have a weak stomach. "Her name was carved into the poor woman's forehead."

I feel like I might puke or faint again. Maybe both. “Oh my God...”

“After that, I warned Marina to stay the fuck away from me. She just took my anger to mean that I was fucking the maid and was heartbroken over losing her.”

“Were you?”

“My heart doesn’t break so easily, Jessa. It wouldn’t matter either way, but I never laid a finger on that woman,” he says. “That was the last straw, though. I decided then that I had to divorce her. She would do nothing but bring me down and cost me allies and followers.”

He falls silent for a moment. I have to resist the urge to reach out and touch him, to comfort him. To be there for him the way I want to be.

“There was a particularly bad incident days after the maid’s body was found. I was in an important meeting. She decided to crash it and make a scene. Things got... bad.”

“Bad how?”

He shakes his head, clearly not willing to give me details. “That was the day she told me she was pregnant.”

I gasp. “She was *pregnant*?”

“She miscarried a few days later. But yes, at the time, she was pregnant.”

“Did she blame you?”

“I blamed myself, too,” he says without shying away from the guilt. “But still, I saw the miscarriage for the blessing it was. I couldn’t raise a child with Marina. Fuck, if the child were to have a shot at an even halfway normal life, then he or she couldn’t have Marina as their mother.”

“Maybe motherhood would have calmed her down.”

He snorts. “No, it would have sent her over the deep end. The woman was not all there.”

“Did you ever try to get her help?”

“The mere mention of it would throw her into one of her episodes. She would break things, smash things, hit walls. She treated the staff like they were her personal punching bags. It’s no coincidence that we lost employees in droves when Marina was the mistress of this house.”

I shake my head, trying to imagine the person capable of throwing Anton’s life into chaos.

“You wanted the truth, Jessa,” he says, taking my hand boldly this time. “This is the truth. After she miscarried, I waited until she had recovered and then I went to her bedroom. I told her to pack her things and leave, because I was going through with the divorce.”

“How did she take that?”

“About as well as I expected. She destroyed her own room and tried to set the curtains on fire. I had Dr. Spegal sedate her. When she came to, she seemed calmer. She told me she would leave.”

“Did she?”

“The next day.” He nods. “And three days after that, she was dead.”

I shudder. “You think she committed suicide because you were divorcing her?”

“No. I think she was trying to scare me. But something went wrong and she ended up killing herself instead.”

“You don’t think she really wanted to die?”

“Not for a second,” he growls.

“Why?”

“She was too egotistical. She’d sooner kill me than kill herself. She was just hoping I’d feel bad about her attempt and take her back.”

“How did you find out she was dead?”

“She sent a note,” he tells me. “Asked me to meet her at the Grand Centrale Hotel in the city. Room Twenty, I remember. I

wasn't prepared to deal with her fucking nonsense, so I sent Yulian instead.”

“And?”

“And he found her right where she said she'd be. But not in the state he expected.”

“What happened after that?”

“Yulian disposed of her body and we buried her in memoriam the next day.”

He says it as though the story ends there. But I can see from his face that Marina's ghost is still here, clinging to every facet of his life. Haunting him. Ravaging his mind, his soul.

And just like that, I find myself leaning into him. I don't even think about the kiss—I just do it.

Our lips touch and, in an instant, the kiss is hungry. He grips my jaw and I curl my fingers in the hair at the back of his neck. I pull back only because I need to gasp for air.

“Does that mean you believe me?” he asks.

“Right now, I do,” I admit. “Ask me again tomorrow.”

He cups the side of my face with his palm. “I was going to divorce her, Jessa. Killing her was unnecessary. I can understand why you would have trouble believing me, but I'm not lying to you.”

Tears well in my eyes. “I think I know that now.”

“Is that why you didn't tell me?” he asks.

I frown. “Tell you what?”

“About the baby.”

“Did I hit my head when I fainted?” I tease, chuckling nervously. “What baby?” He stares at me for a moment, and I get the feeling that I'm leagues behind him right now. “Anton... what baby are you talking about?”

Anton smooths his thumb over my cheek and then reaches down to grab my hand. “Jessa... the doctor that was in here before examined you...”

“What about him?”

He takes a deep breath. “He said you’re pregnant.”

“No, I’m not,” I say instantly. “I just had my period back in...”

When? When was my last period?

I made sure to schedule the wedding in the middle of my cycle. Dane didn’t want me to be on my period during the honeymoon. So I should’ve had it roughly two weeks after the wedding.

Except...

Fear curdles in my stomach, a wave of nausea washing over me.

Nausea. Fatigue.

I swipe at the tears rolling down my cheeks.

Emotional.

Check, check, and check.

I can feel my expression twist. Disbelief. Denial. Shock.

“Oh my God...” I breathe.

I’m pregnant.

JESSA

“When was your last period?” Anton asks.

I look down at my flat stomach like the answers to all the questions swirling in my head might be written there. But there’s nothing. No outward sign of what’s going on inside my body.

“The doctor asked me that, too.” It makes sense now. At the time, I didn’t even consider the possibility. I might not be that smart after all. “I should have had a period two weeks after the wedding. Or the almost-wedding, I guess.”

He leans forward. “And did you?”

I can’t be more than two months along, which is incidentally the exact length of time since I was on *The Medusa*.

With Anton.

“No.” I shake my head. “I don’t... I don’t think so. So much has happened since then. I wasn’t paying attention. I’m not sure...”

I look up and Anton is watching me. His dark gray eyes are a familiar landmark, an anchor in the storm. Whatever power he has over me, I’m thankful for it in this moment.

“Jessa.”

He says my name like it’s the whole damn sentence. There’s so much meaning there. So much emotion.

“Say it again,” I hear myself plead.

“Say what again?”

I grab his hand, his calloused fingers rough against my skin.
“My name.”

His expression softens. He presses a kiss to my temple and breathes. “Jessa.”

The pressure in my chest eases slightly and I close my eyes.
“How did this happen?”

“We had sex,” he says. There’s a hint of amusement in his voice.

I peek up at him. “How can you be so calm?”

Anton lifts his chin, his body straightening. “I’m not sure how my answer will make you feel.”

Oh God. He’s going to tell me that he’s calm because he knows how to control the situation. He’ll ask me to get an abortion. Because of course he will. Why would he want a child with me, a woman he barely knows?

I put on my bravest face. “Tell me anyway.”

His thumb brushes over my knuckles. “I’m calm because it was always meant to happen this way.”

I’m so shocked that I spin towards him, forehead creased.
“What?”

“This baby, you and me... in some ways, it was inevitable.”

I shake my head. “How can you say that? I didn’t even know you a few weeks ago. I was about to marry another man.”

“Exactly,” he says. “We were on two entirely different paths. And then I saw you marooned in the middle of a lonely beach in a fucking tearstained wedding dress, Jessa.”

“I remember.” The memory is bittersweet. I remember how it felt, sitting there in shock and then looking up into the face of the most beautiful man I’d ever seen. It felt like a dream. A hallucination.

“I should have kept walking,” he says. “But I felt compelled to stop. I was drawn to you from the moment I saw you. And I

can't regret that decision or anything that came after it."

"What about after I stole your cell phone?"

He smirks. "If you hadn't stolen it, I would have found another reason to see you again."

He's telling me things that, deep down, I always suspected. But hearing him say it out loud makes it all seem real. It makes me feel lighter than I've ever felt in my life.

"You're actually... happy that I'm pregnant?" I ask.

He places his hand on my stomach. My entire body shivers from the intimacy. "I'm euphoric."

I gawk at him, trying to process the strangeness of this moment. Is it possible that I'm looking at a future with this man? A man I thought was going to be my worst nightmare?

"What does this mean for us?" I ask nervously.

"It means we're going to have this baby. It means that you're going to leave that shitty little apartment and move in here with me so we can raise this child together."

His words are beautiful, but it's not lost on me that they can be interpreted a different way. He hasn't actually said what any of those changes mean for *us*.

Are we friends? Are we co-parents? Are we roommates or lovers?

Are we anything?

Are we nothing?

I desperately want to ask, but I'm too mortified by my reeking desperation to voice the question. So I just nod along, wondering why it's so easy to agree to a whole new life with this man, even though I have no idea what it will hold.

"What is it?" he asks.

I blink and look up at him. "What?"

"What are you worrying about?"

I frown. "What makes you think I'm worrying at all?"

“Please.” He rolls his eyes. “I know you better than you think, Jessa. Your mind is working in overdrive right now.”

I take a deep breath. “I’m... scared.”

“Parenthood is daunting.”

“No, not about that. I mean, yes, I’m nervous about motherhood, but it’s something I’ve always wanted.”

“Okay. So then what is it?”

“What does this mean for *us*?” I ask again.

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “I told you.”

“You said we are going to raise this child together,” I clarify. “But will we be raising the baby from different rooms?” God, this is the cringiest conversation I’ve ever had in my life. I need to salvage the situation. “What I mean is—I guess what I want to know is... do I get a separate annex on your property? Or, like...”

His eyes go wide for a moment. Then his face splits into a smile. He takes my hand and brings it up to his lips. He kisses me gently and butterflies erupt in my stomach.

“I want you on my property. I want you in my bed, *kotyonok*. I don’t want you anywhere that I can’t reach out and touch you every fucking moment of the day,” he says softly. “Does that clear things up for you?”

Jesus.

Is it possible to melt from the sheer physical presence of another human being? With Anton, it feels more than possible—it feels inevitable.

“It’ll suffice,” I murmur with a blush. “Thank you.”

He smiles. “Thank you?”

“I don’t know why I said that,” I laugh.

I feel this weird bursting feeling in my chest. I think it’s happiness, but I’ve never experienced it quite like this before. Nothing so whole or complete or excited as this.

And I don’t want to let it go.

For the first time, I reach for him without any shred of self-consciousness. Anton leans in and we kiss again, long and slow and gentle.

His hand traces the line of my back and I shiver against him. My hands clutch at the front of his shirt and even through my trembling, I manage to undo two buttons.

Of course, all that does is make me think about everything else that's underneath his clothes. I can feel the throb of my heartbeat in my chest and lower, flooding my entire body. My clit is pounding so hard that I wonder if Anton can feel it, too.

Just as his hand wraps around to my waist and I think he's going to cup my breasts, he finishes the kiss and pulls back.

I sway, unmoored and breathless. "What just happened?"

"There's nothing I want more right now," he clarifies. His hand grips my waist possessively, his eyes raking over me in obvious need. "But you just fainted, and I don't want to be the cause of another episode."

I roll my eyes. "You certainly have a high opinion of yourself."

He shrugs and leans back a little, revealing the hard ridges of his chest. I actually feel a little lightheaded looking at him.

"Which is justified, in your case," I add.

He laughs and leans in to kiss me one more time. "Get some rest. We can continue this when you're up to it."

I am disappointed, but I like the way he's taking care of me. And I especially like the way he confirms that we'll pick this up later.

The future—something I never thought I'd look forward to again.

My hand settles over my belly, and I look up to see that Anton is watching me.

"I still can't quite believe it," I admit.

Anton nods. "We're having a baby."

We. Anton and me.

We're having a baby.

"Get some sleep," he says softly. "I have to go down and deal with a few things. I just wanted to talk to you first."

"Okay. You'll come up later?"

He smiles. "You couldn't keep me out of here if you tried."

He doesn't kiss me again, but he brushes the side of my face with his hand before he goes. One is as good as the other. I watch him walk out of the room, and I feel a new sense of pride.

He's mine.

But when he's gone, nervous energy buzzes through my body, adrenaline thrumming through my veins. It makes me fidgety, desperate for an outlet. I realize that I haven't checked my phone since I woke up.

It takes me a moment to locate it on the bedside table beside me. The first thing I notice is a bunch of missed calls and text messages, mostly from Chris and Freya.

"Shit."

The happy little bubble I've been living in for the past few minutes pops.

When it was just Anton and me, everything seemed possible. Everything seemed manageable. But the moment I think past the two of us, I realize how complicated this will be.

I need to talk to them both, but I'm too much of a coward, so I text instead of call.

I just need more time to craft an explanation that they'll be satisfied with. I need time to think of what I can say to convince them that I'm not just the latest victim of Stockholm Syndrome.

ME: *Hey! Just wanted to update you so you don't have to worry, haha. Work is good. I'm gonna be super busy prepping for a big thing coming up, so don't freak out if you don't hear from me. Love you xo.*

I copy-paste the message to both Freya and Chris, then change my status to unavailable.

I've just set my phone down when it buzzes again. It's a text, not a call, but I'm still nervous to pick it up.

Will it be Chris asking me to stop pretending like everything's okay?

Will it be Freya telling me that some forms of control are subtle and entirely too convincing?

But when I finally glance at the screen, the message isn't from either one of them. The number is unknown. And it isn't a message, but a video.

Curiosity wins out. I click play.

The video is grainy. Still, I've been around Anton enough now to recognize him when I see him. His size and physique are easy to spot.

I should turn it off. I trust Anton. Or at least, I should. We're having a baby and I'm happy for the first time in so long.

But the video is already playing, and I can't look away.

Anton is in some sort of meeting. There are other blurry-faced men sitting around a rectangular table. Everything is relatively calm.

And then someone bursts through the door.

She's a blonde blur as she rushes into the room. There's no sound, but based on her body language and the way the room turns to her in alarm, I think she's screaming.

The men file out of the room, leaving behind Anton and... Marina.

It has to be her. There's no one else it could be.

I flinch when she hits Anton, but I freeze when he roars back in her face. When he grabs her by the hair and drags her across the floor, I have to look away.

When I finally look back at the video, Marina is laid out on the table and Anton is between her legs. It's a position that could

be misconstrued as intimate... if it weren't for the fact that Anton's hands are wrapped around her throat.

He's strangling her—and the look in his eyes says he intends to finish it.

And then the video ends.

“Oh God...” I gasp, feeling as though I'm the one who's just escaped a strangling attempt. I can't breathe. Air is wheezing in and out of my lungs. “Oh God...”

Before I can process what I've just watched, my phone pings again. It's a disappearing photo sent from the same unknown number that sent me the video.

If I click on it, I'll have ten seconds to see the photo before it disappears forever.

I click on the picture and the image fills my screen. It's clearer than the video was, but not by much. Again, a broad-shouldered man with dark hair is centered in the image.

“Anton...” I whisper.

His back is to me, and he's crouched over...

“Oh God,” I gasp, nearly dropping the phone.

His knee is covering her face, but blonde hair spills over onto the floor. I can see blood staining the carpet.

Anton told me that Marina was found dead in a hotel room at the Grand Centrale. But wherever this photo was taken... it was most definitely not at the Grand Centrale.

Which means he lied to me about so much more than I realized.

And despite everything I've seen, everything Chris and Freya warned me about, I blindly believed him. Because... because I am falling in love with him.

There's no denying that anymore.

There's also no denying what I have to do next.

The image disappears. I fumble with my phone as I pull up a number. I call him three times before he finally picks up.

“Sorry, I was in a meeting,” he says, rushing through the words. “Are you okay?”

“No,” I say, unable to hold back the sob.

“Jess—”

“Chris, can you come and pick me up?” I ask before he can say anything else. “This will be the last time I ever ask. I promise.”

TO BE CONTINUED



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