

My deadliest poison.  
My only cure.



# BRUTAL KING

a bratva academy romance

JAGGER COLE

# BRUTAL KING

---

A DARK BRATVA ACADEMY ROMANCE

JAGGER COLE

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

Brutal King

Jagger Cole © 2021

All rights reserved.

Cover by Plan 9 Book Design

Editing by MJ Edits | Proofing by Jessie Stafford, Teshia Elborne

This is a literary work of fiction. Any names, places, or incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Similarities or resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events or establishments, are solely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

The unauthorized reproduction, transmission, or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal and a violation of US copyright law.

✿ Created with Vellum

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# CONTENTS

[Brutal King](#)

[Playlist](#)

[A Special Present](#)

[Trigger Warning](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Coming Soon](#)

[Savage Heir Preview](#)

[Paying The Bratva's Debt Preview](#)

[Also by Jagger Cole](#)

[End Notes](#)

[About the Author](#)

[\*OceanofPDF.com\*](#)

## BRUTAL KING



**He's my deadliest poison. And my only cure.**

To keep my empire, I'm going to marry a man whose family *my* family tried to destroy.

A terrifying and magnetically gorgeous man with brutal blue eyes. A man whose very presence sucks the air from my lungs. A man with no past, shrouded in scars, pain, and darkness.

But this isn't about me. This is about securing a future for my sister. Even if that means binding myself to a man who hates me.

Except "until death do us part" is going to come quicker than anyone knows.

You see, this story has an expiration date. *I* have an expiration date.

In six months, I'll be dead.

They say love is a battle.

And I've got nothing to lose.

*This standalone, extra angsty Bratva academy romance is guaranteed to leave your kindle steaming. Step into the viper's*

*nest of Oxford Hills Academy and meet the Savage Heirs of  
Bratva kings and oligarchs.*

*Absolutely no cheating, no cliffhanger, and a happy ever after.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## PLAYLIST

Hurt - Johnny Cash

I Saw You Close Your Eyes - Local Natives

Where Is My Mind? - Pixies

To The Ground - Death Cab for Cutie

Good Luck - Broken Bells

Die Young - Sylvan Esso

Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This) - Marilyn Manson

Devil Like Me - Rainbow Kitten Surprise

Untitled - Interpol

Bags - Clairo

Creep - Radiohead

R U Mine? - Arctic Monkeys

Just What I Needed - The Careful Ones

Jesus Christ - Brand New

Sweetest Kill - Broken Social Scene

Daddy Issues - The Neighborhood

Duet for Ghosts - Ed Harcourt



I Will Follow You into the Dark - Death Cab For Cutie

Search “Jagger Cole” on Spotify to find this and other book  
playlists!

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

A SPECIAL PRESENT



The [Jagger Cole fans-only newsletter](#) is the first place to hear about new releases, giveaways, and more! [Sign up today](#) to grab a free copy of Mr Big - an extra hot billionaire romance not available anywhere else!

[OceanofPDF.com](#)

## TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains very graphic descriptions of past trauma and abuse. While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. Please read with that in mind.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## PROLOGUE



LUKAS

I WANT to tear my own heart out.

I want to scream until my lungs give out and my throat erupts into flame. But I can't even breathe, let alone make a sound. I curl tighter, dropping to my knees in the grit and the grime. The bottle and the gun tumble to the floor as I bring my hands up to tear at my own hair.

I curl into a ball, hissing, snarling on the floor.

And then, I hear it.

I scramble to my feet, panting for air as my head throbs. I yank the gun up, my knuckles white as I grip it tightly and whirl with a snarl on my lips.

Glass snaps under a foot. Or maybe not. Floorboards creak, but don't.

I squeeze my eyes shut, gasping as the pain explodes across my skin. Lightning bolts splay across my vision, leaving jagged traces in my brain.

This isn't real. Or maybe it is. Or maybe I'm losing control, and losing all sense of what's reality and what isn't.

I groan, whirling again and storming for the door, gun in hand. But then, my eyes focus on the words scratched with a blade

across the doorframe. Words that aren't faded. Scratches that are *fresh*.

*Budet rasplata.*

*There will be a reckoning.*

The same words were on her windowsill.

My heart thuds. A cold sensation drips down my spine as I snarl and slowly turn. My muscles clench as I bring the gun up, fighting the chemicals dulling me as I peer into the darkness.

I'm not alone.

He's here, and I suddenly, I'm sure of it. The phantom who's been hunting her, is *here*.

I wasn't careful enough. I let it slip away from my focus enough. And now, he's followed me here. Now, he knows of this place.

And we both know there's only one of us leaving here.

The crack of broken glass on the floor has me whirling again. I hiss quietly, eyes narrowed, and gun raised as I storm through the doorway into the murk of the ruined mansion.

I walk with staggered, wobbly steps. The pain is overwhelming—like just being here is dousing my very skin with acid or napalm. My vision blurs, and the glitches just keep happening, until I can barely see straight.

I whirl around corners, snarling at every creak of the floor. Every snickered, echoed laugh in the shadows.

He's taunting me. Mocking me.

I growl as I smash down a door into one room, and then another to another.

“Where are you?!” I scream into the shadows, sweat clinging to my back.

*“Where the fuck are you?!”*

I roar like the devil in hell itself as I start to run blindly through the mansion. I crash into one room and then another. I whirl maniacally into a dining room, down hallways, into more rooms.

I stagger into a library, and suddenly, he’s there.

He’s right in front of me, twenty feet away.

My heart thuds as the world grows muffled and muddled. My vision glitches as we lock eyes across the dark, dank room of old books. I see my demons sneering back at me. I see my nightmares, taunting me.

This will be the final showdown. Only one of us leaves here tonight.

Wordlessly, we stare at each other across the room. I grin a death mask grin, and so does he, right back at me.

My gun raises; so does his.

Our eyes lock as my lips sneer a cold, brutal smile.

*See you in another hell.*

The trigger pulls, and the gun explodes in my hand.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

*NEVER LET them see you cry. Never let them see you bleed.*

Most of the advice my mother “bestowed” upon me over the years can be pretty categorically labeled as “toxic.” Insidious, poisonous, lethal, and guaranteed to make sure I ended up as jaded and broken as she is.

Out of context though? Well, today, it might just prove helpful.

With a soft crunch of tires over white gravel, the limo comes to a full stop in front of the main student services building of the esteemed academy. Not just *any* “esteemed,” “prestigious,” “hallowed” private preparatory school. The *most* of all of those snooty words, filled with the self-described “elite” of the world’s elite.

The very selective, very venerated, very expensive as *fuck* Oxford Hills Academy. Otherwise known as my new, and very temporary, home.

My hand reaches for the handle of the limo door. But I restrain myself. This place, where the heirs and offspring of the world’s richest, most powerful, and most elite churn like a den of vipers, is all about image.

Out here in the bucolic rolling hills of England, on a campus that was once a cathedral and looks like fucking Hogwarts?

Here at OHA, the students are the sons and daughters of presidents and prime ministers. Of literal kings and queens, and tech billionaires.

Or, in my case, a piece of shit Russian mob kingpin.

So I stay my hand, and I wait until the driver steps out and comes to open it for me. Because that's what's expected here. It's the whole reason I dipped into the meager, bare-bones cash I have left to even rent this damn limo just to get out to the campus from Manchester.

Like I said, it's all about image. But this isn't about "fitting in" or "looking cool." This is all part of the plan, and this is step one.

Well, no, step one was using the very last of my money to bribe the right officials in the FSS—Russia's FBI—to unfreeze some of my late father's assets. My acceptance letter to Oxford Hills from two years ago—before my father was killed in a Bratva power-grab war—was still valid. I just needed the *unseemly* amount for tuition.

Before, even though I hadn't lived in the same house as that monster for years, the king's ransom it costs to even attend OHA would have been nothing to my father. Couch-cushion change. The monthly cleaning budget for his yacht.

Now, it's literally the last of my reserves... the scrapings from the very bottom of the barrel. But like I said, it's all part of the plan.

It's all for Mara.

Four years ago, my twin sister went out for a jog, along with a whole crew of my dad's bodyguards. She didn't make it two blocks from home before some of my father's *several* enemies—maybe the same ones who eventually killed him, I don't



know or much care—pulled up in a van and started shooting. Four of the five guards died, and Mara took a bullet graze across the back of the head.

She's been in a coma ever since.

That's why I'm here: step one to proving my legitimacy and taking back the empire and fortune that was taken from us when my dad finally got his comeuppance.

I know on paper I don't look all that different from any of the other little snobs who go here. I grew up summering on yachts in the Black Sea or the Mediterranean and wintering in Zurich. We had mansions and townhouses in ten cities across four continents. I had maids, butlers, personal chefs and shoppers, shopping accounts and chauffeurs.

But that's the outside. The veneer. The thin paint that covers the rot underneath.

I also had the psychotic, alcoholic mother, with the cruel jabs, the venomous disdain, and the cold lack of empathy. I had the constant threat of violence with the work my father did. We had staff whose entire jobs were to skim the grounds of our homes and the undersides of our cars for explosives.

But worst of all, I had Semyon fucking Belsky as a father, and that's a hell I wouldn't inflict on anyone. Except him, that is.

I always knew what happened two years ago would happen. I'd hoped for it. Literally. I'm not even religious, and I'd still fucking *pray* for the universe to take him away forever. Then it did, but with him went the money, and any hope of a future where Mara and I could climb out of the mile-deep hole that having the last name "Belsky" put us in.

So that's why I'm here. Oxford Hills gets me legitimacy. Legitimacy gets me in front of the Bratva High Council, where

I can take back the empire that was stolen from me.

Not for me. For Mara. Because she'll wake up someday. She has to. The universe can't be *that* sadistically fucked up.

With a muted click, the driver opens the door. I step out, my black flats—I'm wearing the green, gold, and black tartan uniform of OHA—crunching against the soft white gravel. My eyes scan the gorgeous old brownstone gothic buildings, and the perfectly manicured hedges and rose gardens. The quaint little pathways weaving across campus. The adorable little cottages in the distance where students live.

This is it. Time to dive in.

My belongings—clothes, mostly—have already been shipped and brought to my cottage, which I'll share with one other student. Inside, I'll meet with the Dean, who will I'm sure give me his most plastic smile while he welcomes me—both of us steadfastly ignoring the very public knowledge that my dead dad was a psychotic, murderous thug.

And then, it's welcome to the viper den. Abandon hope all ye who enter.

Except, these snobs and these “elites” don't scare or intimidate me. Maybe I used to be in that world. But I'm not anymore. I won't be, either. I'm just here to do a job and get out. They don't frighten me.

I thank the driver, smooth down my skirt, roll my shoulders under the black blazer with the gold crest, and look up at the face of the main building. But then, just for a second, my confidence flickers. And though I've been trying to put it out of mind, I'm reminded of one other hurdle—one last fear to face once I step foot inside here.

The three dark demon kings of Oxford Hills.

You see, I'm not the only one here who's tuition was paid in Bratva blood money. There are three others here, desecrating these hallowed halls, who come from the same world: Ilya Volkov, Misha Tsavakov, and Lukas Komarov—known in here as the Wolf, the Lion, and the Dragon.

And I know they're in there, waiting for me.

I tremble as I start to walk. My feet crunch on the white stone as I step under the gilded, wrought-iron archway beside the main building.

Two years ago, it was a war my father started with Ilya's uncle and Lukas's father—adoptive father—that got him killed. It's what took my empire and Mara's future away from us. And I'm guessing it hasn't exactly painted someone with the last name Belsky in any sort of favorable light to those three warlords of Oxford Hills.

But, this is how I get the keys to the kingdom, or at least the fortune behind it. Because Mara will need that when she wakes up.

I can do this. I can get through this.

I take a deep breath, step around the corner, and instantly gasp as a huge shape suddenly materializes in front of me.

I suck in air, catching my balance as I gaze up and freeze. I see a broad chest and powerful arms and shoulders, straining what looks like a tailor-fit OHA uniform. I see a strong jaw, clenched tight. I see bared teeth, twisted lips, a regal nose, and sandy-blond hair.

But when my gaze lands on the cold, brutal blue eyes staring daggers through me, I give up on trying to take that breath. Because the very air around me is suddenly sucked away. Like the vacuum after a bomb's lethal scorch.

I look up, and I tremble as I find myself standing before Lukas Komarov, the dragon himself.

My throat makes a swallowing motion. But it's too dry to actually manage that. So I just end up making this awkward frog look for a second.

*Never let them see you cry. Never let them see you bleed.*

I slow my racing heart as best I can. I center myself. And slowly, I breathe.

I knew what I was walking into here. I knew they'd be waiting for me, or at least blocking my way once they knew I was here. But it's just another hurdle. One last obstacle to get over and get past before I can claim what's mine, for Mara.

And yet it takes every ounce of my courage not to quail under that haunting blue gaze—like crushed ice trickling down your spine.

His face darkens, and I stiffen as he suddenly steps closer to me.

“What are *you* doing here?”

I shiver. I actually tremble at the rough, gravelly, smoky timbre of his voice—like iron dragged across stone. Like the scrape of a knife against leather.

Like dragon scales, shifting as the beast rises to engulf you in fire.

*Never let them see you cry. Never let them see you bleed.*

I can do this. I *have* to do this. For my sister.

“I said, *what*—”

“Getting an education,” I snap, smiling thinly back up into his smug, perfectly chiseled, obnoxiously good-looking face.

It's like kicking the dragon in the nose when he leans close to smell you. Lukas's eyes narrow. His face darkens. And like the dragon in my head, he leans closer to me, forcing me to actually lean back an inch or two.

His eyes drag over me like two cold blue pools. Judging me. Chilling me. Eviscerating me.

"You don't belong here," he snarls. He's not yelling. His voice is barely above a soft indoor volume. And yet it carries the weight of thunderclouds. Of molten lava and the armageddon.

"You should leave," he growls.

I swallow, pursing my lips and saying nothing.

"Now," Lukas's voice grates out. "You should leave *now*. Get back to that limo, crawl inside, and drive until this place disappears behind you."

I resist the urge to tremble. To quail. To show fear or even to take a single step back. Even if the dragon looming over me is terrifying and gorgeous in this viscosly cold and brutal way.

*For Mara.*

I take a breath, and I center myself. And before my fight or flight instincts send me running or even make me take a single step back, I square myself and narrow my gaze up at his.

Fuck that. I've worked too hard. I've survived too much horror and shit in my life to walk away with nothing. And I've pulled too many strings used up too many one-time-only favors to get in here.

"I'm not going anywhere."

I half expect him to open his mouth and literally devour me and spit out the bones. Or to yell. Or to grab me, or *something*.

But instead, he just keeps looking at me. It's a mix of the fury of the dragon, and a thin sort of curiosity. Those cool blue eyes never blink, though. They just hold mine like ice, daring me to blink first.

“You will regret coming here,” his voice rasps out.

And then, without biting me in half or breathing a jet of fire into my face, the coldly beautiful dragon turns quietly and walks away.

I don't realize I've been tensing every single muscle in my body until he's out of sight. I breathe out a shaky stream of air before my lungs gasp to fill again.

*You will regret coming here.*

“Will” nothing. I already do. But you do what is necessary. And again, this isn't about me. This is about Mara.

Actually, none of this is about me.

Because in six months, I'll be dead.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



*One month later:*

I WAKE from the nightmare with a silent scream clawing at my throat. In the darkness of my bedroom, I stiffen. My eyes pierce the night, focusing on what's real as my pulse throbs beneath the sheen of sweat on my skin.

Flashes of the nightmare twitch like glitches in my vision. Flickers of a black door to a black house on a cliff. The ocean, the pain. The laughing faces as I scream.

Slowly, I sit up in the bed, gritting my jaw as I reach up to rub it with a hand. I turn and glance at my phone on the table next to the bed. It's still the middle of the night. But the pain is bad. Not the worst it's been—nowhere close to that. It's not great, but still manageable.

It's always manageable, in one way or another.

At this point, I'm a professional at this. At blocking out the hurt; burying, numbing, or cutting out the pain.

I swing my legs out of the sheets and rise from the bed. I slip on sweatpants and toss a long-sleeved shirt over my bare shoulder. The house is asleep, but you never know. Besides, there are more people sleeping here these days than just my two best friends.

I grab a cigarette from the pack by the door and slip it between my lips, unlit. Soundlessly, I pad barefoot down the stairs from my third-floor quarters to the second. I step without a single creek past Misha's and then Ilya's doors, and then down the curving staircase to the first floor of the English manor we call home here at Oxford Hills.

A murmur of a snore stops me cold as I step into the living room. I narrow my eyes, teeth flashing in the moonlight.

Fuck, there are still people crashed on the couch and the floor from the party—two couples snuggled on opposite couches, and a few solos across the floor or in armchairs. I could kick them out now. But my head is still throbbing too much to make words that make sense. Years of this have taught me that my voice will barely even work when I'm this way.

Besides, Ilya or Misha will actually *enjoy* kicking them all out when they realize they're still here. I wouldn't want to deprive them of that joy.

Instead, I pull on the long-sleeved shirt. I tug the sleeve down to the wrist before I turn and slip out the front door like a wraith.

The party tonight notwithstanding, Lordship Manor has quieted lately. My two partners in crime—the two other demon kings of Oxford Hills—have settled a bit, now that Ilya is with Tenley, and Misha with Charlotte.

My two friends have always been the driving element of the raging lifestyle of this house. So without them stoking the fire, its quieted.

I'm honestly fine either way. I'm comforted by dark and quiet. But I also thrive on the chaos of self-destruction. Sometimes, all I want is silence. Other times, all that does is welcome in



the demons who need to be destroyed with violence and chemicals.

Tonight, I'm not quite sure which I need yet.

Outside, I light the cigarette and inhale. I should quit. Not tonight, though. The end of it glows with my breath as I slowly walk through the darkness of campus, barefoot. It's late fall, but I don't mind the chill. I've known true cold. As I've known true hunger and true, soul-destroying pain and suffering.

I'm fine with mildly chilly grass under my feet.

I walk across the moonlit campus to the cottages where most of the other students in this place who aren't the three of us live—to one cottage in particular.

I don't know why I come here. It's becoming more frequent; three, four nights a week these days. But I keep doing it, like a moth that can't just stay the fuck away from the flame that is undoubtedly going to burn it's wings off.

I stamp out my cigarette and climb the ivy-covered lattice at the right side of the cottage to the second floor. I could do this with my eyes closed at this point. Probably not something I should brag even to myself about, though.

At the window, my eyes narrow as I press close to the glass and peer inside.

She's asleep. It's two-thirty in the fucking morning. Of course she's asleep. Blonde hair across her face, blue eyes closed; flickering with a dream.

Hopefully, it's nowhere near the kind of dreams that I see when mine are shut.

I say nothing. I do nothing. I just watch her sleep. She's beautiful, like poison. I'm drawn to her, and yet I know she's nothing I should go near. I know I should hate her for what her family tried to do to mine and to Ilya's.

But that first day, when she stepped into this place, something happened I didn't expect. When I was close to her, somehow, the demons quieted in my head. And yet she rattles their cage, too. It swings back and forth, like a pendulum. A push and pull—a war of peace and chaos, raging and quieting back and forth in my head.

Seconds tick to minutes. Minutes turn to ten and then twenty. Finally, as she stirs in her sleep, I know it's time to go.

I start to climb back down, when suddenly, the clouds move away from the moon. The light catches something on the outside of the windowsill, and I freeze.

It's two words, scratched into the wood as if with a nail.

*Budet rasplata.*

It's Russian. *There will be a reckoning.*

I glare at it, as if I might burn it away with my eyes. There are flashes here and there when I'm not sure what's real and what's in my head. But I know this part is the former. It's real, so it stays, mocking me.

It doesn't frighten me. Nothing much does. But it doesn't shock me, either. Because it's not the first time I've seen these words in the last month—on her windowsill, scratched into the underside of a desk she favors in her Medieval Literature lecture, or smudged in the dirt along the path she likes to walk on through the rose gardens.

Perhaps that's why I come here at night. To check on her. Though I have no idea why I care.

Her father was Semyon Belsky. The man was a piece of shit; a drunk, backstabbing, buffoon of a leader who made enemies every day. The obvious answer is that one of those enemies has found her here at OHA.

The obvious question is, why do I give a shit?

I climb down to the ground, turn, and slip quietly back across the silent, moonlit campus. The pain is coming back now, with a fury. By the time I get back to Lordship, it's clawing at my muscles and crawling under my skin.

I go up to Misha's room and step inside. I wake him with a gentle shake, ignoring the brunette in his bed. He stirs, startled as his eyes fly open.

*"Jesus fucking Christ."*

He frowns, glaring at me in the moonlight. He turns to Charlotte and draws the cover up over her more. Then he turns back to narrow his gaze dangerously at me.

"If you weren't you, you'd be dead," he whispers icily.

I nod.

He scowls at me. "I'm installing locks."

"Okay."

Misha sighs, blowing air quietly through his lips. "What the fuck, man?"

"I need it."

His face tenses as he frowns and glances at his phone.

"It's two-fifty in the fucking morning."

I say nothing. My jaw ticks with the pain rippling through me.

He groans. "C'mon, Lukas, I fucking hate doing—"

“Please,” I croak.

He eyes me.

“Lukas...”

“I need it tonight. Really.”

He sighs again and turns to look at Charlotte. Then he turns back to me and nods.

“Fine. C’mon.”

He stands and pulls on some sweats. He stays shirtless, the maze of ink on his body rippling as he and I walk out of his bedroom. Misha’s got scars like me under that ink. But not quite like mine.

No one has scars like mine.

In the living room, he scowls when he sees the sleeping guests. But I can see the way his lips curl. I knew he’d enjoy this.

“*Get the fuck out,*” he snaps, dumping discarded drinks onto people’s heads to wake them.

There’s a brief but quiet flurry of activity as the last seven lingering party guests scramble under Misha’s mad-king glare. They mumble apologies before tripping over each other out the front door.

When they’re gone, he turns and nods at me. I nod back, the pain throbbing like daggers under my skin, flaying me open as I follow him down to the basement. Beneath that, though, lies the old fallout shelter from when Oxford Hills was a troop marshaling compound during World War 2, and Lordship Manor was an officer’s HQ. During the Cold War, that underground headquarters was expanded and reinforced.

Now, it’s a secret lair for the three of us.

Misha pulls out the copy of *Tarzan* and taps in the code behind it. The bookcase swings aside, and we step down the metal staircase into the old fallout shelter.

We walk to the boxing ring set up to one side of the big subterranean room. Misha starts to tug on gloves. I get the handcuffs from the lockers and start to clamp them shut on my wrists, behind my back.

“This isn’t therapy Lukas. This is fucked up,” Misha growls quietly.

I smile thinly as I duck under the ropes into the ring.

“And you’re a wonderful friend for helping.”

“I fucking hate doing this.”

“I know.” I look him in the eye, trying not to crumple under the searing pain. “Thank you.”

He tightens the gloves and eyes me as he takes a stance and starts to move towards me with fists raised.

“Don’t hold back.”

“I never do.”

The hits come hard and fast. I brace for each one, unable to stop them, but welcoming them like old friends.

Each hit pounds the pain from my body. Each punishing blow centers the hurt, compartmentalizes it; channels it, cages it, until the room spins and the floor comes up to kiss me goodnight.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

WHEN I WAS FIVE, Peytor, one of my father's older captains who'd always gift me little origami animals whenever he saw me, went to prison. Six years later, at the release party my father threw at the house for him, I asked him how he'd survived.

I remember my mother hissing at me to shut my mouth and get to my room. I remember my father laughing and making a disgusting joke about "making someone your bitch before they make you theirs."

But Peytor—looking older and a bit more haggard now—just smiled and crouched down to hand me an origami tiger.

"Routine, *princessa*," he'd grunted with a half-smile. "Make every day the same, and they blur together until you are free."

Oxford Hills Academy is *hardly* a Russian gulag. Not with the elegantly quaint English cottages, the cathedral buildings, the gorgeous landscaping, prestigious classes, inspiring, leaders-of-their-field professors, and a two-star Michelin chef presiding over a dining hall where we're served by waiters with white gloves.

But it's still a prison to me. It's a sentence I have to carry out, to get what I need. And so, I've been following Peytor's advice. I have a routine, and today is no different.

I wake up to the bluetooth speakers on my bedside table softly playing Interpol. I stretch. I take the seven pills in my daily pill organizer—the first two blue ones together, then the orange one. Then I need to take a fifteen-minute break. So I sit on the floor and try and center myself through some daily calming exercises prescribed by one of the ten doctors who've lent their expertise on my condition.

When my pulse is steady, I stand and take two white pills, then the red one, then finally the gigantic, gag-inducing, taste-like-shit green gel-cap.

After that, I do some light pushups and sit-ups to get my blood pumping—but not *too* pumping. Even if this thing didn't have an upcoming end date, and I was going to live to be one hundred, with what I have, I'd never be a competitive athlete of any kind. Rollercoasters are a no. One doctor even told me to stay away from scary movies.

When I'm safely exercised, I change into my uniform, brush out my hair, pull it back and pile it high in a bun. I grab my eighth pill of the morning, which needs to be swallowed with food, and trot downstairs to say good morning to my cottage-mate.

The soft ding of the espresso machine ending its drip greets me as I walk into the kitchen.

"That's a double, one for each of us. Oh and I frothed oat milk."

I groan happily as Julianna turns to grin at me.

"I could marry you right now."

She snickers. "Could you? Please? My mother's on one of her tears, breathing down my neck about how I'm not living up to 'societal expectations of the McCreed family name.' It might

honestly give her an aneurism if I told her I was marrying a girl.”

From an outside perspective, Julianna McCreed and I are the last two people at OHA you’d expect to be friends. I’m the social-outcast daughter of a now-dead, notoriously violent Bratva king. Julianna is the golden daughter to a prominent duke—an actual duke—who’s also a MP in Parliament. Which technically makes her *Lady* McCreed.

It’s not usual for people to become roommates halfway through a term. But right before I arrived, Julianna’s last roommate traded OHA for a very expensive drug rehab in Switzerland. They put us together, probably expecting a nuclear event. But instead, we’ve become fast friends.

Some would speculate it’s because we’re opposites. But in reality, it’s because we’re so much similar than anyone would guess. Julianna also understands perfectly what it means to be a princess in a glass tower.

“Don’t forget to really drive home the sordid history of my family name. Bonus points.”

“Oh, the fact that we share a cottage is already driving her to an early grave. Remind me to send you a thank you card for that.”

I make a face. “Yikes, that’s dark.”

“Dark as her cold, charred black heart,” Julianna shrugs. She turns and takes the two porcelain cups out from under the espresso drip. She carefully pours the frothed oat milk into each of them before turning to pass me mine.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers,” I smile. “And what are we cheersing?”



“You mean besides our engagement?”

“Obviously.”

She grins. “I dunno. To Monday?”

“Works for me.”

We clink mugs and then sip our lattes. Julianna isn't something I expected to be part of the plan when coming here. I didn't anticipate having a friend. For one, because I've never really had any. I've had girls my age who I was expected to be friends with because their fathers and mine did business together. Or I had peers in other private schools that, again, I was expected to be friends with.

That all went away when Semyon was killed, though. I wasn't close with any of them anyway, which made the fact that not a single one of them reached out afterwards fine. When the Mad King was killed, the Mad King's daughter became tarnished goods. A leper to be avoided.

But I also never expected to have a friend here because I never wanted to. Not when I have an expiration date.

My chest twinges when Julianna puts down her mug and grins at me. It hurts that I know she'll hurt when I go without ever having told her. But, it is what it is. The meeting with the Bratva High Council is everything. And I can't chance them knowing about my condition and prognosis.

I turn and grab half of an English muffin out of the bread basket. I wolf it down before I toss the last pill of the morning into the back of my throat and muscle it down with a sip of latte.

Julianna makes a face. “God, are your allergies still bothering you?”

I nod as I turn away. “Must be something planted around the campus,” I lie.

We busy ourselves packing schoolbooks into bags and polishing off breakfast. Then we’re out the door to head to morning classes.

It’s cooler out now that it’s mid-autumn. But I like the slight chill in the air, and the very hint of frost on our breaths as we walk. The path from our group of cottages winds through a rose garden surrounding a small stone-walled pond full of lily pads. A sculpture of Saint Francis sits nestled into the hedgerows.

The usual morning crowds of cliques and groups meander around the main quad outside the academic halls. It’s almost like something out of a teen comedy the way the factions all cluster.

There’s the sports crowd of the star athletes from the rugby, football, and swim teams. The drama club is clustered around the curve of the fountain, speaking in Shakespearean English. And of course, the elites—the very “creme de la creme” of snobbery at OHA, sit on the steps to the main hall, looking down their noses at everyone else.

But then, a dark cloud seems to sweep into the quad. Every single clique seems to stop what they’re doing to turn and stare in a mix of fear and awe at the group that strolls up next.

A cold tremor creeps up my spine, making me shiver. I can’t help it. When I see them, who’ve spent the last month just *glaring* at my every step, I can’t help but tremble. I hate that I do. I hate that it makes me feel weak or threatened.

Ilya, with his hand holding Tenley Chambers’s, and Misha, with his arm over Charlotte Bergdendem’s shoulder, both glare

daggers at me as they settle onto benches to one side of the quad. When I glare back, Misha smiles thinly and raises a middle finger.

I roll my eyes and turn away. Fuck them. I can deal with the knife looks. I've dealt with it for two years from every person who knows the Belsky name. All I need is that meeting with the High Council, and they can be rid of me souring their mornings.

"Screw them. They just like to strut," Julianna shrugs.

There's another way we've bonded. Though things are neutral now, since Julianna and Tenley seem to be chummy, my roommate has also found herself on the wrong end of the glares from the three savage heirs before.

"Or they're PMS-ing because their parties are fading, so they're not feeling quite like the rockstars they like to imagine themselves as."

I turn and grin at Julianna. "Thanks. I'm fine. But you're totally right."

"Just imagine them as little divas and it's so much more entertaining."

I giggle as both turn to walk across the quad. But, the whole dark cloud surrounding Ilya, Misha, and Lukas isn't just an image. I knew they were dangerous, and not to be trifled with. That was all part of my research before I came here.

But I underestimated them. Or, I underestimated the power they wield in this place. It wasn't until I actually set foot on campus that I saw that they're like demi-gods at this fucking school. Little Lords of Chaos, War, and, and Pestilence. Even if they've been... *subdued* or quieted in recent months by women who've tamed their hearts a little.

Well, two of them have. The two who are, I'm sure, still glaring at my back here on the quad. But the third, and to me at least, the most deadly, is still out there. Prowling. Lurking. Forever, it seems, just over my shoulder. And yet never there when I turn around.

Since that first and only meeting with him my first minute here, Lukas has been a ghost to me. But somehow, I keep feeling his presence, like a dark shadow. A cloud that follows me, unseen.

It's not like I don't get why the three of them wouldn't like me. Especially Ilya. My father once tried to have his uncle killed. And I know there were past hostilities between my father and Victor Komarov, Lukas's dad.

But aside from sour looks, Ilya and Misha have mostly just avoided me. Sure, they've glared at me from across the dining hall. They've sneered at me in the hallways. But that's about it.

Lukas, however, is another story.

I *never* see him. I mean I literally haven't since that first run in. It's almost like he's been purposefully avoiding me. And yet I feel him always; constantly. A dragon lurking right behind me, jaws wide to swallow me whole or burn me to ash. And yet there's never anything there when I turn around.

But this morning, like every morning, there's no Lukas present. At least, not that I can see. So I hook my arm through Julianna's, keep my head high and my shoulders back, and I walk towards the academic hall.

*Never let them see you bleed.*

Poison or not, those words are how I've survived this long. And they're how I'll survive the next few months.

For Mara.

*OceanofPDF.com*



THE WORLD IS NOT a fair place. It just isn't. But then, no one ever said it was supposed to be, or going to be. We're born luck-of-the-draw to whatever circumstances we get. Some, like basically every other student at Oxford Hills, was born lucky. They were born with silver spoons and trust funds, and golden parachutes. With family power and reach that 99.9% of the world doesn't get.

And then there's me, who born into the very opposite end of that spectrum. Yanis, my twin brother and I, drew short straws at life. We were born into pain, to a mother I don't remember, and a father I wish I remembered even less than I barely do.

For me, luck came later, when Viktor and Fiona found me in hell and brought me into the light. When they gave me a second lease on living, and the keys to the kind of life the rest of these students here were born into.

Yanis wasn't so lucky. My brother died screaming six months before Viktor's men broke down the black door to that black house and pulled me out.

But like I said, no one ever said life was going to be fair. The very building above me is testament to that. Even here, in a school filled with the privileged and elite, stratification exists.

Almost every other student on this campus—be they the heirs of world leaders or trillionaire captains of industry—live in quaint little cottages. The varsity players of the girls' football team living across campus at Lachlan House are the one exception. But that's just a hang-on to the past, when OHA first became co-ed, and the first class of young women lived there, away from the boys.

But even Lachlan House *pales* in comparison to Lordship Manor, where Ilya, Misha, and I reside. Where we live is a place of luxury. It's even actually been photographed for a famous architecture magazine before. Top-tier designer furniture, all the luxuries of wealth, a pool, hot tub... you name it.

Lordship was once an actual Lord's estate, next to what was once a cathedral. Eventually, the whole thing became the grounds of Oxford Hills Academy. Before we arrived, this manor was actually lived in by the president of the school board of trustees himself.

Now, it's ours.

Strings were pulled, pockets were lined, or in some cases, fear was exploited. Whatever it was, when the three of us arrived as first years, this became home. But it wasn't just to assert us as three kings of the school. It wasn't *just* because of the former fallout shelter it sits above that was fortified during the Cold War, which includes a boxing ring, a garage full of expensive cars and my motorcycle, and even a lounge and living area still decorated from the 1960s, like stage set from *Mad Men*.

It's also because of the car-sized tunnel that leads from that shelter out a mile past the guarded and fortified walls of OHA's closed-campus. It exits under a small barn on a plot of

land owned by a shell company of a shell company belonging to Ilya's uncle, Yuri Volkov.

It's convenient when one of us needs to leave campus without it going on the record to attend Bratva family business. Or in my case, to escape to my own forms of nighttime self-therapy in nearby Manchester.

I tug my riding gloves on and tighten them against my wrists. I reach for the matte-black helmet, when I see the figure descending the stairs out of the corner of my eye. I hold off on starting the bike as I turn to see Ilya nodding at me.

"Manchester?"

I nod. He nods back, slowly rolling a joint in his fingers. He and Misha both know that I do this. Neither of them ask the details, but I'm sure they have their theories.

"How're you doing these days?"

I shrug. "Fine."

"Lukas."

"Ilya, I'm fine."

He eyes me as he slips the filter between his lips.

"Misha says you've been... you know. A lot more than usual."

My lips thin. "We've talked about that."

"No, I know. I know it helps with the overall stuff. I'm not casting judgment, man. I just want to make sure you're okay."

I saw an army of shrinks when Viktor and Fiona first brought me back to the US. I think I scared a solid third of them into never seeing me again when we "dug in" to my past of horrors like they were pushing for. Two threw up in our sessions when I really started in on the details—about being tied down.



About the knife. About the needles. About the men with other tastes.

A few months in, though, Viktor saw that rehashing my past day after day was killing me. It wasn't pushing me forward, it was dragging me back into the darkness. It was a chain keeping me back there in that black house.

Viktor lived his own hell before finding the Bratva. He and his best friend Lev fought daily to survive the streets of St. Petersburg back in Russia. So he knew. He could see the pain inside, even if I'm adamant that neither of them ever knows the true depth of my darkness.

But before the psychologists and specialists ran to the hills, I at least got a few answers. The physical pain that I feel is mostly psychosomatic. Some of it is lingering nerve damage from the maze of scars covering parts of my skin. But a lot of it is basically just that my head is still stuck in a permanent fight or flight mode.

Some of the docs called it PTSD, others drilled down to label it "chronic phantom pain," sort of like phantom limb disorder in amputees. Only with me, it's not a leg I'm feeling that isn't there. It's a blade across and under my skin that I feel.

Am I okay?

Fuck no. I've never been okay, and I never will be okay. But if I can survive, that's a win. And this is one of the ways I survive.

I smile. It's fake, but it's practiced, and it's so good even my two best—and only—friends usually buy it.

"I'm good, Ilya. Just going for a drive. Might get a drink or something." I shrug. "That's it. Nothing crazy."

He arches a single brow, eyeing me. “You know I’m here for whatever you need, right?”

“I know.”

He nods as I start the engine with a roar.

“Drive safe, brother.”

I nod as I slip the helmet on. Ilya backs away to the couch, lighting his joint as I rev the engine, filling the underground space with thunder before I go roaring down the dark tunnel.

Therapy awaits.

---

“OY, BATMAN.”

The inside of The Black Duck is a grime-streaked, beer-stained, wood-paneled affair that reeks of probably a hundred years of tobacco smoke. Hell, the single window that looks out onto the street is barely transparent anymore with the yellow tinge of it.

The bottles of liquor behind the heavy wood bar are foggy and stained. The dartboard against the far wall looks like someone used a shotgun to play the last game, and most of the light comes from the three flickering neon signs up on the walls: one for Guinness, one for Carlsberg, and another For Manchester United.

The place is a shit hole. And I love it.

I smile thinly at Harlow, the gray-haired owner and only bartender, when he greets me gruffly. Harlow came up with the “Batman” nickname last year when I started coming around a lot more often, and it’s stuck. With him, at least.

Maybe because he's the only one brave enough to say it to my face. Or the only one who views what I do in the shadows to drown out my own darkness as being a hero.

I just call it cathartic. I call it my therapy.

"Drinking or working tonight?" He grunts as I slide into a stool across the bar top from him.

"I need information on someone."

Harlow's done this a number of times for me. He's lived his whole life here in the Hulme district of Manchester, amongst the city's seedier, more colorful residents. And through that lifetime of helping the dark and criminal get drunk, he's amassed a huge network of information on the underworld.

"Oy, well let's have it."

"Not a Google search. Something deep, even for you."

Harlow's smile fades as he pulls close and nods. His big bushy gray eyebrows furrow deeply.

"When?"

"Yesterday."

I've avoided asking because I've been worried about the flags it might send up. Semyon might be dead, and his empire in ruins. But he's still got loyalists prowling around here and there.

But I'm going fucking crazy. I need to know why Lizbet Belsky suddenly showed up at OHA. I need to know what her angle is.

I also need to know why the fuck I can't stay away from her. Why at times the roaring in my head dims a little when she's near. And at other times, it's like she's pouring gasoline on the

fire. I'm confident nothing that Harlow can find will help with those later parts. But the former, he might be able to dig into.

"Alright, let's 'ave it," he growls quietly.

I slip the scrap of paper across the bar. Harlow picks it up with a meaty hand and looks at it. His mouth thins as he stiffens.

"No." He drops the paper to the bar and shakes his head.

I frown. "The usual rate, of course—"

"It's a no." Harlow shakes his head again and pushes the paper with one finger back across the bar.

"I'll help you with your little crusades around this city, mate. I ain't dipping my toes into Bratva business, though."

My jaw grinds in frustration. "This isn't—"

"Even *I* know who Lizbet Belsky is, son." He eyes me warily.

"Or who her father is."

"Was."

"I don't fuck with ghosts neither. Not ones like that, at least."

My mouth thins. "Fine. Double."

Harlow looks me dead in the eye. "The answer is no. Here."

He hauls up a dingy bottle of scotch and two grimy glasses and sets them on the bar. He pours me one and shoves it my way before he fills the other.

"Have a drink."

"I'm not thirsty."

"Well, I bloody am, and I promised the misses I wouldn't drink alone."

He glares at me. "*Drink*, batman."

I shrug as I knock my glass to his and take a gulp.

Three drinks later, with no new information, I step out onto the dark, grimy streets of Manchester. Hulme—the part tourists don't go. Hell, the place people who *live here* don't go.

But to me, it's a playground.

I look up at the night sky. Josie's place is close. I should go if only just to check in on her. There's been a rash of violence in this city against women lately. A lot of working girls have turned up dead, or near it. And all signs and accounts point to a single attacker.

But it's a not a night for that. Tonight, I need something else. Something more... physically punishing.

The sudden scream of a woman in the distance doesn't jolt me. It invigorates me. I whirl, turning to where it's coming from. A block's jog to the west, and I glance around the corner of an alley.

There are two of them, so I know it's not the one I've been hunting for. But this will do. I smile thinly as I pull down the black and white skull over my face.

This is a therapy I'll enjoy.

The two of them are pushing a woman against the wall with snickered chuckles and alcohol fueled whispers. I spot the glint of a blade and hear the shred of fabric under it.

"Please!" The woman sobs. "Please don't hurt me! Please God, please..."

But there's no God here tonight.

Just me.

The first man crumbles under the weight of the cinderblock I plow into the back of his head. The second whirls, and his blade flashes. He's not as drunk as I thought he was. But I dodge him anyway. I grab his wrist and slam it against the wall, again and again until knuckles break and the weapon falls.

When the blade is gone, his confidence goes with it. My skull mask takes whatever bravery he had left.

"Please!" He chokes in fear, his eyes wide. "Please, don't hurt me!"

I smile, my teeth flashing in genuine glee.

"She said the same thing," I turn to nod at the ashen-faced, terrified looking woman still standing there frozen and wide-eyed.

The man trembles.

"Just... just a bit of fun," he stammers. "That's all that was! Just a bit of—"

"So is this."

I turn to the woman again.

"You should go."

"Who—"

"I said *go*," I snarl.

She whirls, and she bolts out of the alley, clutching her bag and her ripped blouse closed. I turn back to the man, breathing in the fear exuding off of him.

"*Please*," he whimpers. "Please, have mercy—"

"Fresh out."

---

I LEAVE him bleeding but alive, with a brand new, six-letter word that starts with “R” and ends in “APIST” carved into his forearm.

The demons stop barking inside. For now, at least, I’m at peace. That is, except for the girl back at OHA who has no business being anywhere near my life at all. But I can’t seem to find a therapy for that. I can’t seem to fight, drink, burn, or scare Lizbet from my mind.

But like I said; the world is an unfair place. All I can do is try and keep the roaring and the pain in check, day by day.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

“Ms. BELSKY, A MOMENT?”

Professor Cottingsworth, nods in my direction as the whole class gets up at the sound of the bell.

Behind me, an awful, mean little bitch named Ainsley Hendershire—who Julianna and I have bonded over *detesting*—snickers.

“Tell me, Belsky,” she sneers when I turn to her. She’s flanked by two other of her little elite-clique minions, Cora Laurent and Mimi Balancia.

I purse my lips as I face them. “Yes?”

“Well, we were discussing it the other day, and we couldn’t quite decide which it is.”

I sigh. “Whatever your little punchline is, just get to it already?”

She grins. “We were curious which of the faculty you bribed to be here with *money*, and which you bribed with blowjobs?”

I can feel my face redden even though I’m trying hard to stop it.

“I mean, Cottingsworth is like sixty, but I bet you could still get a *rise* out—”



“Well, if I need any tips, I’ll be sure to ask an expert like you,”  
I smile thinly.

Mimi and Cora gasp, looking appalled like I’m the one who’s stepped out of line here. Ainsley scowls as she steps closer.

“Watch yourself, Belsky. You don’t scare—”

I bark, loudly and abruptly. Ainsley and her crew shriek and jump two feet back from me. She bristles as she collects herself, narrowing her eyes at me.

“You’re not rich. You’re not popular. Your only friend is a slag like Julianna McCreed. And you come from a family of *criminals*,” she sneers. “I have no idea how the fuck you got in here, but I swear to God, my father is aghast at the idea and he’s doing everything he can to get to the bottom of it.”

I smile as I raise a middle finger at her.

“Miss Belsky!”

I frown when I hear Professor Cottingsworth’s sharp tone behind me. Ainsley and her minions grin.

“*Better get to it,*” Ainsley mutters. She brushes my shoulder as she walks past me and makes a “gluck-gluck” sound as Mimi and Cora snicker.

I blow air through my lips when they’re gone. This crap doesn’t really bother me, it’s just annoying to deal with.

“*You come from a family of criminals.*”

So do Ilya, Misha, and Lukas, but everyone at OHA—even the snobby elites—treats them like rock stars. No one—least of all someone like Ainsley—would *dare* to speak to the three of them the way she sneers at me.

But I scowl. Fuck it. Let it go. Let it run off you. It's a pain in the ass to deal with, but I can deal with it.

Of the five families on the Bratva High Council that used to have six, only one seemed like someone I could reach out to with the desire to plead my case before the families: Olek Domitrovich, head of the Diduch Bratva. We've met once, when I was a girl. But he seemed the least likely to spit in my face. The most neutral towards my father of the five families. And he also agreed to keep it quiet.

Any day now, I'm going to get the call that the meeting has been set. Then it's on to part two of my plan: secure the votes, take back the empire, and start setting money up for Mara.

That's all that matters here. My father was drunk, abusive, disgusting piece of shit that seemed to excel at one thing: destroying anything good about my life. He took away my childhood. He took away my freedom to live without the fear of assassination. He took my sister, when his own reckless actions brought that drive-by that put her in the coma.

Semyon was a monster. But he was a rich monster. And when I go, I will make damn sure that money goes to my sister, so she finally has a life to live.

"Miss Belsky..."

I startle and turn towards Professor Cottingsworth.

"I'm sorry, Professor—"

He shakes his head. "I'm not blind to mean-girl bullying, Ms. Belsky. Just try not to respond. An eye for an eye, as they say."

I nod. "I'll try." I clear my throat. "Was there something you needed me for?"

“Just that I received an email during class asking me to direct you to Headmaster Lange’s office after the bell.”

*Ugh, now what.*

But I smile as best as I can. “Thank you, Professor.”

I turn to leave.

“An eye for an eye, Ms. Belsky!” He calls after me.

I roll mine as I step into the hall.

---

I ROUND the corner to the main office, when suddenly, I stutter to a stop, my breath catching.

No more a shadow. No more a lurking presence just over my shoulder. No more a tingling feeling on the back of my neck that disappears when I turn around.

Now, Lukas is just standing there, like a real person. Tangible. Physical. Six-foot-three, broad shoulders, and lean but muscled. He wears his school uniform like a conquering viking savage wearing the crown and cape of a vanquished nobility, with a mix of disdain and triumph. And yet, it also looks like it was tailored to fit him perfectly.

He looks up, and his gaze narrows, *glaring* a hole right through me with those piercing blue eyes.

“I told you to leave this place.”

His voice is gravely and thick, like perpetual morning voice; roughened beyond his eighteen years. And just like the last time I saw him, I’m almost stricken by how classically gorgeous he is, in this cold, dangerous way.

An alluring, tempting bottle of poison.

A dragon, hypnotizing you with his fierce, captivating gaze, right before he strikes.

I swallow as I force myself to tamp down the fear.

*Just another roadblock*, I remind myself. Just one more obstacle to get past or ignore. Eyes on the prize.

“Well,” I smile thinly as I shrug. “It’s a free country.”

The lame retort only seems to piss him off more. His mouth thins even harder, and his eyes narrow deeper.

“What are you *doing* here, Lizbet?”

I glare back “I’m here to see Headmaster Lange about something. Does that pass muster for you?”

Lukas doesn’t say anything. He just keeps glaring at me.

“How about you, hmm?” I sneer. “What are you, the hall monitor?”

“I’m here to see Headmaster Lange as well.”

“Now?” It comes out as a squeak, making me cringe.

“Yes, now.”

His eyes burn hotly into me. The sneering way he looks at me with curiosity mixed with loathing makes me want to throw it back in his face. This whole fucking school is scared of these three. What, because they have tattoos? Because their families are Bratva?

Well *so is mine*.

“Maybe they want us to be prom king and queen?” I say, dripping in sarcasm.

“I’d rather jump off the roof of the dining hall,” he mutters.

“I’d rather you would too,” I smile sweetly back.

Lukas's eyes narrow dangerously. But suddenly, the door to Headmaster Lange's office swings open.

"Ahh, lovely!" The older man with the silver hair and the tan tweed suit smiles broadly. "You're both here. Perfect. Why don't you both come on in?"

My brow knits. What the hell is going on? But when I turn to sneak a glance at Lukas, he looks equally as confused. Just the same, we both follow the headmaster into his office. He closes the door and gestures for us to sit in the two chairs in front of his desk. Then he steps around to sit in his own tall-backed chair and steeples his hands on the desk.

"Well, normally we have a review process for requests, as it is our position to keep students here on campus unless there's a major emergency. However, you've both been given the green light to leave campus, for family matters."

I frown. "Excuse me?"

Headmaster Lange taps his finger tips as he turns to smiles awkwardly at Lukas.

"Your, ah, *father*, Mr.—"

"Yes we all know who my father is," Lukas grunts.

"Now, I was under the impression *no one* knew who your father—"

"That's enough, Ms. Belsky," Headmaster Lange says sharply, cutting off my barbed comment about the coldly, dangerously beautiful boy sitting next to me being adopted. I did my research before I came here. Specially on the three of them who I knew would cause me the most problems.

Lukas cuts me in two with his gaze. But he says nothing.

“Mr. Komarov, your presence at a family affair has been requested, and permission has been granted to leave school. I trust your father has arrangements for you to—”

“I can make my own arrangements,” he growls quietly. “Thank you, Headmaster Lange.”

The headmaster smiles, actually looking charmed by Lukas. I want to roll my eyes. Of course, the son of the Bratva king gets a carte blanche to just up and leave for “family business.” Just like he gets to live in a fucking mansion, and walk around like a demi-god.

Headmaster Lange turns to me.

“And Ms. Belsky, your...” he frowns. “Your... well it just says ‘family’ requesting your presence for a family gathering?”

My brows knit. What?

“But the request is from a Mr. D?”

I stiffen as fear and excitement surge inside of me. Mr. D, as in Olek Domitrovich. Suddenly, I’m not remotely bothered by the looming, consuming presence of the striking hot and strikingly terrifying guy sitting next to me.

This is it. This is my call to The Bratva High Council, like I’ve been waiting for. Where I can assert myself as the next heir to the Belsky Bratva, take the fortune, put it in a trust for Mara, and then let the whole empire burn to the fucking ground for all I care.

That’s literally all I need; to get through this one vicious meeting. Maybe not unscathed but breathing. As long as I’m breathing, I’ll be fine. Well, Mara will be fine.

For a second, I wince. I can feel my chest constricting, and the shortness of breath that comes with it.

Fuck. Fuck-fuck-fuck, no.

I close my eyes and force a deep, slow breath. I do it again, centering myself; walking the line and keeping myself from falling to either side.

Slowly, I feel my heart unclench. I feel the spike of adrenaline melt away. I glance to the side, and my face burns at the way Lukas is peering at me curiously. But I ignore him as I turn back to what Headmaster Lange is saying.

“Mr. D says he’s sending a car to pick you up later today at four, outside the main office here.”

I nod. “Thank you, Headmaster.”

He smiles a nervous smile that definitely says that the word “bratva” came up more than a few times in both conversations involving the two of us leaving campus.

“Well, I hope you both enjoy your time away from campus, and we all look forward to your return.”

---

I KNOW I should just let it lie. I should leave it. But there’s something about the *annoyed* way Lukas just storms away from me once we’re out of the Headmaster’s office that ticks me off.

“Hey, just for the record!” I snap at his back. He halts, tensing as his ear turns back towards me. I suck on my teeth, glaring at his back.

“I don’t know why you’re so hell-bent on avoiding me, or being such a dick to me. But I’m not here to screw with you, okay? Any of you! I’m not even—”

I don't finish the sentence of "I'm not even going here very long." That's for me and me alone to know.

Lukas's jaw grinds as he slowly turns towards me. His blue eyes pierce into me, cutting me to the core and making me fight not to tremble.

"I don't give a shit why you're here," he rasps. "I want you gone, like I told you the day you walked in here."

"Well, I'm working on it," I snap.

As soon as I have that money, I'm obviously gone from OHA.

"Work faster."

He whirls to storm away.

"You know what?" My voice cuts the distance between us, halting him again.

"However much you hate who my father was?" I hiss. "Trust me, I hate him more!"

Lukas snarls as he whirls back on me, taking my breath away with the storm in his narrowed eyes.

"Don't," he grunts.

"Don't *what*."

"Don't expect me to feel sorry for you because your Amex black card ran out when your piece of shit father stopped breathing."

My eyes narrow. "You don't know—"

"Go play the poor little rich girl with someone else, princess. And *trust* that you are incorrect in that assumption about who hates your father more."



I seethe, feeling the rage and the terror of those years when I was younger rushing back. I can feel the claws of the past reaching for me.

Like he did.

I'm trembling in rage and fear as I slowly shake my head.

"You have no *idea* what I—"

"And you have *no fucking clue* about me either," he snaps back coldly. "Your father was a monster who tried to destroy my family."

"Join the club!" I roar.

My outburst seems to halt him for a second. He frowns, his eyes peering into me.

"Well, anyway," I mutter, quieter now. "You can untwist your panties. I'll be on my way to being gone when you get back from your little vacation."

"Good."

"Great," I snap. I whirl on my heel, and I storm away, doing everything I can to ignore the lingering heat on my skin and the burning sensation of eyes boring into the back of my head.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



I SLEEP like shit on the plane.

I always sleep like shit, especially on planes. Planes bring a different breed of nightmare. Not the ones that involve the black house on the cliff over the ocean with the black door. They involve the “travel jobs.” When Yanis and I would be... brought places.

I close my eyes shut tightly. My fingers dig into the armrest of the private jet. But there’s no squeezing that’ll push this out of my head. No drugs, drinks, pain, or suffering. I’ve tried them all. Twice.

But it’s a short flight to London, at least.

Slowly, I push my thoughts away from the past. Instead, as they do a lot these last few weeks, they land on Lizbet.

My eyes narrow.

My anger towards her is shrouded in confusion. I don’t quite understand why I feel the animosity towards her that I do. And for some reason, it’s a deeper animosity than Misha or even Ilya seem to bear her.

Sure, they both look down their noses at the daughter of Semyon Belsky. They both glare at her, and make sure she feels their wrath when she’s near.

But it seems deeper with me. It's as if I feel this *need* to hate her. To shove her away and off a fucking cliff.

Part of it is, yes, what her father did or almost did to mine, and to Yuri. But it's more. It's something in my blood—something that hates her and yet wants her. It's a piece of me that wants to keep my distance and yet can't stay away from her.

Maybe that's why I spend my days avoiding even seeing her, and my nights prowling the darkness watching her.

Mercifully, my pulse is somewhat back to normal, and the cold sweats are gone when we land in London.

“There's my boy.”

I grin as I walk down the gangway stairs and embrace my dad. He hugs me back fiercely, holding me tightly.

Father, adoptive father, Viktor, Vik, Mr. Komarov. Whatever. He's my father, and I'll call him my father until the day I die. Just as I'd do anything he or Fiona asks of me, unquestionably.

I owe them my life.

Viktor and Fiona run an organization called the “Free Them” foundation. On the surface, the non-profit works with international and local law enforcement to hunt down child trafficking and rescue those who've been stolen away.

However, the foundation has a darker side that operates in the shadows, with the vast resources of both the Komarov and Volkov Bratvas behind it. That's the side that hunts down the monsters responsible for these horrors and stamps them out of existence.

That's the part of the organization that found me, four and a half years ago. It was Viktor's men who broke down that black door and pulled me out of hell.

Mercifully, a lot of the children the organization frees are saved before any true horrors can be inflicted on them.

But there are those who aren't saved until later. Those who've looked the devil in the eye for years and years—who've been in the darkness and in hell for too long—before their freedom is won.

I'm one of those. It's why I'm broken, like a half-mended toy that's been given a life of needing nothing. Viktor and Fiona are beyond wealthy; more powerful than state leaders, more money than some of the richest tech billionaires in the world. I will want for *nothing* in this life with them, and I've been given every single comfort, opportunity and ounce of love I never had.

But I'm still broken. I'll always be broken. In a way, they both know that, too. But it doesn't stop them from trying with me, every single chance they have.

My dad hugs me tightly, clapping me on the back. He's grinning as he pulls back.

"How's the term going? I feel like we've barely had a chance to catch up the last few months."

"Oh, good," My usual smile is a thin line. With Viktor and Fiona, it at least slightly curls in the corners.

"Ilya found a girlfriend. Misha's married to a princess." I shrug. "Same old."

My dad chuckles as we get into the waiting Range Rover. I don't mention Lizbet. Or the... *presence*, whatever or whoever it is, on OHA campus that came along with her.

I love Viktor and Fiona. But there's whole pieces of me they'll never know about. Whole chunks of my past and whole rotten, fucked up, blackened parts of my soul, they'll never see.

There's no need to. The past can stay there, dead, charred, and buried.

"You're curious why I flew you to London."

I smirk. He knows my silences well.

Viktor turns. "I wanted you to be a part of this. Because one day, you'll be standing in my shoes."

I raise a brow. But he just looks me dead in the eye.

"You will, Lukas. Sasha will have his own path. Or he'll have this one, if you don't wish to take my path."

Sasha is my infant little brother, Viktor and Fiona's biological son. My dad knows I struggle a little with him saying the empire will be mine. I'm not his blood; Sasha is. And yet Viktor sees no difference, and I love him for it.

He waves off my questioning look. "Well, tonight, something is happening that's happened once in the last forty years."

"Oh?"

"The Bratva High Council of the great families is meeting, all together."

My brow shoots up. Shit, that's a big deal.

"Well, almost all of them," he grunts.

I know he means "aside from Semyon Belsky, because that piece of shit is dead."

"Meeting for what?"

"Unpleasantness, mostly," he sighs. "Something that could upset the loose truce we all have." He waves me off. "Anyway, let's forget that for now and talk about you until we have to get into this shit, shall we?"

---

HALF AN HOUR LATER, we pull up to a huge, old and moneyed building in Westminster, London. When I step out, I glance up at the lit-up clock-face of Big Ben, and the illuminated Palace of Westminster, and I smirk.

Here we are, barely out of its shadow, and a cabal more powerful than the men and women who meet in that building.

Heavy security ushers us inside to a well-guarded, posh interior. It's more than guards, though. This is the heads of all five major Bratva families meeting here tonight. They'll have each brought their own security, snipers on neighboring rooftops, drones hovering around the building. This very meeting will have been set up in four other locations around the world, in case anyone's trying to score a five-for-one hat trick.

The only reason there isn't a full-on war in here or out there on the streets with all of this security is the truce, of sorts. The agreement between the High Council families that hostilities between them solve nothing; that at least a mutual coexistence, so long as no one steps on anyone else's toes, is good for everyone.

A rising tide lifts all ships, as they say.

"Lukas."

I turn and smile as Yuri, Ilya's uncle, grins and approaches me. I shake his hand warmly.

"Viktor told me he was bringing you to this. I'm glad you're here. Perhaps it'll be you at the next council in forty years?"

I'm not sure how to respond to that, but he just grins and claps me on the back. When he moves aside, his second in command, Lev Nychkov smiles and steps forward to shake my hand. Behind him, I see Nikolai—Yuri's son-in-law and Lev's brother—as well as Yuri's second in command, Maksim.

Lev and Nikolai were part of the crew that found me bloody, malnourished, and near death, tied to a chair in a dark room four and half years ago.

“Good to see you looking well,” Lev growls quietly.

“Oh for fuck's sake, tell him. I've bitten my tongue the whole damn ride from the airport,” Viktor sighs.

Lev grins. “Zoey's pregnant.”

My heart surges, and my usual thin smile curls a bit more. I grip his hand firmer, genuinely happy for him.

“That's fantastic news.”

“Hope you're ready to babysit.”

The voice inside of me says something to the effect of “I can think of several billion better candidates in the world.” On the outside, I just sort of smile thinly.

“I'm joking, kid,” Lev chuckles, along with the rest of them before Yuri clears his throat.

“We should get upstairs. I believe all the others have already arrived.”

At the top of an elegant elevator, we step out into a hall of dark wood, warm lighting, and expensive art. At the end, two guards in black suits open a set of double doors to the inner chamber—a dark, softly lit boardroom of minimal but tasteful design.

The far wall is all windows, looking directly out to the Palace of Westminster, though through bullet-proof, one-way glass. Glass bauble lighting hangs from the ceiling above a huge, half-circle wooden table set with six chairs around the curve, facing the doorway.

Three of those chairs are already filled, along with a few others sitting behind the heads of each Bratva family.

“This way,” Viktor grunts quietly, ushering me towards the left.

He takes the first chair, with Yuri directly next to him, and me just behind him. Lev, Maksim, and Nikolai also sit back behind the two heads.

I look around the room, and I have to marvel. Not just for the fact that somehow life has brought me from where I was to *here*. But at the sheer power collected in this one board room. This is a group of men who operate a loose truce of empires that rival most first world States. Not to mention, a collective wealth of *hundreds* of billions.

There’s my father, Viktor Komarov, head of the Kashenko Bratva—worldwide, now. Officially, now that Ivan Kashenko has stepped down. Next around the semi-circle is Yuri, head of the Volkov Bratva and unquestionably the most powerful family at this council.

My gaze continues around the table. Next to Yuri, there’s Olek Domitrovich, head of the Diduch Bratva, then a space and an empty chair that once belonged to Semyon Belsky, may he rot in hell.

Marko Kalishnik, of the Kalishnik Bratva, is after that. And next to him sits Antin Reznikov of Reznikov Bratva. But next



to and just behind him, like I am with Viktor, is a face I don't know; a younger man about my age.

I freeze. I *do* know him. But... no. No, I don't. I can't place him. Or maybe I can. My brow knits. I fucking hate with this happens, and it does from time to time. It's like the wiring in my head is fucked up from my time before, and sometimes what's real and what is not isn't so clear.

"Konstantin, Antin's son," Viktor grunts in my ear, seeing where my gaze is.

The guy—Konstantin, looks at me, eyes narrowing like he's sussing me out. But also, like he knows me back...

I frown. Or this is in my head. Like a lot of things. I pinch the palm of my left hand with the fingers on my right, counting backwards from thirty. It's one of the few "survival tricks" I decided wasn't bullshit from the army of shrinks when I was first brought into the world of the living.

*Center. Remember what's real. Focus on what's real.*

"Gentleman," Yuri clasps his hands together and sits forward.

The point of this council is to keep things democratic, at least to a degree. And the ceasefire puts all the families here at this table as equals. But the Volkov power reach is *vast*; definitely more so than anyone else here. To be honest, it's the fact that Yuri is a reasonable, non-psychotic person that he hasn't just seized full power. But as he's without question the most powerful man at this table, I supposed unofficially makes him the MC for the evening.

"We are... ah,"

One of the guards steps out of the shadows and whispers in his ear. Yuri nods and turns back to the table.

“Gentlemen, we are ready to begin. She’s here.”

My brow furrows as I turn to Viktor.

“Who’s—”

Just then, the doors to the boardroom open. And Lizbet fucking Belsky walks in.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

THIS IS THE PLAN. *My* plan.

Step one was paying off the right people to free up some of my father's money. Enough to get me into OHA. I needed legitimacy to play in these peoples' world, and that gets it for me. Plus, there was a provision in Semyon's last living will that stipulated inheritance would only be bestowed on either of his daughters if we were enrolled at Oxford Hills and getting exemplary grades or had graduated with them.

So, that was step one. And that was the easy part. Now, I'm stepping into a den of monsters: the Bratva High Council.

I hated my father. I still hate him, even in death. I hate the name that will follow me and haunt me forever. But I *will* have my empire. My father took everything from me. *Everything*. I'm taking it back. But it's not for me. Not in the long-term. It's for my sister.

"Ms. Belsky, they're ready for you," the guard next to the door nods at me as he touches his earpiece. He reaches for the door, but I shake my head.

"One second."

He nods. I take a deep breath.

It all hinges on this meeting the whole rest of my plans is now in the hands of five men—some who hated my father, some who hated him but did good business with him. And all who pretty much don't know me at all.

I've dug deep and done as much research on the men on the other side of these doors as I could. But preparation will only take me so far. Knowing which buttons to push with each of them in there will help. But ultimately, my fate—or Mara's, really—is now in their hands.

*So let's do this*, I mutter to myself. I take one last breath, and fill my lungs with every single drop of confidence, power, and attitude I can muster, and I push the doors wide open.

Instantly, I stutter. My confidence falters and sways. My willpower to even do this is ripped to shreds at the clawed feet of the dragon himself, who is sitting *right there* facing me.

Lukas's eyes blaze when they see me. His brows knit deeply as his mouth thins to a line. His very presence here is like a black cloud filling the room. Like ink dripped into clear water until it bleeds and dyes it all.

*Fuck*. This is not good. Not good at all. I want to scream at myself for not putting two and two together: the Bratva High Council meets, the son of one of those men on the High Council gets permission to leave school at the same time, and I thought... what, that Lukas was going on *vacation*?

I groan. This is not good for the plan. The plan is asserting my claim to my father's throne. This council, however, has the ability to block that. But Bratva High Council law, they can vote to liquidate the remnants of the Belsky empire amongst themselves, instead.

This is a trial. And the jury just got stacked against me, hard.

“Ms. Belsky.”

The man speaking is Yuri Volkov. Speaking of a stacked jury. This one is a man my father tried to kill, underhandedly, too. And as I said, I’ve done my research. I know that those piercing, gorgeous blue eyes and that charming smile are weapons to Yuri. They mask the power of the demon king of the most powerful Bratva in the world. And one of the men who certainly wants to take this empire from me.

“Mr. Volkov,” I smile sweetly, playing the part, because I have to. “Thank you for seeing me.”

He nods to a single chair along the flat edge of the half-circle table facing me.

“Have a seat.”

I can feel Lukas’s eyes burning into me. It’s taking everything I can not to give in and look, because I feel like I’ll turn to stone or fire if I do. I groan inside, thinking of how quippy and clever I thought I was giving him attitude at Headmaster’s office.

*“Maybe they want us to be prom king and queen?”*

*“I was under the impression no one knew who your father was.”*

My confidence shrivels as I cringe at my own hubris. But I need to push on. I keep my eyes focused ahead as I take my seat in the chair.

Yuri clears his throat, addressing the whole room.

“As we all know, this council formed during our mutual agreement to a ceasefire. It was formed after the UN model, as a way of self-policing ourselves and making sure the truce was held to by all parties. It was *also* on the shoulders of this

council, however, to decide what to do with an empire in the case of dissolution, criminal prosecution, death, or otherwise, since that would affect all families in this truce.”

He sits back in his chair and strokes his chiseled jaw.

“We’re here tonight to discuss the holdings of the late Semyon Belsky and what remains of the Belsky empire. Lizbet here would like to assert her claim as Semyon’s only...” he clears his throat. “Only currently *capable* heir. Though there have been hostilities involved, because of the ceasefire, Kashenko and Volkov will not simply take, as they would have before in light of...”

“Of my father trying to kill you?”

The room seems to stiffen as one. All eyes dart towards me, but I stay strong and I keep my shoulders high and back as I look right at Yuri. I’m pushing it, I know that. But I also know it shows this room full of men that I have balls. It shows them I can play with the big boys, and I know that’s part of the test here.

Yuri smiles thinly. “Yes, *that*. So, this is a vote. Either we dissolve the Belsky empire evenly amongst the five families here, or we hand over the keys to Lizbet. Each family here has a vote of equal weight, majority carries.”

I watch, my heart sinking as Lukas turns to whisper into his father’s ear. His dad frowns, nodding as his jaw tightens. Yuri turns to look at Viktor.

“Any discussion that needs to happen first?”

Viktor shakes his head. “*Nyet*. I’m ready.”

“Your vote is first, Viktor,” Yuri says quietly.

Lukas's father eyes me coldly. "The Kashenko family votes to distribute Semyon's empire amongst the members of this council."

Shit. Bad news, though not unexpected from him. My eyes swivel to Lukas, who's looking at me like he wants me to burst into flames, and might help that happen if it doesn't occur quickly.

"Ms. Belsky," Viktor says, his voice a little less cold than before. "I do want you to know that my vote has nothing to do with past disputes between your late father and I. That's just the protocol this very council came up with, with your father's vote, I might add."

Yuri nods when Viktor sits back in his chair.

"So that's one in for of distribution." he sighs. "I also vote for distribution. Again, this is looking past any..." his eyes narrow. "Any *past* your father and I had, Lizbet. I mean that sincerely. This is just business, I'm sorry."

"That's fine," I hiss quietly.

Crap. I had Yuri as a fifty-fifty on the vote. Yes, he hated my father. But he's also a businessman. I was hoping he'd see the merit in keeping the Belsky Bratva going, with someone else at the helm.

No such luck.

Yuri turns to the elderly Olek Domitrovich, head of the Diduch Bratva, and my "Mr. D"—my one foothold into this council and a favorable vote. I don't even want to think it, but I know this whole thing rides on him. If he votes no, I'm lost.

"Olek?"

Olek Domitrovich eyes me impassively. But I can see the faint hint of a smile in his lips.

“I vote for Ms. Belsky to keep her father’s assets.”

My heart leaps—hard enough that I have to consciously calm myself and force a quick breathing exercise. I could honestly *kiss* him Olek. If he wasn’t seventy-four years old, I suppose.

The next seat at the table is empty. My eyes narrow at it, imagining my father smoking cigars, drinking whatever he could, and passing judgment on someone like me. *He’d* vote to strip me of my money. Just because he was a piece of shit like that.

Marko Kalishnik, of the Kalishnik Bratva, is next to vote. He frowns, stroking his chin as his eyes scan me.

“I have reservations about a girl your age running an empire, Ms. Belksy.”

I know he and my dad had no love for each other. So I can use this ammo now.

“Well, my father was a drunken buffoon and he seemed to keep the lights on.”

Marko snorts with laughter, his stern face pulling into an instant grin.

*Mission success.* Torpedoes have hit their mark.

He chuckles and spreads his palms towards me. “Then have at it, Ms. Belsky. Kalishnik votes in favor of Lizbet keeping the empire.”

He eyes me with amusement.

“I look forward to seeing what you do with it, Ms. Belsky.”

*Dissolve it. Take the cash. Burn it to the fucking ground.*



All eyes swivel to Antin Reznikov of the Reznikov Bratva. Next to him is a younger guy my age—his son, Konstantin, I know from my research. I've also heard that he's the same sort of dark, power-hungry man as his father.

This is obviously my first time seeing him face-to-face, though. The younger man looks at me darkly, and instantly, I can feel my skin crawl under his gaze.

But I drag my attention back to his father. This is it. The last vote to decide what happens here. And Antin, from my research, is another fifty-fifty.

God, I hate gambling.

“Antin,” Yuri says tersely. From the way he glares at the head of the Reznikov Bratva, I can see there's clearly not a lot of camaraderie between them.

“Antin, your vote will break this tie—”

“I have no vote.”

My heart lurches. Yuri scowls across the table.

“I'm afraid you must—”

“I have another suggestion, instead.”

Yuri's jaw clenches. My insides do too. All I know about Antin Reznikov is that he's contentious, and power hungry. But he and my father did prosperous business together, so I was hoping for his vote.

“Why distribute?” He shrugs, smirking like he's got a trick up his sleeve.

“Because,” Viktor growls across the table from him. “Because that is the will of this council, yourself included, Antin. And Semyon's, at that,” he adds, glancing at me. But when I glance

back, I tremble when I realize Lukas is scorching a hole through me.

“Ah yes, yes,” Antin muses. “But what of the old ways?”

Lukas’s dark eyes hook into me, cutting me to the bone like black knives. But when Antin speaks, I tear my gaze away.

“I’m sorry, old ways?”

He grins wickedly at me. “Through marriage, Ms. Belsky.”

My face pales, and I shiver at the way he looks at me.

“I think perhaps she’s a little young for you, Antin,” Yuri growls. “And unless I’m mistaken, your *existing* wife might have something to say about—”

“Not me,” Antin chuckles gruffly. He turns to the young man next to him, with the dark eyes and dark grin.

My stomach drops. Oh *hell no*.

“My son. Konstantin.”

Not a chance. Not a *chance*. Besides the obvious reasons, there’s something downright scary about the way Konstantin has been looking at me ever since I walked in. Lukas scares me, too. But Lukas looks at me like he wants to turn me into a pillar of fire.

This guy looks at me like he wants to wear my skin after he kills me in my sleep.

“Pass,” I say thinly.

Antin glares at me. “It was not a request.”

I laugh coldly. “I understood that. The answer is still the same.”

His face darkens as his lips pull back into a grimace.

“You think you have *balls*, walking in here and throwing the will of the council in our own fucking faces—”

“*Is this the will?*”

It’s a bold move to take it there. But I read people well, to my advantage. And when I look at Viktor and Yuri, I can tell they have reservations about this.

“Would the rest of you like me to marry him so that the Reznikov family takes everything?”

“It is the old way!” Antin snaps.

“Yes, and this is the *new* way,” Yuri seethes. “Which we all voted on! Antin, this is absurd. You *must* vote—”

“No!” the other kingpin snaps back. “No, I abstain until this matter is resolved, as it directly effects the outcome of our current vote!”

Vitkor mutters in Russian.

“What was that?!” Antin yells.

“Allow me to speak up!”

“Please, gentlemen!” Olek frowns, holding a hand up. “Please, let us not fight.” He turns to eye Yuri. “Antin *is* right. We can’t move forward unless we settle the matter of the first vote even having legitimacy. We will vote first on whether or not the Belsky empire goes to the Reznikovs, through marriage between their son and Semyon’s heir.

I balk, feeling ill. “*Excuse me?*” I stare in shock. “I’m sorry you can’t *make me* marry someone.”

“Correct, Ms. Belsky. We cannot, of course. We can, however, dictate what happens to your father’s empire, I’m afraid.

According to the old ways, you would retain fifty percent of the existing empire while married.”

I grit my teeth. Half. I would get *half*.

“So long as the marriage lasts, of course.”

*Fuck.*

“If you divorce, or pass away, young as you are,” he chuckles, like it’s a joke. It’s not. Young people die all the time, I want to yell. But I stay silent; miserably feeling my plans for Mara’s future evaporate around me.

“In those instances, the holdings would transfer in their entirety to the Reznikov family.”

“This is barbaric and old fashioned,” Yuri hisses. “We’re not voting on this.”

Olek nods. “I have to agree. The old ways were changed for a reason. Mr. Komarov?”

“Hell no,” Viktor growls.

Olek turns to Antin. “I’m sorry, Antin, but I’m afraid you need a second to bring this vote before the—”

“He has it.”

My heart wrenches at Marko Kalishnik’s voice. He frowns as he sits forward.

“I believe in the old ways. I want to at least humor this vote.”

I stare at him.

“No, you—you can’t do this,” I choke. “This is *my* empire—”

“And half of it will stay yours,” Antin smiles thinly. “So long as you *breathe*.”

The words chill me as much as I'm sure they were intended to. I sit there, frozen, watching my world fall apart.

No no no. This wasn't supposed to happen this way. Not at all.

"Fine," Yuri mutters with disdain. "Fine. We will vote again, in one month—"

"Actually..." Olek clears his throat with a small frown. "Let us vote now." He looks up at me, his brow furrowed. "I am sorry, Lizbet. I am not in favor of the old ways. *But*, I think I might see this as a best possible outcome for you. You cannot run your father's empire by yourself—"

"I'll be the judge of that," I hiss through clenched teeth.

"And if you fail, it effects all of us." He shrugs. "A rising tide lifts all ships. But a drought scuttles them all just as unilaterally."

And suddenly, I realize my entire plan is going up in flames.

"I am afraid," Olek continues. "That I have to side with Antin and Marko." His face looks pained as he speaks to me. "Obviously you don't need to be in love with Konstantin. But if you are legally wed, the matter becomes settled. You keep half of your father's *considerable* assets. The Reznikov family takes the other half."

*So long as I'm alive.*

This isn't supposed to go like this. I can't do it this way.

"So, for a vote..."

"Yes, to marriage and the old ways," Antin growls.

"Seconded," Marko adds. He turns to me, frowning. "Sorry, Ms. Belsky. I have the same thoughts and worries as Olek."

Olek nods. “So that’s three yes, which I believe carries the majority.”

My head is spinning as I whirl to see Lukas muttering to his father. Slowly, he turns away, and his eyes level and narrow on me dangerously.

Viktor clears his throat. He glances at his son, frowning, before he turns back to the table.

“There’s another measure to consider.”

“Goddamnit, Komarov!” Antin roars. “You pussy-footing—”

“*Mind your fucking tongue!*”

Lukas’s explosive response seems to jolt the entire room. He snarls, half out of his chair as his father puts a retraining hand on his chest.

“*Lukas, sit,*” Viktor says firmly but gently.

“Yes, Viktor,” Antin chuckles. “Restrain your *pet*—”

“Another word, and I will blow your fucking head off right here in this room, come whatever consequences follow.”

Viktor’s voice is utterly calm, yet laced with acid.

“And I will not hesitate.”

Antin glares back at him in the ensuing silence. But he says nothing.

Viktor turns to his son. He shakes his head at something Lukas mutters under his breath.

“Should we let the boy speak for himself?” Olek suggests. “He is a man, after all. And you’ve brought him in to see the shoes he will presumably fill one day—”

“He doesn’t get a vote!” Antin snarls.

“Of course not, Antin,” Olek sighs. “But we can let him speak. That is the whole point of us being here, is it not?” He turns to look at Viktor. “However, the vote carries in favor of the old ways—”

“We accept the vote in that favor. It’s just that we have another option, aside from Konstantin.”

It suddenly clicks.

*Oh God, no...*

“Me,” Lukas growls quietly. His gorgeously terrifying, coldly beautiful gaze swivels to scorch into me.

“She can marry me, instead.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



“YOU *KNOW* what happens if Antin takes the Belsky holdings,” I hiss as my dad stares at me.

But of course he does. So does Yuri, that’s why they’re leery of that dark-haired little shit Antin across the table. He’s the weakest part of this council, not because he’s weak, but because he wishes for it to not exist.

Because Antin craves power and money over all else, no matter the cost of achieving it. Semyon Belsky didn’t leave a lot—well, sure, a *fuck*-load of money by most of the world’s standards. Just not by the standards of this room. And a lot of it is locked up with various government agencies.

But there’s a lot. And it’s an amount that could turn the Reznikov family from an equal if not uneasy partner to a force to be reckoned with. He could rally other lesser families and start his own power grab.

I turn to level my gaze at Lizbet. As always when it concerns her, my head is a war of hate versus curious need. I should hate her for who her father was. But this is about family. *My* family.

The ones who saved me, and who will give me an empire one day, when I should be dead in a gutter in Montenegro.



No matter the cost. No matter the fight. *This* is where my loyalty lies now.

“Should we let the boy speak for himself?” Olek Domitrovich says gently. He smiles at me. “He is a man, after all. And you’ve brought him in to see the shoes he will presumably fill one day—”

“He doesn’t get a vote!” Antin snarls.

“Of course not, Antin,” Olek sighs. “But we can let him speak. That is the whole point of us being here, is it not?” He turns to look at Viktor. “However, the vote carries in favor of the old ways—”

“We accept the vote in that favor. It’s just that we have another option, aside from Konstantin.”

He turns back to me. And slowly, he gives a small nod of his chin.

“Me.”

My voice seems heavier, thicker than usual. Slowly, I turn my gaze from the stunned men around the table, until it burns right into Lizbet’s big blue eyes.

“She can marry me, instead.”

The room is pin-drop silent for a second. All I can hear is my own pulse. All I can feel is the dull, ever-present ache under my skin. All I see is her big blue eyes staring at me in horror.

But so be it. I know now why she came to OHA, and why she crashed into my world. She wanted to come here and play badass with the High Council to take back control of her shithead dead father’s empire. Antin and his vote have fucked that for her. But now, it’s a matter of who is going to get half.

And if it's between Komarov and Reznikov, you can be damn sure I'll bleed to make sure it's my family that takes this prize.

Or, as the case may be, marry Semyon's daughter, who both quiets and enrages the demons in my head.

"Ms. Belsky," Olek sighs. "We have voted. But now, you have a choice between Reznikov or Komarov."

She looks like she wants to throw up. But she made this bed when she walked in here thinking there was any chance in hell of this council simply giving her an empire. Now, she's going to sleep in it, one way or another.

"Again, I want to remind you that you will retain fifty percent of your interests—"

"I need time," she croaks. "To..." Lizbet swallows. "To consider my options."

Antin swears. "This is *bullshit*—"

"You have two weeks," Yuri growls quietly. "Can we all agree on that?"

"No," Antin snaps. "This is absurd—"

A chorus of "ayes" from every other votes at the table drowns him out.

Yuri shrugs, glaring at Antin. "Then the motion carries by the council." He turns to glance at me, his gaze hard but curious, before he turns to Lizbet.

"Ms. Belsky, in two weeks, you will pick one of these families to—"

She doesn't let him finish. She just gets up, turns, and storms out of the room.

---

LATER, in the lobby downstairs, the Volkov and Komarov men are talking quietly amongst themselves. I put my hand on my dad's shoulder as I slip a smoke between my lips.

"I'll be outside."

He eyes the cigarette but doesn't say anything as he nods. It's the same way you don't harp on guys in AA, or in combat PTSD support groups who're smoking cigarettes. You just don't.

Before I can leave though, the elevator opens. A scowling Antin Reznikov strides out, followed by his son, Konstantin. I watch them march wordlessly past the rest of us and out the doors. But once they're outside, Antin suddenly whirls and cuffs Konstantin hard across the mouth.

His son snarls something. Antin roars and hits him again before he turns and gets into a waiting limo. Konstantin wipes his mouth and spits. He sneers at the taillights of his father's car, and then whirls to stalk away.

*Yikes*

I step out into the night and flick the lighter, igniting the end of the cigarette as I draw slowly. Three guards follow me out, but I wave them off.

"Mr. Komarov, I'm afraid I have to insist—"

I glare at him coldly. I say nothing, but the look conveys what I would if I felt like speaking words right now: do I *look* like someone anyone in their right mind would fuck with right now?

He scowls, but he nods. "We'll be right back here."

“Thanks.”

I turn to stroll a little deeper into the embrace of the night, sucking gently on the cigarette. It’s not even a habit I enjoy. But like prowling the streets of Manchester, or getting punched in the face by Misha, it helps. It has a way sometimes of shrinking down the pain; letting me focus when I have to.

And I need to focus right now, because I’m not entirely sure what the fuck I’m doing volunteering to marry Semyon Belsky’s daughter. The girl who extinguishes the blaze inside of me, while simultaneously lighting three other ones.

My conundrum. My unexplainable fixation. The curiosity that might very well get this cat killed.

I take a drag as I turn the corner towards Parliament Square. When suddenly, the shape hurls at me from out of the darkness. I whirl, catching the fist before it lands. My hand tightens around a soft, feminine wrist, and my eyes narrow down into the furious blue eyes and the mane of blonde.

“You son of a bitch!” Lizbet hisses at me.

“Excuse me?”

She yanks her wrist free of me. She balls her hands to fists as she snarls up into my face.

“What the *hell*, Lukas?! I mean what the *fuck* did I do to you?!”

I glare at her. Nothing. She did nothing to me. And yet, everything. In her veins runs the blood of the bastard who almost took away the new life that has been given to me.

“Do you have *any* idea how hard I’ve been working to get to this point?! To take back what is mine—”

“A broken throne from a broken, piece of shit, backstabbing scum?!” I snap. “Is that what you’ve been working at?”

“*Yes!*” She bellows. “You think I have anything but utter contempt and hatred for my dad? If so, you’re fucking wrong. Call him whatever curses you want, I’ll second them. But this is *my* empire—”

“And half of it would be—”

“That’s not going to work for me.”

I laugh coldly. “Am I supposed to give a shit?”

She purses her lips.

“It’s half, so long as I’m married to you, or to Konstantin.”

“Well, those are the old ways of the Bratva. I didn’t make them—”

“But you will support them.”

“I’ll support *anything* that gets my family what it needs,” I hiss quietly.

“And you’d fuck up my future and my inheritance because of a grudge you hold about my father and your friend’s fucking uncle?!”

I shrug. “Yes.”

Lizbet groans deeply and shakes her head. “They’re right about you,” she sneers.

“Are they now.”

The levity and roughness in my voice makes her pale, just a little. Her lips purse tight.

“What are ‘they’ right about, where it concerns me?” I growl darkly.

She swallows, still glaring at me, but with a hint of fear on her face.

“Nothing,” she snaps.

I suddenly move closer, and she gasps as I loom over her, all but pinning her to the wrought-iron fence behind her.

“What do they say about me, poor little rich girl?” I hiss quietly.

Lizbet eyes me, her face grim and full of beautiful defiance.

“That you’re a psychopath,” she says tersely. “That you’re a monster that prowls the nights looking to...”

She shakes her head.

“Looking to *what*?” I hiss.

“Hurt things.”

I smile thinly.

“I see. You think this is me just being a psychopath?”

*Because trust me, I can play that role so deeply you’d scream.*

“Does that matter?”

“Not really.” I shrug. “The choice is yours. But I can sweeten the deal.”

She laughs coldly. “Sweeten being married to you? There’s not enough sugar in the fucking world.”

“You’ll keep fifty-five percent, not fifty.”

“That doesn’t work for me.”

“I’m not bargaining any higher.”

Her eyes narrow as her lips purse. “It’s not the amount...” she snaps her mouth shut, whirling to shake her head angrily.

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

She gasps when I grab her arm and yank her back around to face me. But I stiffen, my head spinning when I do. Because there’s suddenly this pulse of something that shudders between us. It makes me twitch, and a throb of my usual pain lances through my arms for a second, making me wince before I step back.

I shake my head, collecting myself as I stare at her curiously.

“What do you mean it’s not the amount.”

“I mean...” she grits her teeth and sighs thickly.

“*Fine*. It’s the ‘have to still be married to keep it’ part.”

“Those are the rules—”

“Well those rules won’t work for me.”

I scowl. “Why not?”

“Because in a few months...” she looks down.

“In a few months...?”

“In a few months I can’t be married, to either of you,” she blurts. “I just... can’t be.”

“What the fuck is happening in a few—”

“None of your business,” she snaps. “But I won’t be married to either of you.” She shakes her head again. “You know what? Fuck this. I can’t do this.”

She whirls and starts to walk away.

“If you refuse, you’ll get nothing.”

My words stop her cold.

“The council will dissolve Semyon’s empire and distribute it. You’ll have nothing.”

Lizbet is all but shaking with rage as she slowly turns to snarl at me.

“So I have to fucking marry one of you assholes for the *privilege* of keeping half of what’s mine?”

“Sure looks that way.”

“I’d rather jump in front of a train.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged.”

She glares at me. I stare back, unblinking as I slowly puff on the cigarette.

“So what do you say, Lizbet?” I growl.

“Oh, plenty,” she says thinly. “But let me summarize.”

She lifts a hand and flips me the middle finger. Then she whirls and starts to storm away.

“They’ll take everything—”

“Then come and get it!” She roars over her shoulder, before she’s out of sight

But *not* out of mind.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)





## LIZBET

I'M FUMING as I storm across Parliament Square, past Big Ben, and over Westminster Bridge. I feel like I'm this ball of hate and erratic energy about to explode. I feel like I *want* to explode. But instead, I just keep angrily walking until I find myself outside an extremely classy looking bar and restaurant.

Five minutes later, I'm already feeling better. Sort of. I'm still fuming. I still want to scream at the injustice of all of this. But at least now, I'm sitting at a gorgeous, classy, dimly lit cocktail bar overlooking the Thames, with a tall martini sitting in front of me.

I take a deep breath and lower my lips to the frosty rim. I sip gingerly, feeling the alcohol burn its way down my throat as I exhale slowly.

No one said this would be easy.

I knew there'd be roadblocks. I knew there'd be lots of them, with barbed wire at the top. I just never in a hundred years expected to be faced with *this*.

It's a terrible choice, and neither one gets me what I want. But now I have to somehow pick one of the two dangerous, viperous, Bratva psychopaths to marry and see where I can go from there.

I groan, thinking of the two of them. I mean, which is worse? The devil you know, sort of, at least. Or the one you've only heard about? I know what they say about Lukas. I've heard in my research what they say about Konstantin Reznikov, too.

Konstantin I don't even know. But I've felt Lukas. I've felt the shadow haunting me ever since I got to OHA. Lurking, watching, and yet never there when I turn.

I tremble and try and quiet it with another sip of the large martini. It's an impossible choice. And again, *neither* gets me what I need.

"Gin or vodka?"

A Russian accented voice almost makes me choke. I turn, and I stiffen as I look up into the dark, smokey grey eyes of Konstantin Reznikov.

I swallow, pursing my lips.

"That's always the choice, isn't it?"

He smiles thinly. "It seems your night is full of them."

"No thanks to your father," I mutter.

He shrugs. "My father does what he must. As do I."

"And that means marrying me?"

He smirks. "There are worse looking girls to be forced to marry."

My nose wrinkles. "Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"It can be what you want."

He unbuttons his dark suit jacket and sits into the high bar-chair next to me.

"I was looking to be alone, actually," I say tersely.

“That’s too bad.”

He raises a hand, beckoning over the bartender.

“I’ll have what she’s having.”

The man nods. “Of course, sir. Gin or—”

“I said what *she’s* having,” he growls. “And don’t tell me.” He turns to look at me, still speaking to the bartender.

“Surprise me with the choice.”

He grins wickedly as his eyes lance into me. I glare back, my mouth thin.

“I saw you speaking with Komarov outside the meeting.”

“Good for you.”

He chuckles. “So prickly! So feisty. I like it.”

“Believe me, that wasn’t my intent.”

He smiles darkly. “Perhaps we would need to tame that sass once we are husband and—”

“That isn’t going to happen,” I say icily.

He raises a brow. “Maybe. Maybe not. Komarov made you a better offer, didn’t he? Better than what was discussed.”

I swallow, eyeing him.

Konstantin just shrugs. “You know, these old rules...” he waves his fingers in the air. “They are made to be bent, altered. Tailored to fit the hand wielding them as power. It doesn’t have to be fifty-fifty, you know.”

“Great. I don’t care.”

He smiles thinly. “What did he offer?”

I say nothing.

“Fifty-five percent?” He smirks, his grey eyes narrowing. “You’re playing poker, Lizbet, but you haven’t mastered the poker face. So, Komarov wants so badly for my father not to have the Belsky empire that he will take forty-five.”

He leans closer to me, making me flinch as I back away.

“Let me counter.”

“There’s no need to counter—”

“In business there is always a reason to counter,” he growls. His eyes fix on mine. “You’ll keep sixty percent.”

I resist the urge to groan and roll my eyes. Or to knock back the rest of this martini in one gulp.

None of this posturing and negotiating matters. You can’t take it with you, as they say. And you can’t even leave it for your twin sister in the coma when you go either, in this case.

“I’m not interested in a bidding war on my rightful—”

“Then perhaps an all out *bloody* war,” Konstantin snarls. His charm drops like a crystal glass, shattering as the fury behind it rears. But I don’t shrink.

“I think the council would have something to say about that.”

“And I have something to say about little girls who don’t belong in this world trying to play loose with cards,” he snarls. “Reznikov *will* have your empire, Lizbet.”

The bartender suddenly appears with Konstantin’s drink. He sets it in front of the young Bratva prince before disappearing again. Konstantin takes a sip and smirks.

“Vodka.” He turns to look at me coldly. “Trying to play the part?”

His eyes hold mine, unblinking, as he drains the entire cocktail. He doesn't flinch as he sets the empty glass down and pulls a roll of cash from his jacket pocket. He peels off a couple of pound notes and sets them on the bar.

“Let me get this round, hmm?” He smiles. “I’m guessing you spent every last dime you could bribe out of the Russian officials on getting into that silly private school, no?”

I purse my lips. He chuckles.

“In two weeks, you’ll pick me. Whether because you’re smart, or because you understand the danger of *not* picking me.”

He starts to walk away, when I open my mouth.

“Little boys wearing their daddy’s dress shoes don’t scare—”

I gasp as he whirls, grabs my wrist, and yanks me close. His eyes narrow viciously as his teeth bare.

“And little girls who think they’re smart just because they’ve never learned not to talk back don’t scare *me*,” he snaps. His grip tightens on my wrist before he suddenly lets it go and steps back.

“Enjoy your cocktail, Lizbet.”

---

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I get a text from Olek, asking where he can send his car for me. I want to tell him to go fuck himself. But Konstantin is right. I literally don’t have the cash to get to an airport right now. Let alone a flight back to Manchester.

In the town car, heading back to the airfield later, I groan as I sink back into the seat. The buzz from the martini is tingling

through my veins. But I want five more. I want five dozen more to wash me away from this minefield I need to walk through.

My phone buzzes in my hand. I frown, not recognizing the number. But I answer anyway, out of curiosity.

“Hello?”

“*Lizbet.*”

I groan. *Fuck.*

“Changed numbers, I see?” I say thinly.

“Blocked my last one I see?” she hisses, full of accusation as usual.

I close my eyes, reaching up to pinch the bridge of my nose.

“What do you want, Nadia?”

“Still an ungrateful, spoiled little brat, aren’t we?”

“Guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, does it, *mom.*”

When things were bad—like, really bad, with my father. When he was drinking a lot and coming home angry or... worse. When he’d... I shake my head squeezing my eyes shut to block out the past.

When all of that was happening, Nadia, my mother, did nothing. She was too drunk. Or too whacked out on pills, or sleeping with the latest male member of the staff. And when I finally did grind up the courage to finally spill, and to tell her what had been happening?

She called me a liar. And a slut. And a “family ruiner.”

“What do you want?” I snap, my voice dripping with the utter disdain I have for my mother.

“I heard you’re on a mission, Lizbet.”

My jaw clenches.

“I’m bettering my education—”

“Don’t play games with me, little girl,” she snaps. “I’ve played longer.”

“*Much* longer.”

“Careful, Lizbet,” she hisses. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten how you tried to destroy our family.”

I close my eyes, my chest tightening. I wince as the nightmares from my past come roaring up, and my breathing gets harder.

*Focus. Remember to breathe. Keep calm.*

“You’re after dear Semyon’s money! You ungrateful little bitch! After everything you did?! After everything you accused him of—”

“I’m hanging up now,” I choke.

“Part of that is *mine*, you little—!”

I follow through on my threat, and end the call. When the phone keeps going off, I turn *it* off and sink back into the darkness of the car. And soon after that, I sink into the even quieter darkness of the jet as it soars back to Manchester.

Breathe. Remember to breathe. I just have to put one foot in front of the other. The path was never going to be easy, after all.

I just never expected a dragon with piercing blue, gorgeously haunting eyes and a forked tongue to be blocking it.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LUKAS

THE MAN HAS NO FACE. Just a voice that ignites pure fury and hatred inside of me. A snickered laugh in my ear that makes me recoil and strain at the binds cutting into my skin, keeping me to tied to the chair.

That's all that's in here in the dim room with the red walls, in the black house with the black door. Just a single chair, me tied to it, and him.

The man with no face. Just a voice. Just a laugh seeped in vodka that makes my skin crawl. Well, that and a knife. His favorite is a military-grade looking thing—razor sharp, with three serrated teeth by the base.

He calls me his canvas, and the knife is his paintbrush. He tells me he should have been a painter. Sometimes, if he's especially drunk, he thanks me for being such great practice.

The blade cuts. It flays. It scars and slices until I want to die to escape the pain that I feel everywhere. But there's one saving grace about our time together: when he's in this room with me, he's not in the room next door, with Yanis.

He doesn't use a knife with my brother. He calls him "the pretty one."



When he first came here, he had us both in one room. He flipped a fucking coin. A *coin toss*; that's what picked my fate and my brother's. We're identical, but after months of this, we both look very different in different ways. I've got the scars now. Yanis has the faraway, hollow look in his lifeless eyes. I writhe in pain a lot. He rocks himself, shaking.

When the man with no face isn't in my room, he's with Yanis. He puts on his favorite song, *You Spin Me Round*, by Dead or Alive. He plays it loud, but it's never enough to block out the screams.

And then one day, the screams stop. The music stops too, and I hear the man with no face swearing, slurring as he stumbles around the room. He starts to yell and curse. The men who run this house come in. There's an argument in Croatian about what's happened.

"He couldn't take it. He quit on me."

That's how I find out my brother's dead. A customer complaining to management, through a wall.

"Wait," the man with no face snarls as I hear them dragging something across the floor.

"I wasn't done. Get me another."

---

I WAKE WITH A START, gasping and slick with cold sweat. My pulse thunders in my ears, my eyes darting madly around the dark bedroom.

My palms are sticky. I glance down, rubbing my hands together in confusion. Then I realize I've dug my nails into my palms so hard they're bleeding.

I slink from the bed and walk into the bathroom. I wash my hands, dry them, put some bandages on them, and then stop to lean over the sink, shoulders heavy.

The dreams aren't always this vivid. The memories aren't always this sharp—sharp like a knife, ready to cut. But lately, they have been. And I've had this one every single night over the last three nights, since I got back from London.

I exhale slowly.

"I miss you," I growl into the dark, silent, empty bathroom. Yanis doesn't answer back. Though sometimes I make up what I imagine he'd say.

I slowly raise my head to look at the dark silhouette staring back at me in the mirror. My hand extends, and my fingers flick the switch next to the mirror. The lights click on, and suddenly, I'm no longer hidden by shadows.

My gaze slowly drags over my bare chest, shoulder, and arms, tracing over the scars. Some—most—are from him. Others are from other guests of the black house. Some are from life on the streets before I was brought there.

Some are of my own doing.

Mostly, I cover them because I just don't want to deal with the bullshit from people who will either gawk or make a pathetic attempt to tell me they "understand."

They don't. No one can possibly understand the road I've walked.

Part of the meditations I do when I find the time is to tell myself that I'm not ashamed of my scars. Sometimes I believe that, sometimes I don't. But what I do know is that they motivate me to be better. To excel. To be the man my father wants and needs me to be one day.

But that's for me. So I cover them.

I click the light off and turn to slink back into my bedroom. I cross the large room to the big windows overlooking the dark front lawn of Lordship Manor, and the campus beyond. The lighter flicks, the end of the cigarette crinkles and burns as I inhale slowly.

Enough of the past tonight. And when I exhale, I breathe out the memories of the dream that just woke me shivering and bleeding. Instead, my thoughts wander to London.

To Lizbet.

I replay the way I hung back, and then followed her on her furious walk across the park and the bridge. I replay following her up to that second-floor cocktail lounge, hanging in the shadows and watching her drink alone. Until she wasn't alone.

My jaw tenses and my eyes narrow as I remember the way that motherfucker touched her; grabbed her. My blood turns to acid at the memory. But the pure fury I felt, and still feel, is... confusing.

It's fucking with me, and things in the present don't fuck with me. I'm bogged down enough with the past to concern myself with the pettiness of the present. Or at least, that's what I've always told myself.

But that did it. Watching Konstantin lay hands on her broke something in me, and almost had me surging across the restaurant to smash his pretty face into the side of the bar top until he bled.

I held back, barely. And yet, I can't stop thinking about it. I can't stop being angry at myself for *not* destroying the man who would lay hands on her. Even if I don't quite understand why I feel that.

Scowling, I tamp out the cigarette in the ashtray by the window and pull on a shirt and some jeans. I slip down through the sleeping house, and then outside into the darkness. I could lie to myself and pretend I'm just out for a walk—off someplace random.

But it's not random. I know exactly where I'm headed.

The night is cool, but it soothes the ache throbbing under my skin—still present from the dream. I cross the manicured grounds of Oxford Hills Academy, moving closer to the quad clusters of sleeping cottages.

I move through one of the little hedged-in rose gardens the pathways of OHA meander through. This is one where Lizbet likes to sit and look over her class notes before dinner. My eyes narrow as they pass over the bench where she sits, next to the small bronze statue of a pile of boys rugby shoes, and a plaque commemorating the young men who “left the pitch to fight the fight” in World War Two.

But suddenly, I tense and stop mid-step. Something different catches my eye, drawing me closer to the bench. When I realize what I'm looking at, my lips pull back in a snarl.

*Smert' zhdet.* Death waits. And it's carved above a little skull, on the edge of the bench.

My blood chills as I turn towards her quad of cottages. I move quietly, slipping from the rose garden and off the path to step through the shadows. I get to Lizbet's cottage, tense and ready. But there's nothing there.

There's no *one* there.

I check the door. It's locked. The downstairs windows are as well. So are the ones upstairs—in her room, and in Julianna's.

I stalk around the perimeter once more before I tell my pulse to calm down. I breathe.

And then my phone buzzes with a text. I slip it out, and my brow knits.

*Fancy a pint?*

It's Harlow. He's got something for me.

---

AN HOUR LATER IN MANCHESTER, I step into the Black Duck. The place is almost empty—save for a Manchester United home match, it's almost always almost empty. I take a seat at the bar. Harlow finishes a conversation that sounds vaguely about football to the one other guy at the other end of the bar. Then he ambles down to my side.

“Oy, what are we having, son?”

“I suppose I'm open to suggestions.”

He glances down the bar. But the old timer down there is busy watching a horse race on the cracked TV, and he looks like he's been drinking for a week straight.

Harlow turns back to eye me carefully.

“This had better not bite me in the fucking arse.”

He slides a slip of paper across the bar to me. I nod, but I ignore it. The place is empty. The guy at the end of the bar is almost certainly just an old drunk. But there's a gravity to the look Harlow gives me that makes me pause.

This is important. Which means it needs caution.

He pours me a pint of Carlsberg. I drink it slowly, eyeing the piece of paper. When I'm done, I leave a few notes on the bar,

nod at Harlow, slip the paper into my jacket pocket, and head for the door. I wait until I'm back astride my bike to open it.

My eyes widen a little, then narrow. My jaw grits.

Marrying the girl who's father almost destroyed my life was never part of any plan. But it is now. Come hell or damnation.

I would bleed for my father and the Kashenko Bratva. I owe Viktor and Fiona a debt I could never repay. If it involves marrying the daughter of the enemy?

So be it.

And if getting there means doing—or at least threatening—whatever I must, however fucked up it is, given the information I'm looking at?

So be it.

The bike thunders as I roar back to Oxford Hills. Lizbet is playing a game she only half understands. She's in over her head, and she's trying to play Konstantin and I off each other to buy time or to buy a better deal.

She's just run out of time.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

THAT PROVERBIAL SPOT between a rock and a hard place? That's me. I'm that place, caught between two impossible, immovable forces crushing in on me.

Again, I find myself wondering which is the lesser of two evils. Konstantin, the devil I've only heard rumors about? Or Lukas, the devil I've heard rumors about but also come face-to-face with.

Like it matters anyway, though. With the provisions of "the old ways," keeping half of my empire and money is only good so long as I'm married, and *alive*. This presents more than a slight speed bump in the road to my end goal.

On the couch in the downstairs living room of our cottage, I open my laptop and bring up a browser. I start Googling without really knowing what I'm looking for. But soon enough, I've got three windows open side-by-side—all on *them*.

The three kings of OHA.

Maybe it's my way of "knowing the enemy." I mean, they're *not* my enemy. But right now, they kind of are. Or at least, Lukas is. One more hurdle in my life I can thank Semyon for.

"Oh, God, Lizbet..."

I gasp, whirling to see Julianna standing behind me. I snap the laptop shut, blushing.

“What?” I blurt to her wincing face.

“Please don’t tell me you’re looking to be one of those pathetic girls who tries and fucks her way to popularity through one of *those* three?” She makes a face. “Or *any* guy, for that matter?”

I roll my eyes, feeling my face burn hotly.

“*No*, God. *No*.” I shake my head. “I was just...” I clear my throat, searching for answers. “Curious about them, I guess.”

She makes a face as she steps around in front of me and drops into one of the chairs across from the couch.

I bite my lip. “You... *know* them, right?”

Julianna groans and rolls her eyes. “Yeah, that’s a disgusting rumor, okay? The thing about me blowing Misha in the dining hall? I mean, c’mon, please tell me you don’t believe that trash?”

I snicker. “That’s actually the first time I’ve *heard* that trash. But please, go on.”

She gives me the finger as she grins. “Complete fabrication. Most likely Ainsley Hendershire or one of her evil bitches mean-girling.”

She frowns, sucking her bottom lip between her teeth as she looks away for a second.

“Okay, there *was* a time when I was convinced I was into Ilya.” She shrugs. “It was a while ago, and I ultimately wasn’t, at all. I was attracted to—or thought I was attracted to—him being broken.” Her lips thin. “Until I saw how broken broken was.”



She sits back, shaking her head. “Not for me *at all*, and I’m not just saying that because he’s with Tenley now and I’m trying to be a gracious loser because she and I are friendly. It’s not that at all.”

I frown. There’s something unnervingly on-point and familiar with the whole “attracted to the broken” thing.

“What was it, then?” I ask quietly.

She shrugs. “Confusion. Mistaking wanting to help someone or fix someone with having real feelings for them. Look, when Ilya got with Tenley, it didn’t break my heart. It mercifully clarified what I think I already knew.”

“Which is?”

She smiles wryly. “That there’s broken-attractive, and then there’s broken to pieces. And I don’t like getting glue on my fingers.”

I smile as I look down at my hands.

“Do you know much about Lukas?” I ask hesitantly.

I look up to see her frowning, like she’s searching for the right words.

“Not really. I don’t know if anyone aside from Misha and Ilya know much of anything about him. He’s...” she sucks her teeth. “There’s something there. I don’t know what, but that’s not just brooding grumpy rich boy broken. That’s something way *way* deeper. Honestly, it gives me the chills.”

“Yeah, me too,” I add.

I leave out mentioning that they’re not always bad chills.

“Anyway,” Julianna stands. “I need to get to a study session. Want to come? It’s for poli-sci.”

“Thanks, I’m going to stay in though, I think.”

“Suit yourself. See you at dinner?”

“It’s a date.”

She grins as she shrugs her coat on and grabs her bag. But then she suddenly stops and glances back at me curiously.

“You don’t have a thing for Lukas Komarov, do you?”

I blush fiercely, but I quickly shake my head.

“Trust me, if you knew the history between my train wreck of a family and his, you’d understand how off that is.”

She grins, shrugging. “Hey, just asking.” She wags her brows. “Cause if you are, hope you packed leather and handcuffs with you when you came here.”

I make a face. “What?”

“Word is, Lukas has... dark tastes.” She winks. “Buckle up, Anastasia. Mr. Grey will see you now...”

I roll my eyes. “Go study.”

She laughs as she steps out and closes the door behind her. When she’s gone, I head upstairs to grab my study notes. I swing the door to my room open and *scream* as I jump a foot back.

“Anastasia Steel, I presume?”

I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing myself to breathe in and out. The pain surges in the center of my chest, making me sway on my feet. I grab the doorframe, but suddenly, two hands are on my arms, steadying.

“Hey, hang on.”

I swallow the dizziness as I take a breath. The pain and the tightness fades, faster than usual, actually. Slowly, I stand upright and open my eyes.

Lukas is peering at me with concern and curiosity.

“That was a joke, by the way,” he growls. “I heard you and Julianna downstairs.”

I blush deeply. Wonderful. Meaning he heard my roommate asking me if I had a *thing* for him.

“I got it, you just scared the shit out of me,” I mutter. I glare at him, shaking his hands off before I fold my arms over my chest.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

He looks at me coolly. The concern from before is gone, replaced with his usual searing, cold blue dragon’s stare.

“I’m upping my offer.”

I smirk. “Heard that I was talking to Konstantin, I take it?”

His eyes narrow. “Something like that.”

“He’s offering sixty percent,” I say tersely. “What’s your new offer? Sixty-five? Either way, I’m not doing it with this stupid clause—”

“My offer is back to fifty, actually.”

I frown, peering at him. “I don’t think you understand how negotiations work.”

Lukas smiles thinly. “I understand how playing to win works,” he growls. “You’ll take fifty, trust me.”

I scoff. “Like hell I—”

“Or I’ll marry your sister instead.”

The room screeches into stunned silence. I stare at him as the horror of what he's just said creeps up my back.

"I—I..."

How the fuck does he know?

"Mara's a pretty name," Lukas mutters quietly. "Life is so fucking cruel sometimes, isn't it?"

"*Fuck you*," I hiss, trembling as I shake my head back and forth and glare daggers at him.

"Fuck you. Don't you fucking go *near* my—"

"St. Thomas' in London is a wonderful hospital," he says thinly. "But, did you know that Mara's caregiver, Veronica, who's also her legal medical proxy by the way, has a mother with a terrible, *terrible* gambling problem?"

My body feels cold.

"Lots of debts, with not so nice people." Lukas's cold gaze pierce me. "You know how it goes."

I stare at him in horror. He smiles thinly.

"You can't marry someone in a fucking coma," I choke.

"Everyone deserves happiness, Lizbet."

Rage explodes inside of me.

"You can't *legally* marry someone in a—"

"You can when their legal medical proxy signs off on it, actually." His eyes glimmer with ice. "Veronica also believes everyone deserves to be happy."

I shake my head, feeling nauseous.

"This is disgusting," I whisper.

“This is leverage. Maybe you don’t understand how negotiations work, Lizbet.”

Rage pools in my gut and ignites in my eyes as I stare at him.

“I have less interest in marrying your comatose sister than I do you,” he growls.

“Gee, thanks.”

Lukas frowns. “Please. We both know what this is about. Let’s not bullshit each other with lies.”

“Exactly,” I hiss coldly. “You don’t like me, and I—”

“Correct.”

I glare last him. “Fuck you, too.”

Lukas ignores my words as he brings a hand up to rake his nails over his chin.

“I don’t want to do this, but I will. I will do *anything* to get my family what it needs to thrive and grow.”

“Didn’t peg you for a suck-up daddy’s boy.”

He twitches, his jaw clenching as his eyes sear into me. He grimaces.

“You have no idea the measures I’ll go to for Viktor Komarov. I owe him a debt I will never repay. So this is it,” he hisses. “It’s half or nothing, Lizbet. Or you can marry Konstantin Reznikov, and good fucking luck with that.”

I purse my lips. I hate that this is the wall in front of me, but it is. And I think I may be looking at the closest thing to a ladder I’m going to find.

There’s *nothing* I won’t do for Mara. Just like there’s apparently nothing he won’t do for his father.

“I have one condition.”

He nods. “Which is?”

“I need to *actually* keep half. No bullshit about staying married or whatever.”

*Or being alive.*

He frowns and shakes his head. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“It’s half or nothing, Lukas,” I hiss back.

“The council wouldn’t ever approve a provision like that. I don’t believe in them, but the old ways are clear.”

“Then we give it just enough time for them to give it that stamp of approval. Then I want my half given to me flat out. No strings. No provisions. No needing to stay married to legally keep it. We’ll draw up a contract.”

What am I saying? It’s surreal, and insane. But here I am face-to-face with the dragon, negotiating our *marriage contract*.

He seems to chew on my words, eyeing me coolly as his jaw tenses and grinds. I wait, hoping I don’t look as about to explode as I feel.

But finally, he nods quietly.

“Fine. To satisfy the council and assuage any bad mood, we’ll let it run through the end of the school year—”

“Term.”

He frowns. “That’s like two months away.”

Yes, it is. And with it, the end to more than just a stupid school term.

“That’s my firm line. After term ends, I want half. No strings, no bullshit. Or we have no deal.”

Lukas eyes me, his eyes narrowing curiously and dangerously.

“Why is there this time limit for you?”

I shrug. “There just is.”

“What is it.”

“None of your business.”

He hisses as he suddenly moves close to me, making me gasp. I step back, feeling Julianna’s closed bedroom door at my back as he advances on me, until he’s all but pinning me to the door.

“We’re getting married, Lizbet,” he growls. “*All* of this is my business.”

I gasp again as he leans down close, slipping his face next to mine with his lips right by my ear.

“You can hide as many secrets as you want, Lizbet,” he purrs. “I’ll find *every. Single. Last. One of them.*”

I tremble, forcing my heart to calm down against the aching need to race out of control.

“You don’t know this yet but finding things out is what I do. I will find every dirty secret. *Everything.*”

As he pulls away, I shiver. I shouldn’t be excited. My skin shouldn’t be tingling.

*I will find every dirty secret.*

I shiver. He can’t find all of them. He’s already uncovered Mara. But he can’t get to the part about my heart.

That’s the last of my leverage. If he does, he can just wait me out until... well, until I’m gone. Then Mara gets nothing.

Some secrets you hold tight. Others, tighter. And then there are the real secrets you keep deep under your skin, close to your

heart. Away from the dragon.

“Draw up the contract, and I’ll look at it. Then we’ll make it official.”

“Just until the end of term. And I get to keep—”

“One day at a time, Lizbet,” he growls.

He extends a hand. “Deal?”

I could hesitate. Or pretend to think it over. But we both know I’m out of options. We both know this is the only road I have.

I take his hand, shivering as the electric heat that sizzles through his strong palm to mine.

“Deal.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)





## LIZBET

I FIRE AND REPLACE VERONICA, Mara's caregiver, that very night. Then I call Yevgeny, my lawyer, about this contract I need to put together. At first, I'm trying to tiptoe around it. But soon enough, we both get how ridiculous this is going to get with me giving half-truths, so I spill the whole thing.

Well, not the *whole* thing. I don't mention my condition. No one besides me and three doctors locked into confidentiality agreements are privy to that.

Besides, Yevgeny's known me since I was young, when he worked for Semyon. And though he's never implicitly said it, I know he regarded my father with disdain, too. Two years ago, when Semyon was killed, Yevgeny was actually instrumental in helping me secure a basic trust for me to live on and pay Mara's hospital bills with. He also helped me legally emancipate myself from my mother, while still remaining a conditional beneficiary in Semyon's will, if the money were to ever be unfrozen.

But even he raises an eye on the video screen when I lay out exactly what it is I'm trying to do.

"Lukas Komarov," he mutters. "You're going to marry—"

"Is it a doable contract or not, Yev, please," I groan, rubbing my temples. It's late, and my mind is still trying to process the

gun-to-head decision I made earlier.

I'm really doing this. I'm marrying a man who hates me, to make sure my sister gets at least a piece of what she's owed after I'm gone.

"Legally?" He shrugs, rubbing a hand over his bushy salt-and-pepper beard. "Yes. Only because I am very good at this."

I smile. "The best."

He rolls his eyes. "Flattery will get you everywhere, Lizbet. Okay yes, legally, this shouldn't be a problem. We'll create provisional terms, I'll set up a trust tomorrow, and I can clearly lay out which assets are to be transferred."

He frowns into the laptop camera from his office in Berlin.

"Can you explain this timeline to me, though?"

"What do you mean?"

He shrugs. "It is just that... well, the end of the school term in two months seems like a fairly arbitrary date—"

"It's the soonest Lukas would agree to."

"I see. Well, so be it then. I'll draw this up tonight and get on a plane before dawn. I should be to your school by noon?"

I startle. "Oh, Yev, that's not necessary—"

"It would seem time, for whatever reason you choose not to tell me, is against you in these matters. No?"

I purse my lips.

"You don't have to tell me what it is, Lizbet. But I've known you a long time, and I can tell there's something more to this. I won't ask. That's not for me to know."

"Yev—"

“Are you okay though?” He frowns with a sort of grandfatherly concern. “That’s all I’m really concerned about.”

I smile wryly. “You mean aside from marrying into one of the families my father tried to double-cross and have killed? I’m fine.”

He grins. “Well, if avoiding that was a condition of marriage, you would have a very short list of potential suitors, now wouldn’t you?”

I laugh.

“I’ll see you for lunch tomorrow with this contract, Lizbet. Goodnight.”

I say goodnight back and close the laptop. It’s late, and I drop back in my bed. I’m still in my clothes, and I haven’t even brushed my teeth yet. But the exhaustion that’s seemed to have come on with my decision is creeping up on me.

My eyelids flutter shut, and I sleep.

I dream of dragons; prowling after me, looming over me... watching me through a window.

---

“YEV, YOU’RE A MIRACLE WORKER.”

A bedraggled, tired looking Yevgeny is standing at the cottage door by eleven-thirty the next morning. It’s a Sunday, which of course means no classes. But mercifully, Julianna is out for a long run.

She might be my closest friend here—or, I suppose anywhere, really. But I don’t need her knowing about this devil’s deal with the dragon of OHA.

I shudder. I don't need *anyone* knowing about this. One more secret to keep.

Hey, it's not like I have to keep any of them for long.

I usher Yevgeny inside, and we set up shop at the kitchen table.

"Coffee?"

"My God, yes. Extra cream, extra sugar, please."

I look at him sympathetically as I pour a big mug. "You really didn't have to red-eye it over here, you know."

He glances up, eying me as I hand him the coffee.

"And yet, why do I feel like I did?"

I purse my lips.

"Lizbet, you can talk to me, you know."

*Not about this I can't.*

"I just want to have everything in order so that I can make this deal." I shrug casually. "You know? The sooner I can get into it, the sooner I can get out."

He nods. "Fair enough." He starts to lay out the multiple copies of pages of the contract until they're all spread open. Then he turns and hands me a silver pen.

"Well, shall we sign your doom?"

I smile wryly. "Lead the way."

I'm almost done signing the million and five pages of this contract Yevgeny has managed to put together in a matter of hours. There's just a few left, but Yev gets a quick call he has to take outside. So I take a quick break to go pee.

I dry my hands, open the bathroom door, and freeze when I see Julianna standing in the kitchen staring at the contract spread out across the table.

“Jules—”

She jolts, turning quickly. Her brow knits. “Lizbet—”

“That’s... that’s not...”

She swallows thickly. “Are you...”

“Look, it’s not what you—”

“Holy shit, Lizbet,” she whispers, staring at me. “Are you *marrying* Lukas Komarov?”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

*Shit.* Well so much for keeping this to myself.

---

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, after I’ve signed the last page, thanked Yev, and watched him leave with his copy of the contract, I’m sitting on the couch with Julianna staring at my hands.

“Holy *shit*,” she whispers.

She obviously knows who my father was. I mean anyone who can use Google knows who he is. But I’ve never really told her the full extent of that background, as it concerns Ilya, Misha, and Lukas.

“You have got *balls*, girl.”

I smile wryly. “Yeah, well... you do what you have to do.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t believe you never told me you had a twin sister.” Her face falls. “God, that’s so awful about

her accident.”

I nod. “It’s why I have to get this money for her.”

I don’t add that it’s *all* for her. Again, my timeline and the impending stop to it is nothing anyone needs to know.

She frowns. “So, all of this with Lukas is just for this inheritance thing?”

“Strictly for that.”

“How very soap opera.”

“Look, Julianna—”

“Oh c’mon, Lizbet. I’m not telling a soul any of this. I promise.” She frowns. “But, you’re okay?”

“Oh, fine,” I wave her off, laughing and hoping it doesn’t sound forced. “It’s just a…” I shrug. “A business move.”

“So, you get half of this inheritance, free and clear with that contract.”

I nod.

“And Lukas is doing this because…?”

“Because he gets the other half. Or at least, The Komarov family does.”

She nods, eyeing me. “Sounds like you’ve got this all figured out.”

“I do.”

“Promise you’ll ask for help if you need it, though?”

I smile, again, hoping it doesn’t come out forced. “Oh, of course.”

---

LATER, I gather up the copy of the contract I need Lukas to go over and sign, and head over to Lordship Manor. I'm not sure who I expected to answer the door when I knock, but when it swings open to Ilya's grim, cold face, my confidence shakes.

It hits me quite suddenly that this is the first time I've been face-to-face, one-on-one, with the nephew of the man my father tried to stab in the back.

His eyes narrow, and a sneer curdles at his lips.

"What the fuck do you want, Belsky," he snarls coldly.

I swallow the lump in my throat.

*Never let them see you cry. Never let them see you bleed.*

"I just need to see Lukas for something."

His already thin glare narrows even deeper.

"I know about this arrangement you've set up with him."

I smile plastically. "Good for you."

"I don't fucking like it, and I sure as fuck don't like you."

"And you didn't like my father, either, right?" I mutter, brushing past him into the lavish entryway to the manor. "Join the fucking party."

I turn to him, relishing the way he seems to be actually thrown that I've just barged in instead of running away peeing my pants. I get the impression "standing their ground" isn't the reaction Ilya is used to with people he's burning holes into with his eyes.

“Lukas is my friend, Belsky.” He shuts the door with an ominous click and moves closer to me, looming over me.

“What the fuck is your angle here?”

Anger simmers like lava under my skin.

“*My* angle?” I snap incredulously. “My ‘angle’ was to just accept what is rightfully mine. It was your fucking uncle that steered it away from that to whatever this charade is now.”

He growls, his lips pulling back from his teeth in a snarl.

“One day, I will sit where my uncle sits now, at the head of the Volkov empire.”

He steps closer, a dangerous edge glinting in his eyes, sending a shiver up my spine.

“My uncle is a great man. He’s wise, and unflinching when he has to be. And I would be wise to follow his lead to the letter if I hope to be half the leader he is.”

I start to open my mouth to ask where the hell he’s going with this when he stops me cold.

“But there’s one thing I would have done differently than my uncle. When it comes to being stabbed in the back, and retribution?”

He smiles thinly.

“I wouldn’t have stopped with just your fucking dad. I’d have eradicated *every* Belsky.”

His green, wolfish eyes burn into me. I swallow and count backwards from twenty in my head to stop my heart from racing out of control.

“Did you practice that, Ilya?” I smile. “Cause that sounded like you prac—”



“Tread. Fucking. Lightly, Belsky,” he says icily.

I roll my eyes. “Lukas?”

He glares daggers into me.

“Oh my God, grow up.”

I’m being brave. Or maybe foolish. But Ilya Volkov still scares the absolute shit out of me. And I’m not sure how much longer I can stand here bantering with him and pretending I’m not about to completely lose it.

“His room is on the third floor. Upstairs, staircase at the end of the hall. *Knock* first.”

I resist the urge to push my luck and get one more barb in on him. Take your wins when you can, as they say.

Instead, I leave his royal snarliness there in the foyer as I climb the elegant, curved staircase to the second floor. I head down the hall to the next staircase. At the end of those, there’s a landing with a window, a bookcase full of books, and a small reading chair next to a door which must be Lukas’s room.

I take a deep breath, clutch the manila envelope full of contract in my hands, and knock.

There’s no reply. Just silence. I frown, leaning close to see if maybe he’s got the TV or music on. But it’s totally quiet on the other side of the door. My brow furrows. What is he, sleeping? At four-thirty in the afternoon?

I knock again.

“Lukas!” I call through the door. “Lukas, it’s me. I have the contract.”

The silence mocks me. I groan. Screw this. I reach for the knob, twist it, and push the door open as I step inside.

I gasp, freezing mid-step.

He's on his knees on the ground in a meditative pose, facing away from me with his head bowed and headphones on.

And he's shirtless.

My mouth falls open as my eyes drop to the lean, grooved and powerful muscles of his broad shoulders and back.

Muscles, tattoos, and *oh my God...*

The scars take my breath away. The sheer number of them crisscrossing his back like whip marks and running in angry lines across his biceps makes the gasp choke in my throat. My hand flies to fly mouth.

I look up... just as Lukas does. His head raises, and his eyes find mine in the mirror he's kneeling in front of.

His face turns to blind, red, *rage*.

*"Get out!"* He roars like a demon.

He whirls, ripping the headphones off and lunging for a shirt hanging off the back of a chair.

But I'm frozen.

*"Get out!"* He bellows, furiously yanking the shirt over his head and down his scarred torso and arms. He whirls on me savagely, seething with rage.

"I—I'm sorry—" I choke. "I knocked—"

*"Out!"* he roars. "Get the fuck out!"

I whirl, and I stumble, shit-scared as I basically fall-run down the stairs to the second floor. I lurch down the second staircase towards the front door, past Ilya glaring at me, arms folded as he leans against the doorway to the living room.

“Told you to fucking knock,” he snarls quietly.

But I don’t even bother thinking of a retort. I just stumble out the front door and bolt as fast as I can back across campus.

Away from the dragon with the razor claws, thunderous wings, and fire breathing down my back.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



I SPEND two hours focusing as hard as I can on centering myself. Misha's with Charlotte somewhere, so getting punched in the face isn't going to happen right now. And I know Ilya, for all his wrath and his smoldering inner fury, wouldn't be able to give me what Misha can.

Manchester is too far. I can't ride like this. Fuck, I know in my state I could barely get down the stairs to go raid the Lordship Manor liquor cabinet or whatever leftover party drugs I can find.

And so, I count my breaths. I dig my fingers into my palms, centering myself. I press my head to the wall, sucking in air as I fight for control over the blinding pain that's only made worse by the knowledge that it's *all in my fucking head*.

That really is the worst part of this: knowing that at the core of this, I'm just a little fucked up in the head. What was done to me in that black house back in Montenegro didn't just physically scar me and severely damage my ability to let go with intimacy.

It twisted the wires in my head. It's why I sometimes feel or see things that aren't real. And it's why stress or unhinged emotions can bring the pain boiling to the surface.

After enough time of deep breaths and reminding myself what is real and what is not, though, it subsides. At least enough to leave the house and storm across the rapidly darkening campus to Lizbet's cottage.

The front door is unlocked. I pick up on Julianna's schoolbag being missing from its usual hook by the kitchen door. But Lizbet's is still there.

I snarl, taking the stairs three at a time before I all but smash her bedroom door in. Lizbet *screams*, whirling, her wet hair spraying me with water as she yanks the towel up to cover herself.

Not that fast, though.

The rage in me suddenly burns away as something hotter, and darker, and more alluring takes its place.

Lizbet clutches at her chest, and her face looks pained for a second before she takes a series of deep, focused breaths. I frown. They're not unlike my calming exercises. She seems to teeter on her feet for a second before she centers and suddenly glares at me.

"What the *fuck*, Lukas?!" she snaps. Her pale face blooms with color as she tugs the towel up and wraps it deftly around her body. Her arms fold over her chest as she glares angrily at me standing there in her bedroom doorway.

"Seriously! Don't you know how to kn—"

Her gaze narrows when she sees the thin smirk of irony on my face.

"Fuck you, I *did* knock," she mutters.

"What you saw—"

"I'm not saying anything," she blurts quickly.

The room is silent as we both stare at each other. Then she quietly clears her throat.

“Is that... I mean, is that why you wear long sleeves—”

“We’re not talking about this,” I growl. “The contract?”

She stammers, blushing as she turns to glance at her desk.

“Oh, uh, yeah.”

She snatches a manila envelope off of it and turns to thrust it at me awkwardly while still holding her towel shut.

It’s... distracting. In a way I’m not used to being distracted.

“This basically allows you to gift me shares of my dad’s companies and cash reserves, free and clear. Which allows *me* to put them where I will.”

“Which is where?”

Her brow ticks. “Where... ever I want? That’s my own business.”

I shake my head. “That’s not how this is going to work.”

“Yes, it is.”

“*No*,” I growl thickly. “It goddamn isn’t.”

I roll my shoulders, still stiff from the pain attack earlier. I stretch, reaching out to grip the edges of the door frame. I’m aware that it’s a somewhat aggressive gesture to her, like I’m boxing her in.

I *like* the idea of boxing her in. Of keeping her under my control.

“Can I please *get dressed*?” she blurts suddenly.

I frown, thrown off.

“Uh, yeah.”

She stares at me, brows raised. “*Without* being watched?”

I frown and turn away to step out of the room. I can hear her rustling behind me as she opens a dresser drawer.

“A trust,” she says finally, after a minute. “I’m dressed, by the way.”

I turn.

Fuck. The towel would have been better. The flimsy lounge shorts and the thin tank top—very obviously without a bra—are far more of a distraction than I need or want right now.

My eyes sweep over her, hungrily. Dangerously. But then I wrest control back and stab my gaze back into hers.

“What kind of trust?”

Lizbet rolls her eyes. “Jesus, you ask a lot of questions.”

“You keep a lot of secrets.”

She flushes, and I know I’ve touched a nerve.

“It’s for your sister, isn’t it?”

Her eyes narrow. I smile thinly.

“You’re easier to read than you like to think you are. And for the girl with the perpetual devil-may-care attitude, Mara seems to be the one thing you *do* care about. The question is, what happens in a few months where you need to cut and run.”

Lizbet wets her lips, eyeing me coolly.

“That’s for me to know.”

“And for me to find out,” I growl.

Without warning, I move towards her. She gasps quietly, backing away until her ass hits the edge of her desk. I keep advancing, only pausing when I’m right in front of her, so

close that she's almost bending away from me to keep the few scant inches of space between us.

"I *will* find it, Lizbet," I murmur. "I find everything."

Her face simmers with anger, but... something else, too. Something that draws me. Something that entices me. I feel my head sway, senses I've let dim sparking at the nearness of her.

It's the very smell of her; the way the heat of her skin feels like it's calming me, like her nearness did that first day I cornered her when she set foot on OHA. It's like being close to her chases the demons in my head.

I falter, my head swimming as I fight to keep control.

I'm confused, is all. The pain is still fucking with me, I tell myself. I need Misha. I need the punishment. Maybe I even need Josie, in Manchester. I tremble, closing my eyes to imagine that. But it's Lizbet's face that swims behind my tightly closed lids. And it's her that pulls me into the here and now.

Hooking me. Ensnaring me.

Have I fallen into a trap I never actually saw?

I clench my hands and open my eyes, only to realize I'm mere inches from her mouth. Her eyes are wide, but there's no fear in them. Her cheeks are red, but it's not anger this time.

*What the fuck is happening to me.*

I pull away, my mouth dry as I stumble back from her.

"I'll have my lawyers look at it," I choke with a rasping voice.

Lizbet just nods quietly, breathing heavily like somehow she just followed me down that wormhole inside my head along



with me.

I turn to leave, before I'm not able to leave this room. And that would not be good.

"Ever think you'd be here?"

I frown, stiffening as I turn to glance at her over my shoulder.

"Oxford Hills Academy? No."

She grins a little, crookedly. "I meant getting married."

Oh. Right. That.

"No," I say quietly.

"Me neither."

Her voice is so soft and innocent—so delicate—that I have to remind myself this is the heir to a monster. The blood of a backstabbing demon runs beneath that smooth, pale skin. The enemy lurks under those freckles. Behind those curious blue eyes and the taunting, tempting, defiant lips.

I turn again, because I have to.

"Lukas."

My eyes close. My pulse thuds. But instead of the usual surge of pain that I'd usually expect to feel when I'm socially uncomfortable like this, I feel something different instead.

I feel a warmth creep over me.

"Lukas?"

"*What,*" I growl.

"You forgot the contract."

I draw in a slow breath before I turn. The folder is there, behind her, lying on the desk. One foot follows the other as I

move back to her, crossing the room until I'm so close, standing before her looming over her.

Our eyes lock. She's panting and trembling softly, all while glaring up at me the same way I'm glaring down at her.

The battle of wills.

The war of desire versus vengeance.

Two animals circling each other, unsure if they're going to pounce and mate, or tear each other's throats out.

Maybe both.

My hand moves under its own power, separate from my own thoughts or brain direction. I'm only aware of where it's even landed when my thumb finds the soft skin of her hip between the waist of her shorts and the hem of her tank top.

Lizbet tenses, saying nothing. Her cheeks flush pink as my thumb brushes over her skin. I'm aware of her breath catching, and her nipples hardening under the thin cotton.

I'm falling.

My pulse thunders. The roaring is back, like before. But it's different. It's... *need* this time. Not the demons of my past clawing to get out. And it's making my head swim, literally. My vision wavers. I can focus on nothing but her teeth dragging over her bottom lip.

But then suddenly, I snap out of it.

She's white. She's trembling. I glance down at my hand, where my fingers are touching her bare skin.

Lizbet looks like she's somewhere else. And suddenly, I get it. Suddenly, I peek through the walls she always has up around her, and it's like a knife stabbing into me.

Fuck, she's just like me.

I pull back quickly, like I'm just realizing something hot is burning me. My jaw clenches, and I grip the envelope containing the contract tightly.

"I'll get this looked at," I grunt quietly. I whirl, and without another word, I start to storm for her door.

"Lukas..." she whispers.

But I ignore her voice. Because I have to. I stumble down the stairs, out the door into the early evening chill.

What the hell is happening to me?

I stumble and storm across campus. That is, until I see the small crowd outside the dining hall. I spot Misha, who nods his chin at me, and I walk over to where he and Charlotte are standing, his arm around her.

It looks *so* easy.

Affection.

Touch. Giving and receiving intimate emotion.

But that part of me was burned out long ago. Literally. With lighters. With blades. With laughing faces of drunk, powerful, evil men. Men who wanted to hurt, to punish, and to weaponize touch.

"Lukas—"

I shake, hissing as I yank Misha's hand off of where it's just landed on my shoulder before I realize what I'm doing.

I blink, snapping out of my thoughts. I blink again and see him looking at me with concern.

"Sorry," I mutter.

His brow furrows. “It’s fine.”

Misha and I glance at each other. Charlotte looks at me curiously too but does a great job of pretending something else has caught her attention when Misha moves closer to me.

“Lukas, what’s going on—”

“Nothing,” I say quickly. I turn to nod my chin at the crowd.

“What’s this?”

His face hardens.

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Just tell—”

“Konstantin Reznikov just got into Oxford Hills Academy.”

As if on cue, the Reznikov heir himself slips through the crowd, smiling, grinning, looking like the fox that’s just snuck his way into the hen-house.

He scans the small crowd of curious onlookers. But his gaze halts when it lands on me.

I tense.

There’s that flicker of recognition again. That hard look of concern and curiosity. Like he knows me, and knows I *don’t* know him.

Our eyes lock. And slowly, he grins.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



“HI, MOM.”

I smile—well, *my* version of a smile—into the phone propped up on the shelf under my bathroom mirror. Fiona, my adoptive mother, grins back.

“I cannot believe we’re not going to be there for this.”

I roll my eyes as I fuck with my tie.

“You’re not going to be here because it isn’t *real*, mom.”

In the same way I consider Viktor to be my father, and call him dad, father, or Viktor kind of interchangeably, Fiona is my mother. It doesn’t matter that she didn’t birth me. Or that she literally couldn’t have, since she’s all of eight years older than me.

Family is who’s there for you. At least, that’s my definition.

“Wow, thanks for that, captain condescending,” she smirks. “I know it’s not *real*, but you’re still *really* getting married, Lukas. That’s a big deal!” She sniffs. “Real or not, I’m still feeling the emotions, especially with not being there to see you up there.”

“Twenty-six seems like a bad time to have a mid-life crisis, Fiona.”

Maybe not everyone's mom flips them off on FaceTime. Mine does, and I love her for it.

"Hilarious. Well, I'm glad you're keeping a sense of humor about this whole thing."

I shrug. "I've heard humor is the cornerstone of any strong marriage."

She frowns. "Lukas, you know you don't have to go through with—"

"Yes, I do."

Her frown deepens. "Honey, no, you really don't. And your dad feels the same way. It's not fair to have thrust you into the middle of this High Council turf war, and you shouldn't have to—"

"The world's not a fair place, mom," I say quietly. "And on the grand scale of things, this is nothing." I shrug. "And I want to do this. For the family."

She sighs. "Lukas, honey—"

"I want to do this, mom. I mean that."

She frowns and shakes her head. "You know it's freaky how similar you and your father are?"

"Must be genetics."

She rolls her eyes at my favorite adoption joke.

"See? Humor." I shrug as I screw with my damn tie knot again. "The cornerstone of any marriage."

Fiona turns to glance off-camera.

"Hey, babe?"

"Yeah!" I hear my father's deep voice call back.

“What do you think the cornerstone of any good marriage is?”

He chuckles as he steps into view, his back to me.

“You riding my tongue with that sweet little—”

“Oh for *fuck’s* sake,” I groan.

Viktor whirls, paling when he sees me cringing on Fiona’s phone. Fiona’s behind him, looking mortified as she buries her face in her hands.

My dad grins sheepishly.

“I suppose you heard that?”

“Yeah, *thanks*,” I groan. “Jesus, Vik.”

He shrugs, grinning at me. “Sorry for the delivery. Still a cornerstone.”

“Viktor!” Fiona mutters.

I grin as my dad laughs, moves back from the camera, and wraps his arms around my mom. He leans in to kiss her cheek.

It brings a certain happiness to my heart to see. It’s like if I squint my eyes and shake my head, I can pretend to be normal, with a normal, regular life. I can’t pretend there are pictures on the fridge back home of me at my first little league game. Shots of Viktor taking me fishing for my eighth birthday. Of Fiona teaching me how to ride a bicycle without training wheels.

But it’s like seeing Misha with Charlotte. Or Ilya with Tenley. And just like with them, it looks *so* fucking easy.

But I know it’s not. Not to someone like me. I’ll always be a voyeur and nothing more when it comes to emotions like this.

Viktor clears his throat as he eyes me through the phone screen.

“Lukas, I know I’ve said this a hundred times since London, but you really do not need to do this. Yuri feels the same way —”

“I do, dad,” I say quietly.

He scowls. “No, you—”

“I don’t mean for you, or for Yuri,” I growl. “I mean for me. I mean for this life I—”

“You don’t owe anyone shit, Lukas,” he grunts.

I sigh and glance at the time.

“I should go, or I’m going to be late.”

The two of them frown slightly. But I can see they get that they’re not talking me out of this. And while I love Viktor for truly believing in what he’s saying to me, he’s wrong.

I do need to do this.

“I’ll call you once the contracts and certificate are all signed and filed—”

“Lukas?”

Fiona smiles wryly at me.

“Real or not, try and enjoy the day, okay? Take a second to let it be real, even if it’s just for a second. For me?”

I nod with a thin smile. “Sure, mom.”

---

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I’m standing in the backyard of Lordship Manor in a black suit, with a black shirt and a black tie.

“Really leaned into the look there, didn’t you, Johnny?”



I turn to smirk at Ilya.

“Cash,” he adds dryly.

“I got it.”

Ilya’s in a much more casual navy-blue suit, shirt open, no tie. He scowls as his eyes slide over me.

“The fuck, you did say to keep it casual, you know.”

“This is casual.”

“Yeah, for a fucking mortician,” Misha grunts as he walks up. He’s even less formal, in just slacks and white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and the neck open.

It’s not a real wedding. That doesn’t mean I can’t dress up a little. And even though I only need one of my friends to be here as a signing witness, it feels... I don’t know, strangely “normal” to have them both up here, like groomsmen.

Only Julianna, in a dark blue dress that hangs off her shoulders, stands on the other side of the priest from us—Lizbet’s side of things.

Aside from the three of us, Julianna, and the Russian Orthodox priest I flew in from London as added icing on the cake for the High Council, there’s just my lawyer Jonathan, and another who must be Lizbet’s.

That’s it.

There’s no fanfare, but we all turn when the French doors that lead out from the living room open. Lizbet steps out, and my gaze hardens. My pulse jumps as my breath sucks in tight.

She looks amazing.

She’s even in white. Not a wedding dress, but more like a cream, elegant thing you might wear to a State dinner. But

fuck, it looks incredible on her. Her hair is even braided up in these elaborate twists.

Suddenly, I'm more than a little glad I actually dressed up.

She walks over—no Pachelbel's Cannon in D Major—and stops when she's standing facing me, a foot away.

The bride in white and the man in black.

We say nothing. The demons are roaring and clawing at my insides. But when our eyes lock, they go still.

I grit my teeth.

This isn't real. I mean, yes, it's real in the sense that it's not one of my confusion states. But this *marriage* is not real.

I will not kiss this bride. I will not get close. And I will ignore the fact that being near her quiets the roaring in my head.

We follow the priest and say the words. We say, "I do."

But these are vows of duty, not forever.

They have to be, or I'm even crazier and more fucked up than I'm willing to consider.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

I GREW up in a broken home. A gilded one, covered in gold, full of posed, smiling pictures on the wall. But all of it was a thin, moneyed veneer. A silk throw to cover the stains and burn marks underneath.

Mara, mercifully, dodged a lot of it. When she was sick when we were younger, she spent a lot of time in hospitals or in full-time care.

That left me to bear the brunt of it. The screaming, violent fights between my parents—both drunk, high, and accusing the other of the exact same toxic behavior they themselves were engaged in. Semyon would find traces of another man having been in the house while he was gone. Nadia would find lipstick on his collar or a pair of ladies underwear that clearly wasn't hers in the pool house.

Glass would shatter. Tables would overturn. Semyon would slap Nadia around, or sometimes it went the other way.

And then there were the nights when he'd come to me with that anger inside.

Wandering hands. Lingering touches like poison on my skin. He'd snap out of it, and then there'd be the hissed swears, blaming me for his transgressions.

*This didn't happen. You'll never tell anyone.*

I close my eyes tightly as I step out of my study session in Edward Hall into the cool autumn evening. I try not to go to that place in my head, anymore. There's not really much of my past that needs to be remembered or replayed. Least of all that part.

But what my past did do for me is to show me that people are garbage, marriage is a sham, and happy ever afters are bullshit. Which has all prepared me disturbingly well for knowing I'm going to die before nineteen. Or for going up against the Bratva High Council.

Or marrying a man who hates me in order to secure a life for my sister.

But I will say, in the three days since Lukas and I became husband and wife, our marriage is already miles better than Semyon's and Nadia's.

We don't see each other at all. Which honestly seems like the best possible way to get through this.

I blush as I pull the collar up on my light jacket. The best possible way... even if the darkest corners of my imagination have been replaying his touch on my bare skin ever since.

I don't know intimacy. Only intrusion.

At first, Lukas's hand on me the other day sent me into a spiral. Trigger pulled. Bars coming down around me. The familiar feeling of drowning in cold water.

Until it started to change. Until the cold melted to something warm. Until the claws digging their nails into my heart began to let go.

But then *he* let go, too. And it was all over just as I felt like I was about to feel something people are supposed to feel when touched like that. Yet every single night and in every moment alone since that touch, my thoughts have been lingering on it.

Dwelling. Digging. Yearning.

I shiver as I start to walk home—possibly from the cool night; possibly from the forbidden aches for a man who should only terrify me.

My feet crunch the stone path that winds away from the academic buildings towards the cottages. I step into one of the several rose gardens it meanders through, when suddenly a dark shape slips in front of me.

I gasp, a scream lodging in my throat. I clutch at my chest, choking as I freeze like ice.

“Lizbet.”

I blink, feeling my pulse suddenly beat again. My eyes adjust to the dim light from only the moon and a nearby lamppost.

Konstantin Reznikov is standing in front of me—arms crossed over his chest and smiling thinly as he blocks my way.

“What the *fuck*,” I choke, glaring at him. “Do you have any clue how fucking terrifying it is as woman to be surprised at night while walking alone?”

He smiles thinly. “Yes, I do.”

I glare at him. We’ve barely had a single interaction since he suddenly became a student of OHA a few days ago. Just lingering looks across a lecture hall, or a cold stare-down in the halls. *How* he’s here is an easy one: money, power, probably a healthy dose of fear, given who his father is.

But honestly, the “why” he’s here is just as simple to decipher, at least for me: he’s here to stay close to me. To either convince or to threaten me into picking him.

Except, he’s too late. Even if he doesn’t know it yet. The wedding wasn’t exactly a State secret. But it hasn’t been made public knowledge. Julianna knows, and obviously Ilya and Misha do, which I supposed means Tenley and Charlotte do as well. Lukas’s adoptive parents, probably.

But that’s it. I haven’t even told my own mother.

“What do you want, Konstantin?” I mutter.

“You took Komarov’s offer.”

I stiffen. And yet it doesn’t surprise me that much that the smirking, gray-eyed prick standing in front of me knows.

“Yes.”

His chiseled jaw grinds. “That was unwise.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” I mutter back. “Now if you’ll excuse me—”

I tremble as he suddenly lurches into my path as I try and walk around him. He glares down into my face, making me suck in a breath as I step back.

“Do you know why I came to this fucking school?”

“The thread count on the bedsheets?”

He sneers. “Humor will not get you far in this world you’re so desperate to join, Lizbet,” he growls.

“Get out of my way.”

He stays where he is.

“End it with Komarov. You’ve made a grave mistake.”

*Tell me something I don't know.*

“Get out of my way, Konstantin,” I hiss.

“Here’s your chance to rectify that error, though. End it. Null the arrangement and whatever contracts you need to. I’ll give you two million dollars, free and clear, just to make the change.”

I stiffen. Comparatively to the *vast* fortune my father amassed, two million is nothing. But, in the scheme of providing a decent life for Mara? Two million could land her a very nice, quiet life somewhere. She could live modestly on that for the rest of her life, and be happy.

I close my eyes. And yet... no.

*No.*

I’ve gone through too much and survived too much to just hand the fortune over to a shit like Konstantin in exchange for a door prize.

“Thank you for the offer,” I say thinly. “But I’m not going to \_\_\_”

“Then you’re even more foolish than I thought,” he snarls. Suddenly, his hand grabs the neck of my jacket as he leans close.

My heart seizes. My lungs close down. The world starts to spin as black spots dot my vision.

And then suddenly, Konstantin is being yanked away and slammed up against the ivy-covered wall next to me with a grunt on his lips and a snarl on Lukas’s.

*Lukas.*

*“If you touch her again,”* he hisses through clenched teeth, his rough, graveling voice rasping in the night. “I will cut your fucking hand off.”

The garden goes still and quiet. And I realize I’m just staring at him as my heart thuds in my ears.

He’s glaring murderously at Konstantin, who’s glaring right back at Lukas, though with a slight hint of apprehension in his eyes. Just the same, it’s like watching two devils battling with fire and brimstone. Two monsters ready to go at each other’s throats.

But then suddenly, oddly, Konstantin relaxes his body. His frown turns to a furrowed look of curiosity.

“You know Lukas,” he grunts quietly. “I wasn’t sure it was you until this very moment. I wondered, when I saw you in the council. I had my suspicions, but... it couldn’t be. And yet, here you are, heir to the Komarov throne.”

He smiles thinly.

“Tell me, who did you fuck in order to—”

He grunts as Lukas’s fists slam into his jaw, snapping his head to the side as he hisses in pain. He whirls back, fire in his eyes as he suddenly lunges at Lukas. He shoves him back, and then throws his own punch. The hit catches Lukas in the stomach, but he only twists Konstantin’s hand away and lurches to throw another punch.

“Stop it!” I scream. Without thinking, I drop my bag and lunge towards them, almost like I’m getting between them. One hand shoves at Konstantin’s chest. The other pushes Lukas back.

“Stop it! Both of you!”



The two of them seethe, shoulders bunched and brows furrowed deeply as they glare at each other over me.

Konstantin slowly shakes his head. “I mean fuck, Komarov,” he growls. “Really? After they took so much from you?”

Lukas’s jaw clenches. His eyes narrow.

“What are you talking—”

“You know what I’m talking about,” Konstantin says quietly as he steps back. He straightens his jacket and fixes the color before shoving a hand through his hair.

“But don’t think me knowing too will stop me from taking more.”

He turns to give me one more withering look. Then he whirls and storms off out of the garden.

Slowly, shaking a little, I turn to stare at Lukas.

“What the hell was that about?”

“Nothing.”

Lukas is staring after Konstantin with a cold hardness in his face.

“Lukas—”

“I said drop it.”

“What, he goes all caveman just because he wants me to—”

“*No one* else will have you,” he suddenly growls, whirling on me.

I tremble as something heated pools in my core. His words are so dripping with possessiveness that it leaves me tingling.

“*No one.*”

I gasp as Lukas suddenly storms into me, cups my face in his hands, and crushes his lips to mine in a searing kiss.

It's like fireworks going off in my head. It's like the world tilts a little.

It's like cleansing fire, searing away the damaged and the rotten inside of me. It burns away the flinches I've felt whenever a guy has come near me. It scorches out the memories I've spent years trying to erase.

And before I know it, I'm kissing him back. Until suddenly, his mouth pulls slowly away. His hands slip from my cheeks as he steps back, leaving me panting and aching for more.

*What. The. Fuck.*

“What—” my heart is racing. But it's not pained. It's just running free. But I can still barely catch my breath or make words. “What... what was that?” I whisper, staring at him wide-eyed.

Lukas stiffens, his eyes wildly flicking over mine as his jaw clenches. He looks pained—like he's being yanked in two different directions at once.

“You should be more careful if you choose to walk alone at night.”

Without another word—about anything, least of all the fact that he just kissed me—he whirls, and he storms away.

I stand there trembling in the moonlight, surrounded by cold roses, long after he's gone.

My skin tingles. My lips pulse. My heart beats like a hammer in my chest.

That never should have happened. But I realize with a slow, creeping, igniting realization, that I'm okay that it did.

I'm *glad* that it did.

Except the problem is now, that I think I want more of it.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



I'M LOSING CONTROL.

In the pitch black of my room, I drop to my knees, breathing thickly. I squeeze my eyes shut, gritting my teeth and trying desperately to center—to block out the world, to go through my calming exercises.

Like that's going to fucking happen.

With a groan, I'm back up and pacing the floor like a caged animal. I try and count back from thirty. I pinch my palms. I dig my nails into them.

It doesn't help. I can still taste her lips on mine. Being tempted by her was dangerous. Kissing her might break me apart. It's like both ends of the spectrum that she brings out in me are on full blast at the same time: the end where she calms me and brings me peace. But also, the end where the devils in my head are roaring bloody fucking murder as they claw to break free.

I'm shaking as I storm to my desk and sit. My hands jangle as I roll a thick joint, stuff it in my lips, and suck hard at the flame. I sit there smoking the whole thing, feeling like my skin is crawling with liquid fire.

It doesn't help. It doesn't calm me down. I recognize this street. I know the way this spiral goes.

Bring it.

I grab a bottle of vodka from the kitchen and leave the cap as I storm out of the house. I stagger blindly across campus, taking huge gulps as my savage eyes scan the night.

The demons rage inside. The need for excess hums in my very veins. The need to burn out the pain and the loud noises any fucking way I can.

A terrified looking kid trembles and points me in the direction of Lachlan house when I ask him, growling, where the parties are tonight. Normally, whatever I needed would have right downstairs in the hedonism of Lordship Manor. But there's no party there tonight. So I leave the shit-scared looking underclassman and lurch across campus.

The students here are fantastically rich, were brought up without having to ever fear consequences, and love to party. With the legendary parties of Lordship quiet as of late, Lachlan house, home to the varsity girls football team, has tried to pick up the slack.

It's no Lordship, but they're trying.

The back of the smaller, more demure manor home faces a small pond. A bonfire roars in the backyard, and OHA students laugh, drink, and dance to thudding club music from outdoor speakers. It's not even that late, but already, it's clear this is one of those parties hell bent on flooring it full-steam into a wall.

It's exactly what I need.

I guzzle vodka as I stagger into the outskirts of the bonfire crowd. After almost four years here, I'm used to Ilya, Misha, and I being the most famous people on this campus. But while

people will brave the wrath of Ilya and Misha's glare, I'm a step beyond.

I know my reputation. I know the rumors and theories that swirl in hushed whispers after me. I know the cold silence I can bring to a room.

I'm not blind to it. I just don't care. And tonight, I *really* don't give a single fuck.

I push my way into a circle of students passing a joint around. The guy next to me shudders but gives me a weak, stoned smile as he passes it my way.

"Hey, Lukas, man. How's it?"

"Fantastic," I grate out with all the warmth of a frozen tundra. I suck hard on the joint, killing more than half of it before I shove it back to the guy, turn, and prowl deeper into the debauchery.

The vodka goes down my throat like water. The music dulls my hearing as I slam my head up and down, snarling as I let the beat twist and wrench me.

At some point, I find myself staggering into Lachlan house. A group of guys from the rugby team are doing coke off the kitchen counter. I don't ask, I just push my way through, dip my nose, and inhale until I choke.

"Mate!" One guy grabs my shoulder to yank me away. "Who the bloody fuck do you think—"

He pales when I whirl on him, eyes blazing, nostrils flaring. My lips pull back in a drug-fueled maniac's grin as he turns white.

"Fuck, Lukas... uh, hey, mate. Sorry, didn't—" He swallows. "Help yourself."

“Thanks.”

I turn back and snort two more lines just as the first two kick in. My skin is fucking crawling. My very scars throb with a sharp ache. Visions buried in my past come grinning to the surface like ghouls—men laughing. Men touching.

The faceless man with the blade, cutting me.

I’m back outside, prowling like a fucking werewolf around the outskirts of the party. The drugs and the alcohol blur and numb, but it’s not enough.

Nothing will ever blur and numb enough to escape the hell I’m still in.

I blink when I realize there’s a girl in front of me, trying to talk to me.

“What?” I grunt.

She swallows, but she grins bravely.

“I just said hey,” she giggles nervously.

She’s pretty, and even though my chemical haze, I recognize the bedroom eyes she’s giving me. My mouth thins dangerously. There’s always one who’s brave enough, or new enough, or foolish enough, more likely, to try and flirt with me.

The girls who couldn’t get close to Misha or Ilya. Or the ones who somehow haven’t learned how dark and dangerous I am. Or the ones with a painfully basic, run-of-the-mill goth aesthetic who get it in their heads that I’m going to role-play being Lucifer while I fuck them.

Except this is not an act. I’m not the kid who hates his dad for not showing up on his birthday. I’m not the asshole listening to

metal music writing emo poetry and thinking that makes me edgy.

I am *profoundly* fucked in the head. I've had horrors inflicted upon me these little goth girls couldn't fucking fathom.

I'm not going to be their "edgy" boyfriend.

I'm not going to humor their pathetic attempts at being jaded and bored with the world.

And I am *not* going to screw them while they call me devil-daddy or whatever asinine Twilight fan-fiction fantasy they've concocted inside their privileged, un-scared little heads.

I'm not roleplaying any of this. I'm a twisted, scared, fucked-up, survivor-guilt-ridden, chronically suffering from a pain that isn't even real fucking *monster*.

"I was thinking about getting out of here."

The girl licks her lips suggestively.

"You should."

I turn to leave, but she puts a hand on my arm. I stiffen, gritting my teeth at the pain that lances through my arm under her fingers, even through my shirt.

It's the polar opposite of Lizbet, whose mere presence has a way of lowering the volume of the screaming in my head.

"You should come with me."

I turn to glare at her. She trembles a little, but she foolishly pushes that fear aside as she grins at me.

"I've been dying to hook up with you, you know," she purrs as she draws close.

I grit my teeth.



“You don’t want to do that.”

She grins. “Oh, I’ve heard you play rough. That doesn’t scare me.”

*Then you’re a fucking idiot.*

From time to time over the years since I was freed from that hellish place, I’ve tried. I’ve put on mask of normalcy and attempted to do normal things, like sleeping with girls.

It’s never gone very well.

Sometimes, I fade into a state where I don’t see or feel anything. Like my mind thinks I’m back in that red room and it needs to protect me. I literally come to when it’s over, with not a single recollection of what’s just happened before I leave as fast as I can.

Other times, it’s worse. Those times, a sort of devil rises inside of me. An anger takes over, and I lose control. I... play rough. I don’t make love. I don’t have sex.

I *fuck*. Hard. Because fucking hard is another way to drown out the pain and the screaming. Like drugs, or alcohol, or Misha’s fists.

It’s been a long time since I’ve let myself go there. Apparently though, the rumors have persisted.

“What do you want to do to me, Lukas?” The girl purrs seductively.

I’m stopping this here and now. She wants to dance with danger. She wants the thrill of fear while she’s getting fucked —not *real*, actual fear, though. She wants the Disneyworld version of fear-fucking.

But I’m sure as shit not Mickey Mouse.

“I want to tie you up,” I growl thickly.

I don't want to do any of this—not to her, at least. But she wanted to be scared.

So fucking be it.

“With rough rope.”

She blushes. “*Ooo*, tell me more—”

“I want you bound tight, on your knees with your hands behind your back.”

She licks her lips. “Fuck, that's so ho—”

“I want to spank you until you cry.”

Her brow furrows just a little.

“I want to fuck your throat until you gag.”

She frowns, cooling to me.

“I want you to count the strokes while I fuck your ass raw.”

“What the *fuck*,” she makes a face. “I don't—”

“I want to *destroy you*,” I snarl as I loom over her quickly paling face. “I want to leave you broken with cum trickling out of your used-up holes.”

The girl backs away from me, looking ill.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she chokes. She whirls, and she runs away, back to the embrace of the bonfire, the party, and normalcy. Away from the shadows, and monsters like me.

My head spins. The excess is catching up with me, hard. The ground sways under me from the booze, and the whole world is bright and dazzling from the coke in my system.

Like I said, I don't really want to do any of those things, not to her. I just want to let the demon's out.

I just want to *breathe*.

I'm not a hero, like Harlow thinks I am. I'm not any hero, or protagonist.

I'm the bad guy. I'm the demon that creeps throughs the darkness waiting until you never see me coming.

And then I strike.

I stagger like a wraith back into the party. I snatch a bottle of who cares what from someones hand and slug it back as I move on. I take another pull and smash it against the side of Lachlan house. Someone hands me a joint, and I suck the whole thing down.

The screaming is so loud in my head I can barely think. The pain throbbing under my skin makes me want to throw myself into the bonfire.

But above all of that, I know what this is—me going off the rails tonight.

This is me trying to burn Lizbet out of my head. But no matter how much alcohol I slug back, how much smoke I cram into my lungs, and how much white powder I suck up my nose, I can still taste her lips above any of it.

I can still taste the way she kissed me back.

I stagger in a daze back across campus. The world is doubled and dizzying. It's blurred and stabbing. I barge through the front door of Lordship and stumble into the living room.

Ilya, Tenley, and Charlotte look up from the movie they've been watching. They look concerned, and maybe a little scared.

Misha steps into the room holding two beers and frowns at me.

“Christ, Lukas—”

“I need it,” I gurgle, my throat tight and my voice sounding like stone sliding across stone.

He glances at Ilya and then back to me.

“Fuck that. No way. Lukas, you’re a fucking mess—”

“Just fucking do it!!” I roar.

On the far side of the couch, Ilya stands and looks at me with narrowed eyes.

“Calm down—”

“I just. Fucking. *Need. It.*” I hiss.

Tenley shrinks close to Ilya. Charlotte, nearest to me, is looking at me like I’m a rabid animal with a frothing mouth.

She’s not that far off.

Misha shakes his head. “No.”

“Pussy,” I swear at him, trying to provoke him. But he’s not taking it.

“C’mon, man,” he grunts. “Sit the fuck down.”

I turn to Charlotte. Misha stiffens.

“Don’t even fucking think—”

I walk over to her. I hate myself for how much I’m scaring her—how much I’m scaring all of them, really. But I need what I need. And I will have it.

Charlotte quails under my scowling face. But then she frowns.

“Lukas...”

Slowly, she starts to smile at me. I glitch, blinking in confusion.

Kindness. Warmth... my brain can't process shit like that.

"Lukas," she says quietly, still smiling at me with genuine care. "What can I do for you? How can I help—"

"You lay one fucking finger on her, and I swear to fucking God, man," Misha snarls.

The spell breaks.

I turn to Misha. Then I turn back to Charlotte.

"What do you need, Lukas?" she says quietly.

"Just this."

I reach out, gentle as can be, and I tap her head lightly with one finger. I turn to smile thinly at Misha.

"One finger?"

The growl rumbles in his throat as he starts to roll his sleeves up.

"No, c'mon, Misha!"

Charlotte stands to get between us, but I step in front of her and grin at Misha.

"I'm doing this because I love you, Lukas," he says quietly.

"I know."

"But you only get one."

Shit.

The single punch hits me like a fucking train, and I am *out*.

I dream of black doors on black houses, red rooms, and crashing waves beneath the cliffs. And then, an angel with

broken wings lifting me out of it.

An angel whose lips taste like redemption.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

I SWALLOW as I look up at the gorgeous and yet slightly imposing facade of Lordship Manor. The beautiful old English manor home looks like something out of a magazine shoot—perfectly weathered in the right places, with the ivy-covered walls and the perfectly manicured grounds surrounding it.

I pause at the wrought iron gate set into the hedge wall around it. But then, I take a breath and push it open. I haven't exactly been invited. But screw it.

I am *married* to one of people who lives here.

And besides, I need to be here, to speak to Lukas about how to start earmarking the right assets to move into the trust Yevgeny's set up for me.

It's not that I'm here because two nights ago, Lukas kissed me.

I swallow as the heat creeps up my neck.

No, it's definitely not that.

I step through the wrought iron gate and up the path to the front door. But before I can knock, I hear the sound of voices drifting from around the side of the house. I tune my ears, frowning as I slowly creep around the corner.

I follow the flower beds and hedges to the backyard, where the pool is. Where the wedding was, I think with a strange tingle. I

peer around that corner and pull back a bit when I see Misha standing close to Lukas by the back doors—the same French doors I walked out barely a week ago.

“I’m just saying—”

“I know what you’re saying, Misha,” Lukas says quietly. He smiles wryly at his heavily tattooed friend. “Look, I…” he shakes his head. “I was out of control the other night.”

“No shit.”

Lukas’s face darkens, but Misha puts a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m not *mad*. Okay, yeah, I was. But I’m more just worried about you, brother. That’s all.”

Lukas looks down. “Charlotte?”

“Yeah, she’s worried too—”

“No, I mean… you know.”

Misha smirks. “Is she mad that you literally laid one finger on her to goad me into knocking your dumb ass out?”

I wrinkle my brow. What the *fuck* goes on in this house?

“No, Lukas, she’s not mad. No one is mad, we’re just worried.”

“I’ve got it handled.”

“Yeah? Well that’s fucking bull—”

“I *said* I’ve got it handled,” Lukas says quietly, thinly.

“You should talk to—”

“A shrink?” Lukas smiles grimly. “No thank you.”

“Lukas, c’mon—”



“I love you, Misha,” he says icily. “But we’re done talking about this.” He glances at the dimming sky. “Anyway, I have to go.”

“Oh, yeah,” Misha grunts dryly. “Playing Batman. That’s a healthy move.”

Lukas glares at him coldly.

“Oh, fuck off, like Ilya wouldn’t tell me when he sussed out what the fuck you were doing on your little nightly jaunts into Manchester?”

My brow furrows. Nightly jaunts to *Manchester*? How the hell is Lukas getting permission to leave campus like that?

“Can we just drop this? Please?”

Misha sighs. “I’m just—”

“I know.” Lukas smiles thinly. “But you don’t have to worry about me. I promise.”

Misha nods.

“You headed over to Charlottes?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you…”

“She knows, Lukas.”

“Just tell her I’m sorry for the other night.”

Misha nods. “Be safe out there tonight.”

“I always am.”

I gasp, pulling back into the shadows behind one of the hedges as Misha walks around the side of the house back up to the front gate. When he’s passed, I glance around the corner again

just as Lukas ducks into the house, jangling what looks like car keys.

What the hell is going on here?

I slip over to the French doors just as Lukas disappears down the stairs that lead to the basement entertainment center and billiards room of Lordship Manor. I slip inside the house and walk over. I glance down the stairs but hear nothing.

Tailing Lukas seems about as great an idea as tailing a wild animal into its cave. But, slowly, I start to tip-toe down the stairs. Gingerly, I peer around the corner at the bottom.

I blink. What the *hell*?

The whole space is empty. No Lukas.

I'm about to question my vision or my sanity when I suddenly realize the bookshelf at the far end of the room is moving.

No, not moving; swinging shut.

*What the fuck?*

I bolt, lunging across the basement lounge and jamming my toe into the crack before the bookcase-door can shut. Slowly, I pull it open and push my head through, into the darkness.

Down below, the darkness turns to a big, lit-up space. A metal spiral staircase leads down to a concrete floor, and as I crouch down, my jaw drops.

The room, or bunker, or whatever I'm looking at is like half the size of an airplane hangar. There's a boxing ring set up in one corner, and a very 1960s looking lounge space, like a set piece from *Mad Men* in another corner. Along the far wall, there's a row of expensive looking modern and vintage luxury cars... and one motorcycle, currently with a black helmeted, black-jacket-wearing Lukas swinging his leg over it.

A million questions pop into my head. But the first one is answered when he revs the engine to life and turns on the headlight. Light casts on what I thought was a shadow on one wall, but is actually the opening to a large, car-sized tunnel.

Are you fucking kidding me? They live in a mansion. They have no rules, even for Oxford Hills. But now it seems they also have a freaking underground hangout hanger full of cars with a way out of OHA?

I have to know more.

Lukas revs the motorcycle, and then takes it into the tunnel. I act without thinking. I bolt down the stairs and then rush across the space to a wall of neat hooks on the wall. I grab the ones with the Mustang logo on the fob and turn.

It's pretty obvious which vintage black Mustang it goes to. It's also pretty obvious from the "TSVKV" on the license plate whose Mustang it is.

TSVKV, as in Tsavakv. Yeah, I'm about to steal Misha's vintage mustang to chase Lukas off a decidedly closed academy campus, presumably all the way to Manchester.

But again, I don't think. I just jump behind the wheel, turn on the massive engine, and kill the headlights before I drive into the dimly lit tunnel. I go as fast as I dare, until I can vaguely see a red taillight way in the distance. It pauses, so I slow, pulse racing.

But the bike keeps going before it suddenly disappears. I swear, gunning the engine. I gasp as the car suddenly roars through a doorway, up a ramp, and then into a rickety looking barn.

The secret tunnel ends in a secret door in the floor of a barn. Because of course it does.

I drive out of the trapdoor, through the straw covered barn, and out the big door. It's dark outside, but I can see a single motorcycle taillight zipping away into the night.

I rev the engine, turn on the headlights, and chase.

---

THE NEIGHBORHOOD I park in looks like the very last place you should be parking a vintage, beautiful Mustang. But, so be it. This is where Lukas drove to, for whatever reason. So this is where I followed.

A glance at the map app on my phone tells me we're in the Hulme district of Manchester. Graffiti lines the old brick walls of the old, gritty buildings and storefronts that line gritty streets.

A few gruff, rough-looking faces peer at me sitting behind the wheel as they pass. I swallow. I'm alone, in this neighborhood, wearing a fucking plaid skirt. Common sense tells me I shouldn't even get out of the car. Hell, I should rev it into drive and haul my butt all the way back to OHA.

But I came this far. And I'm not leaving without figuring out what the hell Lukas is doing here. Or what Misha meant when he called it "playing Batman."

Taking a deep breath, I step out of the car.

Lukas's bike is parked a block ahead of me, outside of a dingy-looking pub on the corner with a single grimy window. A black sign hanging above the door in the silhouette shape of a duck labels it "The Black Duck Pub."

I walk quickly, avoiding the stares from a man slouched in a doorway, and the catcall from another guy across the street.

Mercifully, he keeps walking though.

At the pub, I slink against the wall and creep towards the edge of the single window. Carefully, I peek around the sill. I frown to peer through the barely transparent, grime-streaked glass. But there, inside, I spot him.

Lukas is sitting at the bar, his head low as he speaks with an older, grizzled looking man behind it. But of course, I can't hear what they're saying. And the place is empty, so there's no way I'm getting in there to eavesdrop without giving myself away.

“Now what's a pretty girl like you doing 'round here, luv?”

I gasp, my heart jolting as I whirl. Three rough, sinister looking guys leer at me, spread out in a semi-circle, like they're surrounding me.

Pinning me there.

I swallow thickly, clenching my hands so I don't shake.

“I—I was just looking for someone.”

The guy in the middle grins, showing a mouth of dirty, broken teeth.

“Well lucky you, luv. You found *three* someones. And we're real anxious to get to know you.”

“Oh, I—”

The scream chokes in my throat as they grab me. It's like my body instantly shuts down, not even sure what to do as they drag me around the corner into the dark of an alley.

My heart clenches tightly. The pain cripples me, taking my breath away—making it so that I couldn't scream now even if my voice was cooperating. The world goes cold, and I grow

numb as they shove me against the dirty wall. Hands grab my wrists, spreading my arms wide and pinning them back. A knee shoves between my thighs to spread them.

I can't move. I can't breathe. It feels like I'm shriveling in on myself as the three of them laugh and reach for me.

But suddenly, something is happening. The first guy, to my right, groans. His eyes roll back, and something dark and red trickles down his face before he crumples to the ground.

The second man starts to turn, but the brick smashes into his face—crumpling it in a horrifying vision of blood and broken teeth. He gurgles a scream and flails. But the shadowy wraith behind him just snarls viciously and slams the brick into his face again, dropping him.

The last man roars as he whirls. A blade flashes dangerously in the dingy light. The wraith dodges the thrust though. The man screams as his wrist is grabbed, yanked, twisted, and snapped with a gruesome sound.

The dark shape shoves the blade back, and the man groans as it sinks into his stomach.

“Let's go.”

A hand grabs mine. And suddenly, I'm jolted from my frozen state. I scream, yanking my hand away and shrinking back from the ghostly, dark shape of a man. But then Lukas steps forward, and the dingy light casts in deep shadows across his grim face.

“I'm here, Lizbet,” he growls quietly. His eyes pierce into mine as he crouches low to look up into my face. “I'm *here*,” he whispers.

My heart seizes again, and I go limp. But he catches me in his arms and scoops me effortlessly off my feet. He carries me

down the street as I cling to him with a white-knuckle grip. When we get to Misha's car, he opens the passenger side and slips me into the seat. He buckles me as I stare almost comatose at the dash in front of me.

"I'll be right back," he growls quietly.

My eyes snap to his, going wide in terror as my lungs seize. My hand grabs his, gripping tightly.

"*Right* back," he says gently, squeezing my hand. "I swear."

He slips free, shuts the door, and then jogs back to the pub.

My heart starts to seize. My head spins as the reality of what just almost happened to me crushes into me. I start to gasp for air, and I can't stop. I can't find the starting place of my breathing exercises to calm myself.

I can't breathe.

The world spins, and my vision blurs. I want to scream, or cry. But then suddenly, the passenger door is yanked open again.

"Lizbet!" Lukas hisses, grabbing my hands. He squeezes, dropping one of them to raise a hand to cup my cheek. He turns my head, forcing me to look him in the eye.

I do, and suddenly, I can feel the invisible hand around my throat loosening.

"*Just breathe*," he says quietly in his rasping voice. "You're having a panic attack."

"No, I'm..." My voice breaks.

I'm have a mini *heart* attack, brought on by a panic attack. And it's a bad one. But I squeeze his hand tightly. I force myself to keep my eyes open, and locked onto his, because that seems to be helping.

And slowly, the claws digging into my heart let go. I gasp a choked, ragged breath of air before I start to shudder.

“I’m taking you home,” Lukas says gently. “Okay?”

I frown. “Your bike...”

“It’s fine.”

He doesn’t ask what I’m doing here, or why I followed him. He doesn’t even seem angry.

He seems scared.

He lets go of my hand and shuts the door. I watch him bolt around to the other side of the car and slip behind the wheel. The Mustang rumbles to life. Lukas’s face is grim as we drive. But his hand finds mine in the darkness of the car.

His fingers splay, interlocking with mine. And he squeezes, and doesn’t stop squeezing, as we drive out into the night.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)





## LUKAS

I'M NO THERAPIST. But I understand one therapy intimately: pain. Violence to pound out the violence inside of you.

She's white, staring right ahead the whole drive back from Manchester. But I know the look far too well. Yanis had that look. *I've* had the look. She had that same look when I touched her in her room. And it tells me she's a victim. Just like Yanis. Just like me.

Maybe that's why the riots screaming in my head go quiet when she's near. Hers and mine cancel each other's out.

I have no idea if the men in that alley are dead or alive. Honestly, I don't actually care. With any luck, they're the same pieces of shit who are responsible for the recent uptick in violence against the working girls of Manchester. That's one of the reasons I was at The Black Duck, checking in with Harlow.

Sex work is always dangerous work. But girls have been turning up disfigured and dead the last few months. Someone is hunting. I can only hope one of the men I either killed or turned into a vegetable tonight was that monster.

Back in the garage beneath Lordship, I help Lizbet from car. I give her a once-over, making sure those motherfuckers didn't actually harm her—not physically at least. But she doesn't

have anything aside from some marks on one of her wrists that will probably be bruises tomorrow.

She's just... cold. Distant. She's off. But I know how to bring her back.

I lead her quietly to the boxing ring. When I start to slip the gloves on her hands, she frowns, coming out of it.

“What is this?”

I pull her under the ropes into the ring.

“Lukas—”

“I want you to hit me.”

I don't need this like I need it when Misha hits me. In fact, I don't need this at all. But she does. I need this for her, to fix her. To help her get past the hole those motherfuckers just pushed her back into.

“Hit me,” I say quietly.

She stares at me like I'm crazy.

“I'm not going to hit you.”

“Yes, you are.”

She eyes me. “Is this some kind of fucked up game?”

“No.”

“Lukas—”

“This is how you burn out the demons.”

She stiffens. “Excuse me?”

“It's this or doing every drug on the table until you feel nothing. But this one's a little healthier, trust me.”

She looks at me. I look at her. The seconds tick by in silence.

“What the fuck is this?”

“I’m whoever hurt you.”

Lizbet bristles. “No one—”

“My stepfather and mother,” I begin, my voice rough. “They run this organization that hunts down child predators and saves kids from abuse and trafficking.”

She nods. “I know.” Her brow furrows. “Wait—”

“When they found me, when I was fourteen, I was a prisoner,” I growl quietly. I never speak of this. Ever. Even Ilya and Misha only know that I was saved from some bad shit. Not the details.

“There was a house—this black mansion up on a cliff, just outside Budva in Montenegro called Crna Kuća.”

The name tastes like poison on my lips. It makes my insides clench and burn. It makes my skin turn to thousands of needle heads, turned inward.

“Rich men would come and pay to...”

“Lukas,” she whispers, her eyes wide. “You don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do.”

My jaw clenches as the demons of the past bang at the bars inside.

“They’d come and pay to do the things society won’t allow for anyone to do.”

She pales.

“To act on their most base desires, whatever that is.”

Her face turns ashen. I turn away and reach for my sleeve. I unbutton the cuff, and I start to roll it up.

“My twin brother, Yanis, and I... we’d been on the streets for years when they lured us in. A place to live, food, shelter from the demons that prowl the streets at night looking for young prey. It wasn’t salvation, though. It was just the cave where the demons live.”

I roll my sleeve up, I breath, and I turn to face her fully. Her eyes fall to the scars that criss-cross the skin of my forearm, and her mouth falls open. Her hand flies up to her mouth.

“There was one man who used to come and...” I swallow bitterly. “*Cut*. He’d make me bleed, and he enjoyed it.”

Lizbet starts to cry. But I can’t stop. I’m going to drag her out of this hole, even if it means me sliding back in.

“My brother was another favorite of his, but for another reason. For another sort of hell that I could only hear through walls. But there were others who would...” I look down. “Touch me.”

I drag my eyes, red rimmed, up to hers. Lizbet is shaking, hugging herself as tears fall quietly down her cheeks.

“Pain gets me through the pain, if that makes sense. Pain I can control replaces the kind I can’t. Sometimes, hitting helps. Or being hit, other times. So I want you to look at me, Lizbet,” I growl. “And I want you to see who hurt you, and I want you to fucking kill them.”

“*I can’t*,” she sobs, crying openly now.

“Yes, you can.”

“*No...*”

Tears stream down her face, and her body goes limp.

“I can’t, Lukas...”

“You can,” I hiss. “You’re strong, and you know it. So I want you to look at me—”

“I *can’t!*” she sobs. “Because I don’t want to look at you and see him.”

Her face caves as she looks at me with so much pain and sadness and heartbreak.

“I don’t want to look at you and see my father.”

I cross the distance in a second. My arms go around her, and she hugs me tightly, painfully so; clinging to me like a life raft in a storm. She sobs into my chest. And I just hold her.

Maybe it’s not like how Misha holds Charlotte. Or how Ilya holds Tenley. But it’s how I’m going to hold Lizbet. How I’ll shield her.

We stay like that, her sobbing into me as she clutches me. But slowly, we pull apart, and I look down into her face.

There are so many warring emotions inside of me. I want to protect her. I want to save her. And as messed up a desire it is given the mood and the emotions raging right now, I want to fuck her senseless.

I want to lose myself between her legs until her lips moan my name and her fingers dig into my skin.

Mostly though, I just want to fucking kiss her again. But I can’t, for so many reasons. You can’t kiss a broken vase.

My eyes say that to hers. Or I hope they do. Then I pull back. I start to turn to walk away, because I should before I can’t.

Her hand catches mine.

“Lukas—”

I turn back, and I see the same want in her eyes.

“I can’t do that,” I whisper. “I can’t kiss you again.”

I turn away again, but her grip tightens.

“Please.”

I turn again to look at her. She’s so frail, like she might blow away. But she looks at me with those eyes, and her soul seems to burn into me.

“Lizbet—”

“I want you to kiss me,” her eyes snap up to mine. “I want you to kiss me, and I don’t want you to stop kissing—”

My mouth crushes to hers, searing away the pain, swallowing the agony.

Bleeding out the poison.

Re-wiring.

Rewriting.

Reforging.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

I'M GASPING into his mouth as he pulls me into his arms. He scoops me up, cradling me against his chest, kissing me deeply as he yanks the gloves from my hands. We move, moaning into each other's lips, out of the ring and over to one of the sofas in the lounge area.

I find myself laying back as Lukas pins me back against the sofa. Panic grips me for a second, but when he pulls away, I grab him and pull him back to me.

"Don't stop," I breathe.

"Lizbet—"

"I'll tell you if I want to...if I have to."

His eyes search mine, and I can see the same pain reflected in his. When he pauses, I touch his face.

"Tell *me* if *you* want to stop..." I whisper.

He nods. The silence acknowledgement that we belong to the same horrible club. But then his lips find mine again, and I start to forget the hurt.

His lips taste mine, long and slow until my body is trembling and surge up to push to his. His mouth slips lower, to my jaw, and I whimper with need. They slip to the soft skin of my neck, and my mouth falls open.

“I’m going to unbutton your shirt now.”

I nod, lost in it, and wanting this. My heart is pounding, but there are no claws digging into it. Just wild horses racing it along. His finger pluck open the top button of my school blouse. Then the next, and another, and another, until it falls open.

I shiver as his lips suck gently at my neck, loving the way his mouth burns away the past. His hands skim down my hips. I’m trembling, but I urge them up towards him as his fingers trace over my skin.

The bookcase door at the top of the spiral metal staircase opens with a creak. I gasp, lurching up to a sitting position as Lukas swears.

“Come *on*,” he snarls, turning and pulling his sleeve back down as I button my shirt up. I sit up on the couch. Lukas turns as Ilya descends into view. He pauses, frowning when he sees us.

“What the fuck is she doing down here?” he snarls.

“Calm down,” Lukas growls quietly. “It’s... a long story.”

They glare at each other. Ilya walks down the last few steps, eyeing me, arms crossed, hatred in his gaze.

“This place is off-limits to anyone but—”

“Oh, except for Tenley and Charlotte?” Lukas glares back at him.

“Tell me you’re not dense enough to not see the difference there.”

“What difference.”

Ilya rolls his green eyes.



“That those are real relationships, and this is—”

He pauses. His eye twitches and his jaw clenches.

“Hmm,” he growls. He narrows his gaze at Lukas. “Jesus, Lukas.”

Without another word, he turns and climbs the stairs.

Lukas turns. A hint of smile flickers in the corners of his lips. I grin back, blushing.

“Guess we woke the babysitter.”

I giggle. “That’d be a first.”

“Never had a babysitter?”

“Never woke anyone with...” my face burns. “This.”

He moves towards me, and my skin sizzles as he kisses me deeply. His fingers thread through my hair, and it might be the single most intimate feeling I’ve ever felt.

“This can move at a glacial pace, you know,” he growls.

“I nod, biting my lip. “Okay.”

“I mean that.”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“I’ll walk you home.”

One more first to add to the list.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



I WALK her to the front door of her cottage, across the dark campus.

“Thanks for...” her lips twist as she turns to look up into my eyes. “Well, a lot.”

“What I told you tonight...”

She shakes her head. “I’m not saying a word, Lukas.”

I nod. But I’m also lingering. I’m not ready to walk away from her. The roaring is just... there, but quieted. The war inside is being won by the silence she brings to my raging head.

She opens door and steps in. We both spot the piece of paper taped to the mirror by the front door, and she plucks it free to read.

“Julianna, my roommate...” her eyes scan the note. She looks up at me and bites her lip.

“She’s out until later.”

Fire kindles in me.

“You want to... come in?”

“Care,” I say quietly.

“Says the guy beating up criminal in alleys.”

“That’s my therapy.”

“Maybe this is mine.”

She reaches for me. But I’m already grabbing her. I yank her against me, pinning her to the wall as I kick the door shut and lock it behind us. She moans as I press her to the wall, grappling at each other as we tumble into the kitchen. I push her ass back on the counter, the moonlight filtering in through the windows.

“I’ve—just so you know, I—”

I pull back. She chews on her lip.

“I’ve never, I mean...”

“We don’t have to do that tonight. We never *have* to—”

“I mean any of it,” she blurts.

I start to pull back, but her hands shoot out to grab my shirt.

“Don’t you dare,” she whispers. She sinks her nails into me, pulling me back. “Show me,” she breathes.

“I can’t be your therapy,” I groan.

“Yes, you can. Because you understand.”

I groan as my mouth descends to hers, kissing her.

“Not here, then,” I whisper.

I carry her up the stairs, her legs around my waist, her lips still pressed to mine.

“Right,” she chokes at the two doors at the top.

But I already know which one is hers. I carry her to her bed, set her down, and push her back across it. I crawl over her, watching carefully as the tenseness in her face melts back to want.

My fingers work open the buttons on her shirt. Lizbet is trembling, but she's moaning and urging me on with her eyes and the arch of her back. I slip her shirt off, and her hands slide up my chest. She looks up into my eyes.

"Take it off."

I tense.

"Let me feel your skin, too."

"You don't want to do that—"

"Yeah, I do," she says quietly as her eyes lock with mine.

I stand. I keep looking at her as I slowly peel it off and step into the moonlight.

"Come back here," she whispers.

I move back to the bed and I crawl back over her. I kiss her deeply, sinking into her. My hands slip up to her bra, and that comes off next, sliding out from between us. She whimpers, shivering as her nipples graze like little points across my chest.

With a groan, my mouth drops down her chin, her neck, and across her collarbone. She's panting, arching her back as I slide my mouth lower, across the slope of her tits. My lips wrap around one hard, pink nipple, and she moans.

My hands slide to her hips. She doesn't freeze this time, she whimpers. I bring my fingers to the zipper on the side of her skirt, and I pause there.

"Yes," she whispers, nodding her head.

The zipper pulls down, and the skirt falls away. I kiss my way down her stomach, groaning at the way her skin throbs with heat, caving under my lips. My fingertips slip into the waist of her panties, and again, I wait.

Slow is not my usual style. Neither is gentle. Rough, hard... that's the only version of intimacy I've ever known, because it dulls out the searing pain inside of me.

But with her, I *want* to go slow. For her; for me.

I want to draw this out. I want her to want me to cross each and every line before I do.

I glance up from kissing her hip. Lizbet's eyes hooded as she looks down at me, panting. She nods, dragging her teeth over her lip. My fingers tug at the waist, and I slowly peel the thin fabric away from her and down her thighs. When I look back up, I growl thickly.

Her pussy glistens with need in the soft glow from the moon. Wet, puffy, eager for me. I slip between her lips and lower my mouth, letting my breath tease over her.

*"Lukas..."*

Her fingers thread through my hair. I don't need any more encouraging. I push her legs apart, and I lower my mouth to her wet little slit.

*"Oh God..."*

She gasps breathlessly as my tongue drags up her seam, parting her lips. She shivers, moaning as I do it again, tasting her sweetness.

The roaring in my own head stops. I realize the throbbing pain that's basically always there is *gone*.

I realize it might be because of her.

My mouth drops again, my tongue dragging wetly through her lips. I groan into her, pushing my tongue deep as she gasps and squeals with pleasure. I'm slow, but relentless, sliding my tongue up to her clit and wrapping my lips around it.

*“Oh shit... Lukas!”*

I’m drowning in her; losing myself or losing the parts of me I’ve been trying to lose for years. I suck her clit and swirl my tongue around it, over and over. I push the tip deep into her, feeling her shudder and clench her thighs around my head.

I move back to her throbbing button, and I tongue her mercilessly until her body suddenly jolts and arches from the bed.

*“Lukas!”*

When she comes, her thighs clamp, her fingers clench my hair, and the moans fall from her lips. I keep going, making her come again, and then again, before she’s trembling and shaking all over.

I gently move away and slide up between her legs. Lizbet looks at me in a daze, blushing brightly. But she suddenly grabs my face in her hands and yanks me down to kiss her deeply. I lose more of myself in that kiss—willingly. Her fingers trail over my skin, and I feel her smile against my lips.

I slowly pull back, looking down into her eyes.

“I like you smiling.”

She grins wider.

“That’s your fault.”

I smile thinly as I lean down to kiss her again. Then the front door to the cottage opens downstairs.

“Hey! You home yet?”

Lizbet tenses at Julianna’s voice downstairs.

“I’ll leave,” I murmur quietly, sensing that she’d maybe like to avoid the awkwardness of her roommate seeing me here, with

the obvious written clear on both of our faces.

“No, I... that’s not what I meant,” she blushes.

“It’s fine,” I smirk. “I can leave an unconventional way if you’d rather not have that conversation.”

I glance at the window. Lizbet frowns.

“No, Lukas—”

“It’s really okay.”

“No.” She sits up and shakes her head. “No. C’mon.”

She glances at me with a small smirk.

“Let’s go down. Together.”

I grin a small smile. We dress silently, and I feel something... strange inside when Lizbet walks up and does the top button of my shirt for me.

She smiles. “C’mon.”

She takes my hand and leads me out of her room and down the stairs.

“Hey,” she says quietly to Julianna’s back.

“Oh hey—”

Her roommate freezes as she turns. Her brow arches, her mouth open with a silent question.

“Uh, hi?”

“Julianna,” I growl, a small grin lingering on my lips.

“*Lukas*,” she says curiously, grinning at Lizbet.

“Um, welcome to our humble abode.”

Lizbet blushes. Her hand squeezes mine tightly as she turns to lead me to the front door.

“I’ll see you tom—”

She pulls me close, putting a hand on my chest as she looks up into my eyes.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “For everything.”

She tilts her head up. I lower mine to kiss her mouth slowly as Julianna quickly looks away. Lizbet is grinning when we pull apart.

“Tomorrow,” I grunt quietly.

She nods. “Tomorrow.”

I step out, and the door closes. I look up at the moon, and the world is *silent*.

Utterly silent. No screaming in my head. No demons from the past. Nothing. And slowly, I actually smile as I exhale and walk down the path.

And then suddenly, I stop with a sharp halt, and the moment of peace shatters.

It’s hardly noticeable, but I notice everything. Every cottage on campus has a quaint little wooden gate in the stone wall surrounding them. But there, carved into the wood of the one outside Lizbet’s and Julianna’s, is a coffin—the Bratva symbol for death.

I tense, whirling with a snarl as I bolt back to the cottage. But inside through the window, I can see her laughing—giggling with her roommate. I go to the door but then I stop myself.

She’s... joyful. She’s happy. And that’s a new thing for her. I won’t destroy that illusion right now But I already know I’ll be coming back here tonight.



I turn and fade into the darkness. I wait another hour, hidden; watching. But nothing and no one makes a move on the cottage. After another half an hour, I slowly melt away and head back to Lordship.

*OceanofPDF.com*



## LIZBET

“SIT. NOW.”

I blush as Julianna grins at me and points to one of the chairs around the kitchen table.

“Tea?”

I nod, biting my lip. “Please.”

She puts the kettle on and laughs to herself, shaking her head before she glances back at me.

“My my *my*.”

“It’s not what...” My brows knit. “Well—”

She laughs. “No, I think it’s *exactly* what I think.” She leans against the kitchen counter, her brow arched.

“Well, so much for just a business arrangement, then?”

I look down, my hands twisting. “I—I don’t know.”

“Oh, I don’t mean that in a bad way,” she smiles as she walks over to sit next to me. Her hand touches my shoulder, and I look up to see her smiling warmly at me.

“I’m happy for you,” she says gently. “And proud. I don’t need the details, but it seems like that was a big deal?”

I blush as I nod. “Yeah, I guess it was.”

I've never given her the gritty details—or the who—but Julianna and I have talked briefly about the abuse in my past and my hang-ups with intimacy because of it.

She smiles as she moves close to hug me. I grin, hugging her back.

“I'm really proud of you, babe.”

I nod into her shoulder.

*Me too.*

When she pulls back, though, her brow is worried.

“Just... you know, be careful.”

I tense. “What, because its Lukas, the psycho who stalks the OHA campus looking for vic—”

“Oh, come on,” she sighs. “Don't paint me with that brush. You know I'm not a rumor person. No, I don't think Lukas is stalking and prowling around campus at night like a fucking werewolf. But I do think he comes with a *lot* of baggage.”

My brows knit. “Has he talked to you?”

She laughs. “Lukas? No, definitely not. But, I don't know. I can sense it on him. He's damaged. Broken.”

“So am I,” I whisper.

She smiles wryly. “Maybe the broken pieces fit, then.”

I grin. I like that thought.

“Look, I get the appeal of the bad boy and the forbidden—”

“That's not what this is.”

She nods, smiling at me. “Okay then. I'm not trying to paint it a color it isn't.”

“I know.”

“Just...” she shrugs. “I want you to be and stay safe is all.”

I reach out and squeeze her hand with mine. “I am safe.”

“Good,” she grins.

The kettle starts to whistle. Juliana gets up to grab it, just as my phone rings. I answer without recognizing the number, but I instantly regret that.

“You got *married*?!”

I groan. “Hello, Nadia.”

“So it’s true, then?!”

“It’s a complicated situation—”

“Oh, don’t give me that bullshit!” She snaps, slurring. “And not just married, but to the son of one of dear Semyon’s mortal fucking enemies!?”

I stand, turning to storm into the living room.

“It’s *complicated*, Nadia,” I snap.

“And not even his *real* son. You couldn’t even have picked someone with blood ties to money and power. You had to go for the low-brow, bastard rent-a-kid charity case—”

“You’re vile,” I hiss, shaking my head. “Jesus, do you even hear yourself when you speak?”

“Do you even see yourself when you look in the mirror?” She snaps back. “Do you even see that you’re a proud Belsky—”

I choke out a laugh. “*Proud*? Proud!? Are you fucking kidding me? There is *nothing* proud about this last name, Nadia. I’d burn it off the face of the fucking planet if I could!”

She sneers, hissing at me. “I don’t know what turned you into such an ungrateful, spiteful little bitch, Lizbet. I really don’t.

So trying to dig your father and this family through the mud with your petty, perverted little lies wasn't enough—”

I hang up.

I'm shaking, clenching the phone so tight that it might shatter. My eyes are tightly shut, my teeth grinding as the searing claws dig deep into my heart. My throat closes, I try and swallow and just choke—

And then arms surround me.

“Hey... *hey*, breathe, Lizbet. Just breathe.”

Julianna hugs me tightly, stroking my hair and my back as she cradles me into her.

“Just breathe with me, okay?”

I nod, trembling.

“In, out. In, out. Like that.”

I follow, keeping my eyes closed as I match her breaths. Slowly, my lungs unclench, and my heart begins to untwist and beat normally.

She holds me for another second before she pulls back.

“These... attacks...”

“I'm okay,” I say weakly. “Thank you, though.”

“They're not just panic attacks, are they?”

I bite my lip, hesitating.

“You don't have to tell me,” she says gently. “But I'm all ears if you want to.”

As it always does when I think on it, it breaks my heart a little knowing we won't be roommates next term.

Lukas won't be kissing me next term, either.

My face falls, but I quickly suck it up and push it all back in that little box I keep it in. I can't dwell on the future—or, the lack of future. I just *can't*.

Live now. Just live now.

My phone buzzes in my hand, and I groan. I swear, if it's my mother, I'm stomping on it. But when I glance down, it's another number I recognize.

It's Olek.

"I..." my brows knit.

"I'll be upstairs, okay?" Julianna smiles wryly at me as she steps back and rubs my shoulders. She starts to turn to walk away.

"Hey, Julianna?"

She turns back. "Yeah?"

"Thanks for being a..." I frown. "Well, my only friend."

She grins. "I'm not exactly lousy with friends either, you know. So thanks for being mine."

She smirks and nods at my buzzing phone.

"If that's your mother, feel free to pass it over. I'm *great* with shit mums."

I grin. "I'll remember that."

When she's upstairs, I quickly call Olek back.

"Ms. Belsky," he mutters deeply. "How are you?"

"I'm good, thank you, Mr. Domitrovich."

"I wanted you to know that the council has had strong words with Antin for sending Konstantin to Oxford Hills. It was an

aggressive move, and it has been met with great displeasure with the rest of us.”

I nod. “Thank you, I appreciate you saying that. But, it’s fine. Konstantin hasn’t really been a bother.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Well, I wanted to tell you that we have a council meeting set, three weeks from now. We will finalize everything with your father’s estate and empire, along with your ties to the Kashenko family.”

He clears his throat.

“And congratulations, by the way. I think you made a wise choice.”

Thank you, Mr. Domitrovich.”

“Speak to you soon, Ms. Belsky.”

I’m smiling when I crawl into bed a little while later. I’m still buzzing... still tingling from Lukas’s touch and lips. I’m still replaying every single instance of what just happened in this very bed as I climb into it.

My eyes close, and I dream of Lukas.

And it almost feels like he’s still here, looking at me.

Watching me...

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



THE DOOR SHUTS BEHIND ME, and I lean against it. My heart soars. My lips pull back in what just might be one of the most normal smiles I've had in years.

I smirk to myself, shaking my head as the memories of Lizbet's moans and smiles float through my head. I breathe deep and start for the stairs.

"What the fuck is going on, Lukas?"

I tense, turning my head to see Ilya standing in the near-dark kitchen. He's leaned against the counter by the range stove with the hood-vent on low, dragging slowly on a spliff. The cherry illuminates his face, throwing the shadowed lines of his scowl in sharp relief.

Ilya scares most people. I'm not most people.

"Care to elaborate?" I grunt, stepping in to glare at him back over the marble island.

"Belsky. What the fuck are you doing?"

"Her name is Lizbet."

"I don't give a shit."

My temper flares as my lips pull back in a snarl.



“What I do with my time, and who I spend that time with, is none of your business, *Volkov*.”

“Not when it concerns the heir to fucking Belsky empire, you fucking idiot!” He snaps back. “This was supposed to be a goddamn business acquisition, not a fucking booty call for you!”

I growl darkly. “*Watch it*. I’m allowed to want this, Ilya. I’m *allowed* to feel the same things normal people do—”

“Not with her,” he snaps, shaking his head. “Christ, Lukas, are you fucking insane? Her father tried to kill my uncle! And your father!”

“And she’s not him!” I roar back.

“Maybe you need a lesson in genetics, since you’re not quite up to speed on that front.”

I snarl as I lunge around the island towards him. But Ilya meets me halfway, gritting his jaw as he squares off with me.

“Say that again,” I hiss. “And watch me knock your goddamn teeth in.”

“Her entire fucking family is a cancer, Lukas!” He roars in my face. I snarl back, my hand jutting out to grab his collar. He grabs mine, hauling a fist back.

The kitchen lights click on.

“What the *fuck* is going on in here?!”

Suddenly, Misha’s shoving between us, pushing me back and then turning to slam Ilya into the refrigerator.

“Jesus Christ, what is wrong with you two?!” Misha roars.

“Ask the traitor over here trying to get his dick wet with—”

I snarl, shoving past Misha as my fist slams into Ilya's jaw. He lunges at me, but Misha keeps him pinned back with one arm as he sends me sprawling back with the other.

"*Enough!*" he roars.

"That's fucking *enough!*"

"Fuck you, Luk—"

Misha whirls on Ilya. "Shut the fuck up. Enough, Ilya. She's obviously not her father, stop going there."

"And why not?" he spits.

Misha's face darkens. "Am I *my* father?"

Ilya's jaw clenches. But he says nothing.

"Enough," Misha says, quieter. He turns to me. "Okay? Are we done coming at each other like a couple of fuckheads?"

I glare at Ilya. He rolls his eyes and grunts.

"*Fine*, yes." He eyes me as he rubs his jaw. "Sorry," he grunts.

"Forget it," I mutter back.

"Good. Great. Fantastic," Misha growls dryly. He turns to me, his eyes narrowing.

"Lizbet aside, though, dude..."

I frown. "What."

"Tell us what's going on, Lukas. Seriously. You've been acting erratic. More than usual, I mean."

"Nothing is going on."

His mouth thins. "Lukas, just talk to us. Let us help—"

"I'll be back."

“C’mon, Komarov,” Ilya sighs as I turn. “He’s right, man. The fuck is going on with you? And I don’t even mean you and her. I mean you and whatever demons—Lukas!”

I walk out of the kitchen, through the foyer, and out the door into the darkness. I stride quickly across the campus grounds, following the path to the only place I want to be right now.

And the only person who quiets the raging in my head.

The path winds through one of the rose gardens. But suddenly, I frown as I come to a stop. Above the tops of the hedges, something’s glowing, and flickering.

My nostrils flare, and I shiver as I realize I smell smoke.

I bolt around the corner out of the garden, and my eyes go wide as I stare across the field towards the clusters of cottages.

I break into a dead-run, my pulse pounding.

Lizbet’s cottage is on fire.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

I'M SHAKING as I clutch the blanket tighter. It's chilly outside, but that's not the only reason I'm shaking.

The fire is out... thanks to Lukas and the fire extinguisher in our kitchen. The local fire department is on the scene, along with the OHA campus security, and with a few dozen students in pajamas from neighboring cottages.

But still, I'm shaking as I remember him hauling me out of my bed. I flinch as I remember the terror of the heat of the flames and the confusion of what was going on as he pulled Julianna and I from the house.

I blink as I realize one of the firefighters is speaking with a stone-faced, soot-streaked Lukas.

"Not sure, but could be faulty wiring or something." He points to the scorched side of the cottage, right under my bedroom window.

"We'll need to send our photos and measurements to an expert for analysis, but my guess is it started right there, at that electrical box."

Under my window. The fire started right under my bedroom window. I shudder again as I remember the shape roaring as he broke down my door to grab me out of bed, screaming. My

eyes slide back to the wall of the cottage—now blackened; the ivy there charred to ash.

Ilya, Misha, Tenley, and Charlotte are here too—the first two standing with arms crossed behind Lukas, looking grim. Charlotte and Tenley have been hanging back. But as Lukas speaks to the firefighters, they step forward.

“Here,” Charlotte says quietly as she drapes another blanket over me.

I look up, smiling wryly at the girl I’ve barely ever had any interaction with. Mostly everyone at this school looks at me like an outcast—a leper to be avoided since it was made clear early on that “the kings” of OHA looked down on me.

But also, I’ve put next to zero effort into making any friends. Because what’s the point?

And yet, it feels... nice, when she smiles at me. It makes me remember that at one point, before the hurt, before the chaos after Semyon died, and before being given an expiration date, I could smile at people. I could make friends.

Tenley crouches down to give Julianna a hug. I know from talking to my roommate that they’re friendly now, despite Julianna formerly having had an unreciprocated thing for Ilya.

People can change. People can evolve and get past things.

Or, some people can. Maybe I can. But there’s not getting past the big “thing” in my imminent future.

Lukas is still talking with the fireman. The man nods with his head, and the both of them walk closer to the charred electrical box. The fireman says something, and Lukas’s eyes narrow. He glances back at me, his eyes piercing me. Then he turns and nods to the fireman before he stands and walks back over to me.

“You’re going to come stay at Lordship.”

I grin a little. But I bite it back.

“Oh, I’m sure the school can find another cottage—”

“Come to Lordship,” he says quietly. But his voice is edged, and his face is drawn.

I frown, tensing. “Wait, are you—”

My eyes dart back over to where the fireman and one of the campus security officers are speaking lowly next to the electrical box where the fire started.

“Do you think—”

“It’s just an electrical fire,” he shrugs, unconvincingly. “Just come stay at Lordship for now. It’ll be the easiest thing.”

He turns to Julianna.

“You too, Julianna.”

Her brow knits. “Oh, that’s—”

“No, you should come,” Tenley pipes up. She smiles at Julianna and then me.

“Come on, there’s definitely room.”

Lukas nods. He turns to eye Ilya. The Wolf scowls, raking his fingers over his jaw, lips thin. He turns to glare at me, but then he sighs.

“Fine.”

Lukas rolls his eyes as he claps a hand on Ilya’s shoulder.

“Wasn’t looking for your permission,” he growls quietly with a small smile.

He turns back to me.

“I’ll get your stuff.”

“I’ll help,” Misha grunts. He glances at Julianna. “I’ll grab your stuff.”

He and Lukas disappear into the smoke-damaged house as campus security comes over. Julianna and I sign some statements, answer a few more questions, and assure the OHA student services lawyer on the scene that we’re fine.

Misha and Lukas step back out with a few suitcases of stuff, and then we’re off to Lordship.

---

I’M UTTERLY *EXHAUSTED* as Lukas guides me into his room. He puts my bags of clothes to one side and digs into a side zipper.

“Here, you can change in the bathroom,” he says gently. He passes me a pair of my sweatpants and a tank top, along with a bag of my toiletries.

I nod, numb, a little scared still. And yet, I feel safe. I feel safer here in his room with him than I have in years, to be honest.

I brush my teeth, change, and then step out of the bathroom.

“I’ll take one of the couches. The bed is all your—”

“Lukas?” I say softly.

He frowns. “Yeah?”

“Would... could you sleep with me?” I blush. “I mean... not—I just—”

He smiles quietly. “I know what you mean.” He nods, his eyes holding mine, comforting me. “Of course I will.”

We both crawl in under the covers. Warmth spreads through me as he moves up behind me. His arms circle me, pulling me close against his body as my lips split in a big smile.

“Just sleep and rest, Lizbet,” he growls quietly. “You’re safe here.”

I know I am, too.

His fingers gently stroke my hair; soothing me, calming me. Until slowly, my eyes close.

I’m slipping off to sleep when I think I feel him getting up from the bed. But no... there’s his hand again, stroking my hair.

My mind settles. My eyes stay closed. And I sleep.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)





## LUKAS

WHEN SHE'S FAST ASLEEP, I quietly slip from the bed and head outside to smoke. It's not that I want to, or relish, leaving her. But being outside has a way of clearing my head.

And I need to think, especially after the fireman's words.

*"Look, I didn't want to say nothin' near the ladies, but..."*

*He points to the electrical box we're crouched by.*

*"There's something off with this fire."*

*My brow knits. "What do you mean?"*

*"With most electrical fires, you can see signs of a spark or initial bang, and then the creep of fire around it."*

*"And this?"*

*He points again. "There. The initial 'spark' ain't a spark. It's a small burst."*

*I frown. "How is that different?"*

*"Electrical circuits don't 'burst'," he grunts. "And I'd need to have a lab check this, but..." he nods at the metal door of the box, hanging askew.*

*"These are normally locked."*

*I tense. "Did the first team on the scene have to cut it off to—"*

*“Nothin’ to cut, son,” he grunts. “It was already gone.”*

She’ll be safe here, I think to myself as I open the French door to the back patio. She’ll be safe.

I step outside and slip a cigarette between my lips. But someone’s already out here at the patio table. Ilya looks up from rolling a joint, and we glare at each other.

A full ten seconds tick by before he sighs and slumps back in the chair. His scowl turns into a wry smirk.

“Smoke?”

“Sure.”

“Sit,” he nods at the chair across from him.

He looks up at the look on my face and grins. “I know you weren’t asking for permission, dick. Just sit and smoke with me.”

I slip the cigarette behind my ear and sit at the table. Ilya puts the joint between his lips and lights it. He puffs slowly, letting the smoke curl around his face before he passes it to me.

“I’m sorry about what I said earlier,” he grunts. He blows smoke in a thin stream before his lips twist. “Look, you deserve peace and happiness, Lukas. Of course you do.”

I nod as I puff slowly.

“But, c’mon, man. Misha’s right, too. You’ve been... different lately.”

I look up, blowing smoke at the moon.

“I’m working on some stuff.”

“No shit.” He sighs, reaching across to pluck the J from my fingers.

“But I’m here, man. Try and remember that. Lukas, you’re my best friend. I’m here if you need anything”

“I know.” I smile thinly at him. “And thanks, man.”

But there are some things he can’t help me with. Ilya is a dark guy. I’m darker, though. And there’s a darkness in me and in my past that even Ilya couldn’t face without breaking.

I don’t want any of the people I love to know that darkness.

We sit in silence, smoking the joint slowly.

“You really like her, don’t you?” He eyes me curiously. “I mean, I know I was being an asshole earlier when I said—”

“I know you were.”

He grins. “But it’s more than just... I don’t know. That. Isn’t it?”

I nod.

“She...” I frown. “She quiets the...” I shrug and tap a finger to my head.

Ilya grins. “I get what you mean. Good for you, man. I mean that.”

“Thanks,” I grin back.

The French door opens, and Tenley steps out wearing sleep shorts and one of Ilya’s hoodies. She looks surprised to see me.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“You’re not,” I smile at her.

She steps over, shivering in the chill before she slips her arms around Ilya from behind. He twists his head to kiss her.

It's the same as before—how natural this is. How easily they let down their walls with each other. But then I remember that most people don't *have* the walls and broken bars up that people like Lizbet and I do.

But even then, I feel like seeing the two of them now is somehow more relatable than usual. I like that.

“You two keep talking,” Tenley smiles at me. “I’m going to get back inside before I freeze.”

“Go ahead,” I nod at Ilya. “I’m good, really.”

He arches a brow. “*We’re* good?”

I grin. “Of course we are, asshole.”

“Prick.”

We both stand, and he walks around to give me a quick hug.

“I’m here, Lukas. Please don’t ignore that.”

“I know. I won’t.”

I watch the two of them slip arms around each other and step back inside. Then I sit and lean back to look up at the stars.

I’m just about to head back in myself, and get back to wrapping my arms around Lizbet. But my phone rings.

I glance down. It’s my dad.

“Hey,” I murmur.

“Sorry to call so late. I just realized the time.”

“Nah, I’m up.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” he chuckles.

I grin. “What’s up?”

“Nothing, kid. I just wanted to let you know that Olek set a meeting in three weeks to finalize everything.”

I nod. “Good, that’s great.”

“Yeah, I had a conference call earlier with the whole council, and we all decided. Even Antin dropped this bullshit with trying to get his son with Lizbet to get his hands on the Belsky holdings. He’s fine with it.” He sighs. “Crisis averted, thanks to you.”

I’m nodding along, when suddenly I tense.

*“Electrical circuits don’t ‘burst’.”*

*“Nothin’ to cut. The lock was already gone.”*

I sit up straight, my senses tuning as my eyes narrow into the darkness.

“How earlier?” I growl.

Viktor pauses. “What?”

“How earlier was the conference call with the council?”

*With Antin.*

“A few hours ago. I meant to call you right after, I just had some stuff to wrap—”

“I have to go.”

I hang up abruptly, standing quickly. Murder roars in my veins.

Hours ago. And Antin was “fine with it”?

*Bullshit.*

I snarl as I storm out of the yard and into the darkness to find Konstantin.

And if I smell smoke, I’m going to fucking kill him.

*OceanofPDF.com*



“I DIDN’T START that fire, Lukas.”

Konstantin speaks before I can even open my mouth. I’m halfway out of the shadows into the illumination cast from the light outside his cottage. He’s sitting on the stoop, smoking quietly, eyeing me.

I growl as I step into the light.

“That’s why you’re here, right?” he grunts.

“You seem to know about it.”

He snorts. “Jesus, Lukas. The whole fucking campus knows about it.” He sighs heavily, shaking his head. He stands and nods past me at the lit-up face of the main buildings in the distance.

“The famous Oxford fucking Hills,” he mutters. “So, this is where you go to pretend to be normal, huh?” He turns to look at me. “Where you and those other two pretend to be normal, regular schoolboys instead of future Bratva kingpins.”

His eyes narrow.

“How *quaint*.”

I snarl and move towards him with bared teeth.

“Oh, *stop*, man. I didn’t start shit.”

“Why are you *here*, Konstantin?” I hiss.

“At OHA?” He grins. “To fuck with you, Lukas.”

“Funny.”

He chuckles. “I’m being totally serious.”

“This council meeting in three weeks,” I growl. “That why you went to her cottage?”

He grunts, glaring at me. “For the last fucking time, I didn’t start any fires, asshole. But this council meeting and you being legally married to Belsky means *fuck-all* until the vote is through. And my father is working on that.”

He grins.

“This isn’t over, Komarov.”

My eyes narrow. My teeth grind as my hands curl into fists and I start to storm towards him.

“Oh, *please*,” he snaps, moving back into a defensive stance, fists raised.

“Please, start something. Let’s start a fucking *war* over some chick.” He rolls his eyes. “Let’s be those guys, Lukas.”

I stop, but my muscles are still tight. My hands are still fists.

“You don’t want to cross me, Konstantin,” I growl quietly.

“You have no fucking idea the depth of my fury.”

He frowns curiously as he eyes me.

“Yes I do. You know I—” he peers at me. “Hmm.”

My frown deepens. “What.”

“Nothing.”

His anger drops though, and he looks actually visibly shaken.



“Nothing, forget it.”

“*What,*” I snarl.

“Forget it. Look I’m not ‘crossing you,’ Lukas. I had nothing to do with tonight. I was at a study group in the library until twenty minutes ago.”

“Really,” I mutter dryly.

“Yeah, *really.*” He scowls. “This fucking school of yours is actually tough.”

“I know.”

He smirks. His hand dips into his jacket pocket, and he pulls out a pack of cigarettes. He raises it towards me.

“Smoke?”

“No.”

He grins. “Trying to quit or trying to hurt my feelings?”

“Both.”

Shit. He’s not lying. I’m looking for it in his face, but it’s really not there. Which means he really didn’t start the fire at Lizbet’s cottage. But that presents another, bigger problem: it means whoever *did* is still out there.

The thought chills me and drains the color from my face. The hunt is on.

Without a word, I start to turn away.

“This mean I’m not longer a suspect, detective?” Konstantin calls after me.

I ignore him. But I hear him chuckle.

“Looks like you’ve got yourself a ghost, Lukas.”

I stop and glance back to see him looking at me curiously as he lights another cigarette.

“But don’t worry. If I were to bet on one person hunting ghosts?”

He inhales, the smoke curling around his grey eyes as he looks at me coolly.

“Well, it’d be you.”

He grins.

“Happy hunting, Lukas.”

I turn and slink away into the shadows.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

I FEEL like I'm living a new reality. A strange one, but a great one. And it's mostly great because I'm effectively living with Lukas.

And that's a strange and very fun thing.

It's been a week and a half since the fire. The cottage is repaired, and it was officially deemed an electrical short by the school and the local police, which seems to have calmed Lukas down a little.

Just not enough to let me move back in.

"Let."

I want to roll my eyes at the thought. I'm not chained here. I just, well...

Maybe I like being here more. Maybe I just like the feeling that I have sleeping the best sleep I've had in years. Because each night, in the same bed as him, with his arms around me, that's how I feel.

Juliana's moved back into our newly renovated cottage. I go and hang out there, and study there, and even shower there. But I sleep here.

In his bed. With him.

And I... explore.

Slowly. With touching. With wandering hands under the covers in the gasping darkness of night. With his mouth on me, *frequently*.

But that's all. He doesn't push me to do anything I'm not ready for. He takes me right to the line, willingly, eagerly. But he never pushes me past it. And somehow, even though the way he makes me scream into his lips sends my heart racing, I haven't had another episode since the night in Manchester.

It's Saturday morning, and I'm in Lukas's bathroom brushing my teeth when the door opens behind me. I look up into the mirror and blush as I catch his deep, piercing blue eyes.

He's bare-chested, too—something that he's been doing more and more of around me, even in the daylight while we're alone. My eyes sweep over him, and my core clenches with heat.

I don't even see the scars. Not really, at least. I see through them. I see the tattoo ink, and the muscles. I see the man under it all, staring back at me. He grins that small, tight smile that I honestly adore. My eyes drop, over his chest, down his abs, and down the tempting grooves of his hips into his very, very low-slung sweatpants.

I shiver as his jaw tightens. He's so, *so* hot in this dark way.

He steps into the bathroom, eyeing me hungrily. I'm just in a tank-top and panties, and I feel his gaze slide over every inch of me.

Lukas moves close to me, and I gasp as he pushes my hair away from my neck. His mouth dips, and I shiver as his lips start to gently kiss down the side of my neck.

“*Lukas...*” I moan. I drop my toothbrush and grip the edges of the vanity. His hands grip my hips, pinning me to it as I gasp.

“I—I have a study group...”

“You’re going to be late for it.”

His hand slides over my hip, and his fingers slip into the front of my panties. I moan, biting my lip as he pushes it deep between my legs, feeling how wet I am.

“*Lukas...*” I whimper.

His free hand slips to the back of my tank top. He pushes it up, bunching the back of it in his fist. His mouth slips down my spine, kissing the bare skin as his fingers work in slow circles around my throbbing clit.

His mouth drops lower, skipping over the bunched cotton in his hand to drop to my lower back. He kneels, still rubbing my pussy as his lips leave wet kisses all the way down to the small of my back, right above my ass.

His hand slips away from me. But suddenly he’s pulling my panties down my legs as he kneels before me. He growls, and I whimper as he roughly bends me over the vanity and starts to kiss down the curve of my ass.

He spreads my legs with strong hands, and I gasp as he pushes his face between them.

“*Oh fuck...*”

His tongue drags over me, making me see stars. He groans, gripping my ass and spreading me lewdly open. His tongue dances up and down my slit until he pushes it into me, like he’s fucking me with his mouth.

I cry out, clawing at the marble vanity as I shamelessly push back against his tongue. He growls, moving to my clit and

sucking it between his lips. His tongue dances over it as I moan for more.

Slowly, his mouth teases back. And back, and *back*.

“Lukas—” I choke when his tongue slips up and over my asshole. But when he does, the sensation absolutely melts me. I gasp, panting at the new feeling. But my legs shake. My core clenches, and my body surges with pleasure.

His hand slides up between my thighs, and he starts to roll my clit with his thumb as he licks my ass gently.

I start to tense. I start to fall. And before I even know it, I’m *coming*.

I turn to bury the scream in my arm, moaning as his thumb and tongue topple me into my orgasm. I come, and I come *hard*.

I’m still shaking as he stands and casually kisses the back of my neck. He grins, smirking smugly as he reaches past me for his toothbrush.

“Morning,” he grunts quietly as he starts to brush.

I just stare at him—my eyes wide and my mouth still hanging open. He looks right back at me, looking smug as he finishes brushing his teeth.

“Something wrong?” he teases.

Oh, that’s it.

I turn and almost jump into his arms. I kiss him wildly, moaning into his mouth as I shove him out of the bathroom back into the bedroom. We tumble onto the bed, and I instantly reach for him.

I’m about to cross another line I never have. And I’m so ready to.

My hands push at the low-slung waist of his sweats. They slide down, and I tremble when his thick cock springs free against his abs.

I swallow as my eyes grow wider.

He's *so* fucking big. I mean, I've only touched it, mostly in the dark. But it always takes my breath away, like it does now.

Lukas groans, pulling me in to kiss me as I wrap one hand as much around this length as I can and stroke him slowly. He pulses in my hand, the vein throbbing under my grip.

But I want more this time. I'm ready to give him more.

I slip my lips from his and kiss down his neck. He groans, dropping a hand between my legs to stroke a finger through my lips. But I keep kissing lower, down his chest, before I drop to the floor in front of him.

He suddenly frowns.

“Lizbet—”

“Let me,” I whisper as I lean closer. My tongue wets my lips as I eye his bulging cock.

“Lizbet, hang—”

“Let me do this for you,” I purr softly.

I lean forward, and I kiss the swollen crown. Power surges through me as he pulses against me. I moan softly as I open my lips and let them slip wetly down around him.

I whimper eagerly, losing myself in the act as I bob my head. My tongue dances across his underside and swirls over his crown. I try to push deeper, but no—that'll be for another time.

After a minute, I realize he's silent. My brow furrows as I drag my eyes up to his.

*Oh God.*

He's ashen-faced, staring into nothing, like he's somewhere else. His jaw is clenched. Every muscle in his body is tensed.

"Wait wait, hang on," I gasp, quickly sliding up to wrap my arms around him. I kiss him, but he's still barely here, barely even aware of me.

"Hang on, Lukas," I choke, alarmed as I cup his face and peer into his eyes. "Where are you?"

He blinks, coming out of it.

"Nowhere," he growls quietly. He looks away and reaches for a sheet.

"Lukas,"

I take his hand and look into his eyes. He looks back, his own gaze quavering.

"This have to do with the scars?"

He nods.

"The same place?"

He nods again, and my heart breaks.

"It's..." he frowns and looks down. "It's hard for me to vocalize..."

"Then don't, really—"

"I want to." He looks up. His hand tightens in mine. "I want to tell you."

He takes a slow breath, his jaw still gritting tightly.



“Some came to pay to watch us—Yanis, me, the others there—fight each other. Some came to hurt or torture. To kill, at times...”

Tears burn the corners of my eyes as the pain in his voice cuts into me.

“There was that one man who loved to whip and cut me. But there were others who...”

*Oh God.*

My stomach turns.

“Some came who would pay to...” he scowls, glaring fire at the floor. “It was never, I mean...” His jaw sets. “It was never *that*. Not with me, at least. But there were some that came and wanted to...”

He looks away.

“With their mouths.”

The sob wrenches from my chest, and I wrap my arms as tight around him as I can. I hold him, crying, as he holds me back, shaking.

“You’re going to be late to your study session,” he says quietly, after who knows how long.

“Then I’ll be late.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



“WE WANT TO MEET HER, for real.”

I arch a brow, pausing outside the library at Viktor’s request.

“You...”

“Want to meet her. I mean like a sit-down dinner—you, Lizbet, and your mother and I.”

“You understand this is Lizbet *Belsky*, yes?”

He chuckles. “Oh, really? Thanks for clarifying that. Smart-ass.”

I smile.

“People aren’t their parents, Lukas. Well,” he snorts. “Sometimes they are. I get the impression though that Lizbet is nothing like Semyon.”

I frown. He’s right and wrong. No, she’s nothing like the monster that used his position as a Bratva King to be a general sociopath without consequences. To be an abuser.

My teeth grit before I shove that from my head.

No, Lizbet is not *that* part of Semyon. But, she does have some of him in her blood. She’s got the grit to knuckle down and stay the course. Semyon was a drunken piece of shit, and

an idiot. But he didn't stay in power by accident. He stayed because he could *outlast*.

So can she.

"When were you thinking? And where?"

"We'll come to you. Let's say Manchester, three nights from now?"

I slowly nod. "Yeah, that works."

"Excellent. I'll call the school about getting you and her permission to—"

"It's fine. She knows about the tunnel."

He pauses, and I can almost hear his eyebrows raising as I smirk.

"Oh?"

"Yeah." I pause. "Vik, why is it I can tell you're smiling?"

He chuckles. "Because you are, and that's rare, unfortunately. You gonna tell me what's going on?"

I smirk, smiling a crooked, small grin.

"There's a chance this has moved past a business arrangement.

"Well now I'm really smiling."

I chuckle as I glance up at the library. "We can discuss it later."

He laughs. "Nice dodge on that father-son bonding moment. Alright, go. I'll text you later about the restaurant."

"See you in three days, dad."

---

INSIDE, I prowls through the huge, old gothic library of Oxford Hills into the back stacks. She texted me earlier that she was here when I asked.

With a winking face. From both of us.

I'm texting fucking *winking* emojis now. I grin. Yikes.

I stalk through the dim aisles and shelves of old books until I back-step when I catch sight of her. I slink up the aisle, watching her as she stands there, reading a page from a book she's just pulled from a shelf.

"How's the studying?"

Lizbet gasps, whirling with choked surprise until she realizes it's me. She makes a face and playfully smacks my arm.

"Scared the shit out of me," she mutters as I pull her into my arms. She kisses me softly before she pulls back.

"Studying is—well, *was*—going well." Her brows knit. "This school is actually really hard, you know."

"That's not the only thing."

She blushes as I push my hips against her.

"Dirty jokes, from you?"

"You bring it out in me."

"*Same*," she purrs.

Her hand slips around my neck, her fingers sliding into my hair as I lower my mouth to kiss her again. This time though, it lingers. It grows hotter and deeper, until we're moaning into each other's mouths.

Her hips rock against me as she whimpers. There's no fucking way I'm holding back anymore.

With a lingering slow kiss, I pull away and drop to my knees. Her eyes go wide as I shove her skirt and slip my fingers into her lacy white panties.

“*Lukas!*” she chokes. Her face is dark red as she whips her head side to side. But there’s no one back here. Not even close.

No one’s going to disturb me from what I can’t wait to taste.

I drag her panties down to her knees. And without another second passing, I press my face between her thighs.

Lizbet cries out as my tongue snakes over her slick little pussy. I groan into her, dragging my tongue up and down her slit before I suck her clit between my lips. She kicks her panties down, but they’re still hanging off one foot as I raise it to drape her thigh over my shoulder.

“*Oh my God, what are you doing?*” She hisses, moaning as I tongue her button.

“Devouring you,” I growl.

And that’s exactly what I do. My pulse thuds as I plunge my tongue into her, drinking her sweetness. I swirl it around her clit, again and again until her thighs are quivering against my face.

I slip my hand up one leg and sink two fingers into her slippery pussy. I curl them against the spot inside as I suck on her clit, and suddenly, Lizbet starts to explode.

“*Oh fuck—*”

Her hand drops to my head, her fingers gripping my hair tightly. She chokes and then buries her mouth in the crook of her other arm as her whole body jolts against me.

I can *taste* her coming. I can feel it flooding my tongue. And it makes me so fucking hard it almost hurts.

She yanks me up, her eyes wild with lust. She yanks me by the tie into her and kisses my mouth hard. Her tongue dances with mine, tasting herself and moaning lowly. Her hands drop feverishly to my belt, and my blood churns like diesel as she yanks it open and tugs down my zipper.

She reaches in, and I groan when her smalls hands wrap around my throbbing hard cock. She pulls me out and starts to stroke me as she kisses me feverishly.

Slowly, Lizbet pulls away from my mouth—her lips glistening and puffy. She glances down as she slowly pumps my dick, and then looks up at me with a glow to her cheeks. She wets her lips.

“You can say no...” she starts, blushing. “I just... before, when you brought me into the boxing ring...”

I know where she’s going with this. I know what she wants to do—to push me past this block I’ve never gotten over or past.

But I don’t clam up. I don’t retreat into myself, or grow cold. I want this. And I want *her* to be the one to banish this particular demon.

Lizbet looks into my eyes, and she sees I know what she means.

“Let me?” She whispers, stroking me gently.

I nod.

Her eyes widen with lust as she kisses me, wets her lips, and then sinks to her knees. She looks up at me as she brings her mouth closer. But still, I don’t tense or go hollow inside.

I push my hips forward. I fucking *want this*.

Her tongue swirls over my swollen crown tentatively. When I groan with pleasure, she grows bolder. Her tongue traces down

one side, then up the underside, then back down the other side. Then it's one long teasing lick from the base all the way to my head before she engulfs it in her warm, wet mouth.

I almost go cross-eyed with the pleasure. But I keep looking at her, staring up into my eyes. I focus on her, not the past.

*Her.*

Her mouth pushes lower, taking more of me. My jaw grits, and I groan as the pleasure surges inside of me. Her hand pumps me as she bobs her head. Her tongue dances over all the right parts, turning me to mush as I sag against the shelves behind me.

But my eyes never leave hers.

She hums, moaning around me, slurping wetly in this erotic way that pushes me dangerously to the edge. I reach down. She reaches up with one hand, and our fingers lock.

“Lizbet,” I groan.

“*Come,*” she moans, pulling wetly away from me. “I want to taste you. Come in my mouth.”

Her lips slide halfway down my spit-slicked length without waiting. Her cheeks hollow, her tongue teases, and her eyes lock with mine.

And it's heaven.

I groan as I lose control. My hips push, my cock surges into her hot mouth, and suddenly, I'm coming, hard.

She whimpers, swallowing every jet as it spills across her tongue. Her eyes stay right there, locked on mine. Guiding me. Keeping me here, with her.

Slowly, she pulls away with a flirty, teasing lick to my crown. With a growl, I pull her up, and I crush my mouth to hers. I push her back, pinning her to the shelves behind her as she moans into my lips. My hands slide over her, and hers slide over mine as we yank at each other's clothes.

And then suddenly, she's shaking. Not trembling, *shaking*.

Her legs give out, and the alarm bells roar in my head.

"Lizbet!"

Her face goes white and ashen, and her eyes roll back. Her hands claw at her chest.

"*Lizbet!*"

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)





## LIZBET

I WAKE to all-to-familiar white lights and beeping sounds. My eyes flutter open, not wanting to believe it's true. But here I am, back in a hospital bed.

I close my eyes again, tightly; wincing.

*Shit.*

My mind flashes back to the library stacks—to the heaven of his mouth, and then freedom of taking him in mine. I remember kissing him, and wanting him in every possible way, so badly.

And then, nothing.

Which means I had another attack. And a bad one, because I just came-to in a freaking hospital.

*Shit shit shit.*

It's getting worse. It can't get worse. An aching sensation builds inside of me as I clench my eyes shut.

I thought I'd have more time. I was ready, for the eventual, that is. But that was before. That was before Lukas.

“Lizbet...”

His voice is so soft. But I don't to open my eyes again. I don't want to admit that what I saw before, a second ago, is real. I

don't want it to be real that I'm actually lying in a hospital bed, because I don't want what that means to be real.

But the beeping noises continue. There's no escaping this reality.

Slowly, I open my eyes. I swallow dryly as I turn my head. I see him, and my heart quickens a little. But next to him is a stern woman with silvering hair and horn-rimmed glasses.

"Ms. Belsky, I'm Doctor Shah," she says with a crisp, posh accent. Her brows knit. "How are you feeling?"

"*Thirsty*," I croak.

She nods. "I'll get some water for you soon. You've got the IV drip in, too, so the dehydration should fade soon."

She frowns.

"Do you know where you are?"

"A hospital. Final answer."

She smiles wryly. "You're in Manchester. You were brought here via ambulance from Oxford Hills Academy barely conscious. Do you remember any of that?"

I look past her, to Lukas. He smiles encouragingly. But there's nothing.

"Not really."

Doctor Shah nods and takes a measured breath as she glances at her charts and then back to me.

"Lizbet, your condition is... deteriorating. Faster than I think your previous doctors—"

"Hold on, what condition?" Lukas growls thickly, pushing forward. His brow furrows deeply with concern.

Doctor Shah frowns as she glances at him. “I’m sorry, who exactly are you to the patient?”

“Her husband,” he hisses, his voice gravely.

She looks skeptical. But I reach for him, and he takes my hand and squeezes. I smile at him, and then turn to her.

“Can you... give us a minute?”

She nods. “I’ll be outside.”

When we’re alone, he leans over me, pulling close.

“Fuck, Lizbet...” he murmurs as he lowers his lips to kiss me softly.

“I need to tell you something,” I whisper.

“You fainted,” he grunts quickly. “It happens.”

“It happens a lot to me.”

He swallows, his nostrils flaring.

“So you need iron, or vitamins, or—”

“I need a new heart, actually.”

Time freezes. The world goes still. Lukas’s face looks like it’s broken.

“*What?*” He chokes, blinking quickly.

I close my eyes, swallowing. Here we go. Slowly, I open them again and meet his stricken gaze.

“I have something called Ebstein’s Anomaly,” I say quietly.

“They thought I had a heart murmur for years, mostly because my mother always thought I was cry baby.”

His face tenses. His hand grips mine tightly.

“They diagnosed me about nine months ago. It’s a condition where a faulty valve between the two right chambers of the heart doesn’t work correctly.”

“So how do we fix—”

“With a full transplant or a partial valve reconstruction, also from a transplant.

Lukas’s face darkens.

“So we get you a valve donor—”

“I’m too far along to get on the list,” I say softly.

His eyes glisten as they narrow in anger.

“Fuck that. No you’re—”

“Yeah, I am.”

He shakes his head violently, his eyes locked on me.

“The hell you are. I’ll get—”

“And my dad being who he was burned a lot of other bridges.”

“*No*,” Lukas hisses quietly.

I wince. “Lukas, I’m going to—”

“I said *no!*” He roars, turning and slamming a fist into the wall, denting it. His jaw grinds as he seethes, pushing his forehead to the wall next to his fist as his shoulders tense.

“Lukas,” I whisper.

He turns, his eyes red and wet.

“C’mere,” I smile weakly, beckoning him.

He moves close, taking my hands in his. His mouth is a thin line, and the pain in his eyes is almost more than I can bear to look at it.

“*Now*,” I swallow back tears. “Now I burn this, right here, into my memory. Because in a few months, I’m not going to be here, Lukas.”

He swoops into me, making me gasp and cling to him as his strong arms surround me.

“*No*,” he growls. “No-no-no-no-no. Don’t you say—”

“This is happening,” I choke into his chest. “It *is*, okay? So can I please just hold onto you for now?”

“You don’t have to,” Lukas says quietly as his arms tighten around me. “Because I’m holding on to you, and I’m not fucking letting go.”

We’re silent as I breathe in the scent and the warmth of him, ignoring the beeps of the machines, and the tick of unstoppable clocks.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

WHEN MY VITALS are back up, they discharge me. I mean, what else are they going to do? And what, am I just going to lay in a hospital bed until I die?

Yeah, screw that.

It's dark when we get back to campus. At Lordship Manor, Lukas helps me up the stairs to his room; *gently*. So gently it's like he's handling me like I'm made out of glass.

"You're not going to break me, you know," I joke as we step into his room.

But he's silent, his face hard and walled off. It's been like this since we left the hospital.

"C'mon, Lukas," I sigh, reaching for him. "Please talk to me?"

He turns on me, eyes narrowed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I shake my head, looking away. "I don't know. Not denial, I just—" I shrug. "I made peace with it, a while ago. Before you."

"Christ," he growls. "*This* was the end of term deadline you demanded, wasn't it?"

I nod.

“I need the money to go into a trust, for Mara. Because when she wakes up—”

“It’s done,” he chokes, nodding solemnly. “Consider it done.”

“*Thank you.*”

“You need to rest.”

“I need to *shower* that hospital off of me.”

He smiles, nodding. “I’ll run the water.”

“Join me?”

He smirks, glancing back at me as he turns to the bathroom.

“You could ask me to do *anything* right now, and I’d do it. Jumping under hot water naked with you is an easy yes.”

I grin, blushing.

He runs the water as I strip. I pad into the bathroom to find him naked as well. But when he joins me under the luxurious rain-head spray, it’s not a grope-fest. It’s just him holding me, keeping me close.

“Turn around.”

His hands wash my hair gently, rinsing it clean before I turn back to wrap my arms around him. We stay like that for I don’t know how long before he slowly reaches over and turns off the water.

“Let’s get you to bed,” he murmurs.

I slip into a pair of sleep shorts and a t-shirt and slide under the covers. He tugs on boxers and slips in behind me, turning off the light before he wraps his arms around me. Moonlight gleams through the windows as I let the warmth of his body seep into me.

But I can't sleep.

"Lukas?" I whisper.

"Yeah?"

I close my eyes tightly. "This is happening. I mean, me—"

"I know," he growls. His arms tighten around me. "I don't want to—"

"That doesn't matter. It is. I'm just..." I swallow. "I'm glad it's you. Here with me, now."

I turn in his arms to face him, and I reach up to cup his cheek. My heart thuds as words I've never said choke in my throat. Words as of nine months ago I never thought I'd actually get a chance to say.

"I'm scared. But screw it. I'm dying anyway, right? Lukas, I —"

"I love you," he growls quietly.

My heart surges with light. My lips curl into a grin as I bite it back.

"That cause I'm dying?"

He smirks at my dark humor. But then he shakes his head.

"No. That's because it's true."

He leans in, and his lips press to mine.

*"I love you, too,"* I moan as I sink into him.

I cling to him, urging my hips towards him and feeling how hard he is.

And I'm so wet.

And I want this. Now.



I reach down and push my sleep shorts down. Then I slip my hand to his boxers and do the same to them.

“What are you doing?” he groans, tightening his hold on me.

“*I want this,*” I gasp.

“Lizbet—”

“I’m not fucking dying a virgin, and I want *you.*”

“I can’t do—”

“You’re my *husband*, Lukas,” I murmur urgently into his lips.

“Who the hell else qualifies?”

He growls, kissing me deeply, grinding against me as we both kick our shorts off. I’m so wet for him, needing him. Needing this.

“Don’t make me beg, because that would be pathetic,” I whisper into his lips. “This isn’t fucking charity, Lukas. I want you to have me because I want *you* to have me.”

He groans as his cock surges so thick and hard against my bare thigh.

“*That I can do,*” he growls.

His lips crush fiercely to mine, kissing me so hard it bruises me so sweetly. I whimper, clinging to him as I feel his muscles coil.

“Your heart...”

“*I’ll tell you.*”

With a groan, he pushes me over onto my back and slides between my legs. I’m aching for him, tingling everywhere with the throbbing need for him. One of his hands cups my cheek as the other centers the swollen, thick head of his bare cock between my lips, right at my opening.

I shiver in excitement as I look up into his piercing blue eyes.

*“Fuck me,”* I hiss.

His lips find mine, and he slowly starts to push inside.

I gasp, turning to bite the palm of his hand. He’s so big, and so freaking thick. But as I feel myself stretch open around him, the pleasure melts in my core.

*“Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me,”* I whimper.

He groans, his lips on my neck as he slides his hand from his cock to my ass. He grips it possessively as my legs wrap around him. His muscles coil as he pushes, sinking his thickness deep into me—deeper and deeper until my eyes roll back in my head.

And then, all of him is inside. I cling to him, panting and whimpering as I feel myself clench around him. He pushes my shirt up, peeling it off of me before his hands go right back where they were at my cheek and my ass.

Our noses and foreheads touch, our eyes lock. He slowly slides wetly out of me. But when just the thick head is inside, he drives back in to the hilt.

*“Lizbet,”* he groans as he starts to thrust in and out. Our panted breathes mingle. My skin shivers as it touches his. My nipples send electric currents tingling through my core as they drag over his muscled chest.

He growls, teeth clenched as he drives into me harder, over and over, until all I know is his body against me, inside of me, taking me, owning me.

Breaking me into a million pieces.

I cling to him as I feel the surge of heat threatening to explode inside of me. I moan into his mouth as I kiss him feverishly,

dragging my nails over scars and ink as my legs tighten around him.

*“Lukas...”*

“Let me feel you, love,” he groans. “Let me feel you come for me.”

Trigger: pulled.

With a cry, I sear my lips to his. My legs spasm and my thighs bruise his hips as I start to come so hard.

“Come in me!” I cry out as he groans into me. “Come in me, come in me...”

My orgasm explodes into a second as I feel him thrust deep and throb thickly. I gasp, kissing him as I feel his warm cum spill deep inside.

But I don’t stop kissing him. I don’t let go of my clinging grasp on him. Because I never want to.

“More,” I gasp. *“More....”*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

“YOU SURE you want to do this?”

In the back of the chauffeur car that picked us up at the barn exit to the tunnel, I grin. Lukas looks concerned.

“We don’t have to—”

I reach over and squeeze his hand.

“I’m very excited to meet your parents.”

“Look, it’s not like they’re a lot to handle or anything. I just don’t want you to think you *have* to do this just because my dad is on the council.”

I shake my head.

“I want to do this because I want to meet your mom and dad, Lukas.”

He clears his throat. “Alright, screw it. Let’s do this.”

He steps out of the car parked outside the fancy, upscale restaurant in the posh Didsbury district of Manchester. He walks around and opens my door. His hand dips to pull me out. But then he keeps pulling me until I fall into him.

With a grin, my lips find his, and I kiss him slowly as his arms circle me.

“I’d tell you to get a room, but I’m actually starving.”

I gasp, jumping back from Lukas and whirling to see an older, handsome man around forty grinning at the two of us.

“And this one,” he nods to a stunningly gorgeous redhead on his arm who looks about ten or fifteen years younger than him. “Won’t let us order without you.”

The woman rolls her eyes and turns to slap his shoulder.

“*Ignore him*, please?” She grins as she turns back to me.

“You must be Lizbet.”

Lukas clears his throat. “Lizbet, this is my mother and father, Fiona and Viktor. Mom, dad, this is...” he shrugs. “Okay, we’ve done the meet and greet.”

Viktor chuckles as he steps forward. He hugs his son firmly and then turns to look at me curiously. For a minute, I feel a shiver of uncertainty. After all, this man and my father were enemies, for a time. Semyon made attempts on Viktor’s life at one point.

But if there’s any lingering familiar distrust there, it’s gone when Viktor smiles at me. He extends his hand. “Lovely to see you again, Lizbet...” he frowns and stares at his hand. “The hell am I doing? You’re family now.”

He steps close and hugs me gently. When he pulls back, I blink in shock as Fiona does the same thing.

“Nice to meet you both,” I grin. Lukas’s hand slips down to take mine, squeezing.

“Alright, let’s eat.”

---

“So, what do you want to do after school, Lizbet?”

Lukas shoots me a look of concern when his mother asks the question. “After” or “later” are two subjects we’ve been steadfastly avoiding the last few days since the night of the hospital visit.

But I smile. I don’t need to tell Fiona about, well, everything. Not now, at dinner. Maybe not ever. But I can pretend. I can talk as it’s still nine or ten months ago, before the period was written at the end of my sentence.

“I think I’m taking a year off. I’m loving being at Oxford Hills, but with everything with my family the last two years...”

Shit. I’m failing at this meet the parents thing, badly.

“I...” I smile wryly as I look up. “Just to squash any awkwardness, I was estranged from Semyon long before he was killed.”

Viktor clears his throat.

“Just to go ahead and address that giant elephant in the room,” I laugh nervously.

Viktor grins. Fiona reaches over and squeezes my hand.

“So, yeah. I’m taking a year off to think about college. But ultimately?” I shrug. “I’d love to do the sort of work you do, Fiona.”

It’s not a lie. I’ve looked into her organization more and more since meeting Lukas. And the work they do there is astounding.

I’m eighteen and I’ve got a two-month runway at best. I haven’t put a *ton* of thought into “what I’d want to do when I grow up.” But if I was going to get a shot at growing up, I

think I'd like to help heal people and save them from hurt, like she does.

She beams at me.

“Really? I mean, I don’t know if you’ve got plans to sit on a beach for the next year or whatever—and for real, no judgement if you do. But if you’re looking for something to do, we’d love to have you sit in on whatever you like at the Free Them Foundation.”

My brows shoot up. “Wow, really?”

“Of course! And that has nothing to do with being married to this font of conversation over here,” she grins, nodding at a very un-talkative Lukas.

“What, I’m eating,” he grunts.

“If you’re interested, the door is open. Seriously.”

I smile broadly at Fiona. “Wow, *thank you!* That would be—”

My words choke. Reality suddenly smashes its way back in.

I’m not going to be working for Fiona next year. I won’t *be here* next year.

I clear my throat.

“That would be amazing, thank you, Fiona.”

“Honestly, any time, Lizbet.”

The conversation moves on to Lukas’s plans for next year—whether he’ll follow Ilya and Misha to New York for college. Or maybe Chicago to be closer to his parents and little brother, who Viktor notes with a chuckle is back home being babysat by his second in command Lev, and his expecting wife.

“Figured we’d give them some practice and throw them in the deep end with a toddler,” he snickers.

It's a lovely family dinner. It's actually the nicest, best family dinner I've ever been a part of.

I look up over the rim of my water. My brow furrows. There's a tall, elegant looking woman by the bar—beautiful and sophisticated looking in these amazing black and red heels, and a gorgeous burgundy dress that highlights every single flawless part of her.

And she's staring at Lukas.

I frown, pursing my lips. But then I roll my eyes at myself and blush. And the jealousy turns to smugness as I turn to look at Lukas. He turns to me and grins before he goes back to what his dad is saying.

*Look all you want, lady, I grin to myself. He's all mine.*

But as dinner goes on, I keep looking up to the bar. And she's still there, looking at Lukas.

“Excuse me,” Lukas stands and folds his napkin next to his empty plate. “Just going to use the restroom.”

He leans down to kiss the top of my head before he moves across the dining room to the back of the restaurant.

I keep talking with Fiona and Viktor about their foundation. But as the minutes tick by, my attention veers. I glance at the bar, and I tense.

The woman isn't there anymore.

“I'll be right back. Ladies room,” I smile as I stand, my heart racing.

This is crazy. I'm being crazy. But still, I find myself scanning the restaurant as I move towards the bathrooms. I round the corner, and I freeze before I slink back around.



The lady in the dress is talking to Lukas... closely, intimately, next to the bathrooms.

“I need to get back. I’ll call you later before I head over,” Lukas says quietly.

I gasp, jumping back and hiding behind a partition as he strides past. A few seconds later, the woman does as well. I watch as he walks back to the table, and she leaves.

Something furious flickers inside of me. My eyes narrow, and my jaw tenses.

What the *fuck* is this?

I’m silent the rest of dinner. Lukas asks to the side if I’m okay, but I just wave him off and tell him I’m tired. But inside, I’m seething.

After dinner, outside, there are lots of hugs and promises to come visit Viktor and Fiona in Chicago. Fiona makes me promise to call her before she and Viktor get into the back of a chauffeured car and drive away. Our own car pulls up, but I’m frosty as Lukas opens the door for me.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” I say thinly.

He nods absently. He looks distracted.

“Listen, I need to do something here. In Manchester.”

“Beating up bad guys in alleys?”

He smirks. “Something like that.”

*Motherfucker.*

“But listen, you head back. My bike is still here from that night...”

The night he saved me. The night I trusted him, and started to fall for the dragon of OHA.

“I’ll be like an hour or two at most behind you. Okay?”

“Drive safe.”

I dodge his kiss and close the door. He frowns, his mouth thinning. But he nods at the driver in the side mirror, and the car pulls away.

“Stop up here please?” I say to the driver once we’re a block away.

“Miss?”

“Just wait. One second.”

I turn to glance through the back mirror. A taxi pulls up to the restaurant, and Lukas steps into it. When it drives past us, I tap the driver’s seat

“Could you follow that taxi?”

He hesitates. “Look, miss, I don’t want to get mixed up in any —”

“I’ll give you...” I wince when I think of what’s left of my meager bank account.

“Three thousand pounds.”

The driver puts the car into drive. And we follow.

---

IN A PART of the city I don’t know, Lukas’s cab pulls up in front of a posh looking loft building. My driver realizes I thought he had a card swiper and sighs heavily. But I think he

feels bad for me. Or, he knows who he was driving around tonight, and *really* doesn't want to get mixed up in this.

"I'll tell my husband to pay the extra when he pays for the service."

"Don't fret it none, love," he says, nervously glancing around.

I get out of the car, keeping to the shadows as I slip closer to where Lukas is. He pushes a button, says something, and then opens the front door. When he's through, I bolt, rushing it and jamming my purse into the crack just before it shuts.

Through the glass, I watch him push the elevator button. When he gets in and the doors shut, I rush into the lobby and glance at the indicator above the doors.

Lukas gets off at the third floor. I start running up the stairs. The third floor has three units on it, but my jaw clenches as I spot the door with a pair of black and red heels set outside of it.

My temper flares and my brain shuts off. I storm over, slam the door open, and charge in.

Lukas and the woman gasp as they whirl to look at me wide-eyed.

"What the *fuck* is—"

They're clothed. They're not kissing, or screwing. She's in baggy sweatpants and a hoodie, actually. And they're drinking tea.

But still.

*"I need to get back. I'll call you later before I head over."*

My eyes narrow at him.

“What the fuck is this? Already lining up your next *fuck* for when I’m gone?! Is that what this is?!”

The woman smiles curiously at me, arching a brow. “Would you like some tea, and maybe I could—”

“Are you a hooker? He’s married, you know.”

The woman purses her lips and clears her throat. She turns to Lukas.

“I’ll give you two a minute.”

She gets up, smiles with amusement at me again, and leaves the room. I turn my glare back onto Lukas as she stands.

“You *motherfucker*—”

“*Stop it,*” he growls, catching my wrist before I can slap him.

“Calm down, this is not what you think.”

“No?” I sneer. “Then what it is, Lukas? And who the fuck is she—”

“Her name is Josie, and she’s an acupuncturist, not a *hooker*.”

I stiffen. Instantly, my face burns as I shrivel in on myself. I’m suddenly very clear on just how badly I’ve just fucked up and misjudged all of this.

“Wait, what?”

Lukas sighs, his shoulders slumping. “Will you sit? Please?”

I frown, letting him pull me onto the couch next to him. He turns to me, his brow knit.

“Sometimes I need to fight. Sometimes it’s being hit, other times it’s hitting, and hurting others. And then I met you and...” he looks away.

“It’s like I haven’t needed pain to numb the pain. Because *you* numb it.”

He looks back at me, his eyes piercing mine.

“You quiet the devils shaking the bars up here,” he taps his temple, smiling wryly.

I bite my lip. “So... what’s this?”

“Josie’s studied some pretty out there acupuncture techniques that are usually frowned upon by the medical and therapeutic communities.”

“Such as?”

His mouth thins. “Pain centers. She can target concentrated pain centers.”

My face pales. “Why... why would you want that?”

He shrugs. “Why would I handcuff my wrists behind my back and let Misha shadow-box my face?”

I stare at him. “Wait, you *do that*?” I choke.

“Did,” he growls. “I *did* that. Just like I did coming here and having Josie give me excruciating pain in concentrated areas.”

He frowns, looking at his hands.

“Tonight was... great. But also triggering in this fucked up way I wasn’t expecting. I dunno, I’ve never done the dinner with parents and a girl thing before.”

I blush. “Well, neither have I.”

He smiles and takes my hand.

“I saw Josie at the bar, and thought I might need it tonight. Just to clear out the roaring in my head, I guess. But she—”

“Broke up with him.”

I turn to see Josie stepping back into the living area.

“Professionally, I mean,” she says with a small grin my way. “Oh, and I’m gay.” She holds a hand up, and I notice the glittering wedding ring on her finger.

“And also married.”

I groan, dropping my head into my hands.

“Oh my God, I’m an asshole.”

Josie laughs musically as she walks over to put a hand on my shoulder.

“You’re not an asshole, Lizbet.” She frowns. “I’m assuming you’re the famous Lizbet?”

I blush, nodding.

“Well, you’re not an asshole. You’re just impassioned. That’s a good thing. Just like you’re a good thing for him.” She grins. “Why do you think I had him come over so I could tell him face to face I’d no longer work with him? He doesn’t need me. And he doesn’t need this sort of therapy anymore.”

She winks at me.

“He’s got you.”

“I’m *so* sorry that I just barged—”

“Don’t be sorry,” she laughs. “Keep that fire, Lizbet.”

---

HALF AN HOUR, a cup of tea, and thirty more apologies from me later, Lukas and I say goodnight to Josie. We hail a cab to a garage near the sketchy area again. Lukas mentions a friend has his bike there. And sure enough, there it is, parked inside.

“There’s no one else,” he growls suddenly, turning to me as we’re about to climb on. “There’s only you.”

He kisses me deeply, taking my breath away before he pulls back.

“Let’s go home.”

I cling to him the whole drive back to Oxford Hills. When we park in the underground garage, he scoops me into his arms and crushes his lips to mine. He carries me up through the house, up the stairs, and directly into his bed.

“*There’s only you,*” he murmurs as I pull him close and gasp.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LUKAS

I UNWRAP HER LIKE A GIFT, because she is. But I don't mean to say I peel away the wrappings and the ribbons. I *tear*, like I can't fucking wait to play with my new toy.

Lizbet does the same to me the second we're behind my bedroom door. Hands tug at clothes. She rips the fucking buttons off my shirt as I snarl, and she whimpers when I shred her stockings off of her ass.

I whip her around and slam her up against the bedroom door, ass out, as I drop to my knees. I yank her panties down and shove my face between her thighs.

“Oh *fuck, yes...*”

She coos, moaning as I tongue her slit from behind. She reaches back, grabbing my hair and whimpering as I drag my tongue up and down her pussy and swirl it over her clit.

But then, she's pouncing. She whirls, pulling me up and jumping into my arms. We stagger back to the bed, and she shoves me back across it. I look up, and I don't see Lizbet

I see a puma. I see a hungry, dangerous animal about to pounce. And when she does, I'm not even ready for it.

She drops between my legs and instantly sinks her mouth down over my cock. I hiss, rolling my eyes back as Lizbet



takes me *deep*—really deep. I grunt, my balls drawing up as she moans loudly around me, drooling down my dick as her hands tease up my thighs.

Her mouth bobs, but I reach for her and yank her onto the bed.

The tables turn again. Now I'm the hunter once more, and her the prey.

I shove her onto her hands and knees. Lizbet whimpers as she raises her ass in the air. But then before I even know what I'm doing, I'm bringing my hand up and then swatting it hard across her ass.

I tense.

*Shit.* I have no idea if this is some kind of trigger.

“Lizbet—”

“*Again,*” she whimpers softly.

I frown. “We don't—”

“*Please,*” she gasps.

Lust clouds my vision. My lips pull back, and suddenly, I'm spanking her again. And again, and *again*, until that tight little ass in pink with my handprint.

But this is no trigger. Not a bad one, at least. She's moaning and writhing under me, and she's so wet I literally watch it drip down her thighs.

The devil in me takes over. My cock is iron-hard as I grab it in my fist and move behind her. She whimpers when she feels my swollen head push against her eager lips. But then, she turns, and her eyes hold mine.

“*Don't hold back.*”

I tense. Blood surges through my veins, and an aching lust burns like napalm in my gut.

“Lizbet...” There’s caution in my voice.

Spanking her is one thing. Playing a little game of rip-the-clothes is another thing. But I’m not sure if I’m ready to let go of my control when it comes to her and intimacy.

Every time I have since being freed, it’s been hard—hard, rough, and numbing. Purposefully so. With Lizbet, I’ve held back—some because I don’t want to hurt her or frighten her with that side of me.

But also, because with her, I don’t want to numb anything or tap out. I want to be there for every second of it.

When I freeze, she frowns with worry and turns around, facing me on her knees on the bed.

“Did I say something wrong—”

“No,” I growl thickly, reaching for her. My cock throbs against her soft stomach, and she moans and as I grip her jaw and lean down to kiss her deeply.

“It’s just that you can’t say that to me,” I groan, my pulse thudding.

She pulls back, and her eyes glint with danger and lust.

“Can’t say what, Lukas?” she purrs, sensually dragging her teeth over her lips. She looks at me innocently.

“You mean I can’t say *don’t hold back?*” she coos, teasing me.

It’s working.

Lust clouds my senses. The roaring devils in me ache to grab her, pin her down, and fuck the *shit* out of her every which way until she’s dripping with my cum and gasping for air.

“*Don’t*,” I groan in warning. “Lizbet, sometimes I...” my eyes narrow. “Sometimes, I can’t be... *soft*. Sometimes I need it hard; I need it dark. And I don’t want to—”

“Then be hard,” she whispers seductively.

I’m losing control. Quickly.

“*Lizbet—*”

“Because maybe I need it hard for the same reasons you do,” she moans softly. Her hand slides between us, and she whimpers when she feels how fucking swollen and thick I am. My hands slide over her hips, gripping her ass tightly as I grit my teeth.

“With your heart—”

“Afraid you’re going to break me?” she taunts.

“Maybe.”

She leans close, and my breath catches as her lips brush my ear.

“*Maybe I want you to break me.*”

I tense, teetering on the cliff’s edge before I fucking *devour* her.

Her tongue teases my earlobe, and I start to fall.

“*Fucking break me, Luk—*”

I snarl, grabbing her waist, flipping her around, and shoving her down on the bed, hard. But she’s whimpering, panting eagerly as I crouch over her, my lips by her ear.

“You want it *hard*, little girl,” I snarl into her ear. She moans, nodding as she pants heavily.

“*Please—oh fuck!*”

My hand slaps her ass, stinging the skin and making it blossom with pink.

“You want me to show you how rough rough can be?”

*“Fuck me like there’s nothing holding you—oh God!”*

I sheath my cock in her tight little pussy with one thrust. My balls slap her clit before I draw back, only to pound right back in. I snarl, keeping one hand on the back of her neck, pinning her to the sheets as I fuck the living hell out of her dripping wet pussy.

My hand slaps her ass, making her squeal and clench around me. But she’s moaning for more. Begging for it. Her fingers claw at the sheets before she suddenly reaches back. She grips her own ass, spreading herself for me as she arches her back.

Raw lust floods my every neuron as I pound into her like I’m possessed. I crouch above her, pinning her to the bed as I rail her little pussy, my balls slapping her clit with each thrust. I feel her come, hard—flooding my cock with her sticky wetness as she screams into the mattress.

I pull out of her, my cock glistening.

“Turn around,” I growl, my eyes hooded with lust.

She does, whimpering as she turns towards me. Her face is red with desire as she looks up into my eyes.

“Open your mouth.”

*“Yes sir,”* she purrs.

I almost lose it right there.

Her mouth opens, and suddenly, she’s sliding her lips down my slick cock. I groan, my abs clenching as the pleasure grips me. She hums on me, eagerly sucking me deeply. My fingers

thread into her hair, guiding her up and down before I pull her away. She gasps, and then moans as I shove her back on the bed, sprawling her on her back.

I pounce, pushing between her thighs as I hover over her. I fist my cock, pumping it as I rub my head over her clit. She's whimpering as I drag it lower and then sink balls-deep in her pussy.

Her legs wrap around my hips. Her nails dig into my hips, yanking me deeper. My hands slide up her side, over her tits, up over her collarbone. My fingers slip over her neck, making her shiver before I slide higher to cup her jaw.

Lizbet reaches for my hand and pulls it back down. Her eyes lock with mine, burning with need and trust as her fingers guide mine around her neck.

My cock surges, fire scorching through me. My hand closes around her throat—not hurting her, but just enough to heighten everything. Just enough to send her pulse racing and set her body on fire.

I don't make love to her. It's not even sex or fucking.

I'm *possessing* her. I pound her hard, relentlessly, feeling her slickness drip all over me. Her nails rake hard down my skin. Her heels dig into the small of my back. Her eyes are wide, face red as her breath rasps against my hand.

But I don't tap out. I don't numb away. I'm right here, with her.

My mouth drops to her ear, my teeth dragging over her skin as I feel her shudder and start to quiver under me.

"Fucking come for me," I snarl as I start to lose all control. "Come for me."

She tenses, her head dropping back as the silent scream hovers on her lips.

*“You’re fucking mine.”*

She jolts, her hips rocking off the bed as she shudders and explodes beneath me. I groan, gripping her throat as I crush my mouth to hers, breathing in her orgasm. I thrust deep, and my cock pulses hard as I start to explode.

My cum spills into her, and I hold myself there, deep. She trembles and shakes against me, her nails dug in deep. My hand relaxes and slips away, my mouth dropping to kiss over her neck.

Her arms and legs wrap tight around me, like a whole-body hug. Like we need to be as close as we can, with as much skin as physically possible touching.

*“I love you,”* she whispers into my ear.

*“I love you so much,”* I groan into her mouth.

Too much. More than I’ve ever imagined I’d ever love anything or anyone. More than I ever thought I was *capable* of loving anyone.

So much that the thought of losing her is maybe the worst pain I’ve ever felt.

I hold her tighter, keeping her close.

Keeping her here, with me.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

WE SPEND the entire next day in bed. Some of it is doing what we did last night—and I *like* “not holding back” Lukas.

A lot. So much it both scares me and electrifies me.

But other times, it’s more drawn out—both of moving slowly, pushing it as long as we can before the road gives out.

In-between, we pretend this will be forever. We laugh, tickle, watch movies... whatever. We act like normal, regular, unbroken, un-fucked-up, no end-date couples act.

And it’s great.

Towards night, Lukas is in the shower. I’m—shocker—still in his bed, lounging in post-orgasm glow. My phone buzzes. I glance down and instantly groan. But I’m riding so high on life right now, not even my mother can knock me down.

“What is it, Nadia?”

She sighs sharply. “You know, Lizbet, some people address their mothers with love and *respect*.”

“I’m sure some people do, yes.”

She mutters under her breath.

“Well?”

I roll my eyes. “Well what?”

She laughs a sneering, cold laugh. “My goodness, have you not heard? I would have thought the news would spread like wildfire at that little school of yours.”

“What news?”

She laughs. “Well, *my* news, Lizbet.”

I hear the shower stop.

“Whatever it is, Nadia, I’m confident I don’t really care.”

She hisses. “Well at the very fucking least, you could congratulate me!”

My brows knit. “On?”

“My impending nuptials, dear.”

I groan. Nadia has been married and divorced *twice* since Semyon was killed. Two years ago. She’s flaked on another three engagements.

“Who is it this time, Nadia?”

She laughs smugly, like she’s won by hooking my interest at all.

“Well, it’s a *bit* scandalous...”

I roll my eyes. Husband number two was one of my father’s captains who told her Semyon had left him a vault full of cash. When that turned out to be more like fifty-thousand dollars the guy had managed to steal from Semyon’s desk-drawer, Nadia walked.

Husband number *three* was a bank president back in Russia who turned out to be—oops—already married.

In between those two, and after the second where the three other engagements: an eighty-seven year old who made his



money in a chain of strip clubs, then his sixty-eight year old son. And then one of their star male dancers.

Seeing as husband number one was a murderous crime kingpin, “scandal” and “relationship” seem to go hand-in-hand for Nadia.

“I’m sure it is. Listen, Nadia, wonderful to speak to you as always, but I have to go—”

“Well, he’s *handsome*, young, tattoos,” she goes on anyway. “A real bad boy,” she giggles.

Lukas steps out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped deliciously around his grooved hips. I give him a pained look and point a gun-finger at my temple. I mouth the word “mom,” and he chuckles, shaking his head.

“*Wow*, that’s so great, Nadia,” I say flatly. “Best of luck with —”

“His father is Bratva, actually.”

I tense. “Hang on, what?”

“I know, I know,” she sighs. “I suppose I have a ‘type,’ as they say.”

“*Mother*,” I say coldly. “Who—”

“He goes to your school, actually. Have you met Konstantin Reznikov yet?”

My stomach drops. My mouth falls open as I pale. Lukas frowns, looking concerned.

“Oh, dear,” Nadia pouts. “I hope you didn’t have a little crush on him. I know how you get things in your head about boys —”

I hang up. I look up at Lukas, and I tremble.

*OceanofPDF.com*



KONSTANTIN LOOKS up abruptly from the sofa when I kick in the front door to his cottage. But then he smiles a sneering smile at me.

*“Lukas, so nice of you to drop by.”*

I snarl as I storm across the cottage, every intention of grabbing his collar and yanking his smug ass across the coffee table. I know what he’s up to, with this is fucked-up idea to marry Nadia. He wants to usurp Lizbet’s claim.

But he stands before I can grab him up, squaring his shoulder as he looks at me coolly.

*“Here to congratulate me?”* He smirks.

*“You’re just after the fucking empire,”* I hiss.

*“No, Lukas, I’m truly interested in deranged, alcoholic, thrice-divorcees in their forties.”*

He rolls his eyes.

*“Of course I’m just after the fucking empire.”*

*“Stop this,”* I growl.

*“I can’t do that.”*

The growl rumbles in my throat as my lips pull back in a snarl. Konstantin glares right back at me, but he shakes his head.

“This isn’t personal, Lukas. I’m not here to fuck with your life. Or Lizbet’s. I’m just here to do the exact same thing you’re doing. I’m playing to win, for my family; doing what I have to. Doing what I must. *Just like you,*” he says thinly.

“Your father is just using you, you know?”

Konstantin laughs coldly. “Thank you for that revelation, Lukas. I’ll try not to let it knock me off my feet.”

He glares at me. “Of course he is. As is yours.”

“No, he’s—”

“Then you’re delusional,” he snaps. He shakes his head with a sneer. “We do what we have to, Lukas. This is my bid to win this for my family.”

“The council already voted—”

“And the legal argument could be made that Nadia, not Lizbet, is in line for the throne.”

My eyes narrow. “That’s an absurd idea.”

“And an eighteen year old girl with no experience in *any* facet of this business isn’t?”

“*Back off,*” I growl. “This is my final fucking warning.”

He laughs coldly. “You know, I can’t tell which is more pathetic. That you’d do anything for a man who isn’t actually your blood, or that you actually think you’re in love with a girl you married out of duty.”

My blood simmers, and I see red. Without thinking, I reach down, grab the edge of the coffee table between us, and hurl it to the side. It smashes into a side table and a wall, sending a glass vase shattering to the floor as I snarl into Konstantin’s face.

He glares right back.

“Do it, Lukas. Hit me. Let’s start a Bratva war, right here in this Harry fucking Potter cottage. That won’t be embarrassing at all for either of us, right?”

“I’m not going to start a war over you, dipshit,” I hiss. “But I need to make something very clear. I would do *anything* for Viktor. *Anything*. Even kill you in this fucking cottage, right here and now.”

His lips pull back in a snarl. “Pathetic.”

“Watch the next words that come out of your mouth very fucking care—”

“And Lizbet?” He barks, shaking his head. “I mean Jesus Christ, Lukas. I can swallow marrying her to appease whatever blood-oath you think you have to the Kashenko organization. Fuck it, whatever. Viktor pulled you off the streets. Fine, I get it.”

He stares at me incredulously. “But marrying *her*?”

My eyes narrow. “The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“After what her father *did to you*?! I mean that’s loyalty you can’t buy.”

I frown deeper. “Semyon and Viktor had bad blood. But so did Semyon and lots of—”

“Not to Viktor! Get your head out of your loyal little ass, Lukas! I mean to—”

Konstantin suddenly stares at me.

“*Holy shit*,” he breathes. His face pales. “You really don’t remember, do you?”

My lips curl. “Remember *what*—”

“Fuck, man,” he whispers. “Oh, *fuck*.”

The anger is gone from his face. So is the taunting sneer. He’s just pale as he backs away from me.

“What are you saying?” I snap.

“Nothing. I...” he shakes his head. “It’s not going to be me.”

“Stop talking in fucking riddles!” I roar

Konstantin blinks again before he holds my gaze.

“Go back to that house, Lukas,” he whispers.

I tense.

“What house.”

His face pales a little more.

“You know what house. Montenegro.”

I feel cold.

*How does he know.*

“A house on a cliff. Black, with a black door.”

My pulse is jangling. My skin is crawling with pain and discomfort.

“How do you—”

“Because I have nightmares about it,” he whispers. “Because my father took me there once, to see a fight—this brutal, bareknuckle type shit that the old guard of the Bratva is always jerking off about.”

He’s staring at me—through me, his face growing cold and ashen.

“I wandered off to find a bathroom. But I walked into the wrong room.”

He swallows.

“There was a man with a knife, and a boy tied shirtless to a chair, bleeding. The man was—the boy...”

He looks away, visibly shaken as he takes a breath and looks back at me.

“That was the first time I saw you, Lukas.”

Reality glitches. My mind flashes, wrenching like it’s being physically twisted and wrung out. White lights flash in my eyes.

Then red ones.

White pain, red walls. Red blood.

*Oh God...*

Through the blood, I see a door open. A boy my age, with dark hair and gray eyes, stares at me in horror. The man with no face whirls, barking at him, sending him running from the room.

*“Now, where were we...”*

I don’t realize I’m falling until Konstantin grabs my collar and yanks me up on weak legs. I steady myself, shoving him away as I stagger back blindly across the room. My feet crunch on broken glass from the vase.

“Go back there, Lukas,” he says quietly. “There’s a truth there you don’t want to know. But you should.”

I look up, the very walls pulsing as my vision tunnels. Konstantin stares at me like he’s looking at a walking ghost.

“Go back there. Go back to Crna Kuća.

Reality glitches and goes sideways again.

“Go to that house. Go into the past, Lukas.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)





I SLUG BACK THE BOTTLE, and I stare at a place of nightmares.

The black house with a black door.

Waves crash quietly in the background at the base of the cliff behind this cursed place. A chain-link fence with razor-wire along the top surrounds the property, like the site of a nuclear disaster.

Just like Chernobyl, this place has been walled off and forgotten. A cancerous blemish on the face of the planet that can't be removed, only ignored, as if hiding it away is the same as forgetting.

But there's no forgetting this fucking place. Not for me. Not when my blood stains its floors. Not with the nightly terrors and forever pain I have wrapped up in this hell.

I tremble, pounding back more of the vodka I took with me from the Kashenko jet that brought me here. My blood hums with alcohol and cocaine—chemicals I've slammed down as a sort of ward: cursed armor to shield me from the cursed place I have to visit.

But even then, just looking at this place has a high whine ringing in my ears and a visceral pain crawling over my scars.

Yanis and I were eleven when they brought us here. The first time, we were given food, and vodka. They had us dance to stupid songs while men clapped and threw money.

It was a game. It was *fun*.

Later, a man thanked us and drove us back to where he'd picked us up outside the temporary boys' home. But that place was a hell. We spent our days scrounging for scraps in the gutters, and our nights fighting for a cot instead of the floor. Or for some food, when there was some.

But one taste of "the good life," and we were done with that place. After the house where they'd given us good food until we were full—actually full, for the first time in maybe our entire lives? The place where they'd cheered and given us vodka to drink and told us we were men now. Where we could dance to dumb songs and walk out with pockets-full of money?

There was no going back to the boys' home after that. The very next morning, the man was back outside, and he asked us if we wanted to come *stay* at the house.

We couldn't have said yes faster.

I prowl along the fence until I see a section that's fallen away from the posts. Signs in Montenegrin and Croatian warn of armed security patrols, and that the fence itself is electrified.

It's not. And I doubt a single person has "patrolled" this hell in years.

I slip through the chain-links, push open the creaky front gate in the high wall, and walk slowly up the weed-grown pathway to the front door. Every footstep thuds through me like a hammer pounding a coffin lid shut. Every breath I breathe of the very air around this place singes my lungs.

The black door is half-way off its hinges now. Another sign beside that says that this place has been condemned and is scheduled to be torn down by the local municipality.

They might not get the chance to. I might do it first.

Liquor courses through my veins, and I suck heavily on the joint in my lips. More chemicals to armor me. To dull this. To shield the blinding pain even being here brings.

I step up to the ruined door—glass bottle in one hand, and the cold metal of the gun heavy in my other. The jet here is a faded memory. Somewhere in my head, I remember I should have told someone I was here—Ilya, Misha, my father.

I should have told Lizbet.

But I can't. Not yet. There's something... looming; a demon I've spent every moment since my freedom nailing the basement door shut on. But it's breaking free.

I'm going to *let it* free when I walk in there.

But this is a hell I have to face alone. And I *do* have to face it; here, now, back where it began. I take one last breath before I duck under the ruined black door into my nightmares.

My vision blurs as I step into the front entryway of the mansion. My head throbs, twitching. Reality glitches, like the matrix in that movie going haywire. My pulse thuds heavily and slowly, and a certain mania creeps over me.

But I prowl through the mansion anyway. I don't know what I'm looking for. But I keep going. Voices whisper. But I know they're not there. Lights flicker, but not really. And I know not even pinching my palm and counting from thirty will clarify any of this for me.

I'm too far down the mineshaft. And the poisoned air down here is too thick.

As I walk through the nightmares of my past, I see more lights and hear more voices that aren't real. I relive memories that are all *too* real.

They rip at me, making me whirl, choking on my own tongue as I growl. A few times, manically, I yank the gun up, eyes wild as I stare down a shadow.

But there's no one here. There's nothing here but the past that took my twin brother and almost broke me.

I shake my head. Not almost; did. This place *did* break me. I've just been pieced back together with cheap glue and tape and told myself that I'm fixed.

I step past a half-caved-in wall into a billiards room of some kind. A rotten table fills the middle of the room, with balls across the floor. Duty framed photos line the walls. I walk past them, seeing men chortling with cigars and brandy.

The whining in my head grows louder, and louder. The scratching feeling inside my skin claws harder.

Whatever I'm looking for, it's right here. It's right in front of me. But I can't quite see it. The air is too thick. Too toxic. Too old.

Too purposefully forgotten.

I keep slowly walking past pictures, hoping it will jar something loose inside of me. Men from the past in suits, smoking and laughing, sneer back at me. Maybe I know them, maybe I don't. Maybe my mind won't let me recognize them even if I do.

When I get to the end of the wall, though, there's still a blank inside my head. Nothing is jarred loose. No memories have appeared out of the murk.

I growl, slugging back more vodka as I turn to prowl into another room. My foot steps on glass with a cracking sound.

Looking down, I see the framed picture under my boot. My brow furrows as I reach down to pick it up, peering at it through the moonlight coming in through a broken window. The glass is spiderwebbed with cracks and smeared with grime. I almost throw it aside before I take it and turn. I grip the frame and smack it against the wall, dropping the shattered glass away before I glance back at it.

It hits me like a slap.

Like the cold edge of a knife flaying my skin.

I choke as the gas grows too heavy and too toxic to even breathe—searing at my lungs and boiling my skin away as I stare in cold horror at the man smiling back at me.

The man who stalks my dreams.

The man without a face finally has one.

And a name.

The man in the picture is Semyon Belsky.

I drop it like it's suddenly scalding me. I stagger back, sweating and freezing at the same time. Reality goes sideways, and nausea roils inside of me before I turn to the side and vomit.

Somehow, my brain erased his face. Maybe to survive. Maybe to protect me. But it's clear now. The man with the knife, who sliced me while I screamed, and took away my twin brother's

innocence in a dark room full of sweat and tears—who took Yanis’s very life away.

That man is Lizbet’s father.

I puke again. I want to tear my own heart out. I want to scream until my lungs give out and my throat erupts into flame. But I can’t even breathe, let alone make a sound. I curl tighter, dropping to my knees in the grit and the grime. The bottle and the gun tumble to the floor as I bring my hands up to tear at my own hair.

I curl into a ball, hissing, snarling on the floor.

And then, I hear it.

I scabble to my feet, panting for air as my head throbs. I yank the gun up, my knuckles white as I grip it tightly and whirl with a snarl on my lips.

Glass snaps under a foot. Or maybe not. Floorboards creak, but don’t.

I squeeze my eyes shut, gasping as the pain explodes across my skin. Lightning bolts splay across my vision, leaving jagged traces in my brain.

This isn’t real. Or maybe it is. Or maybe I’m losing control, and losing all sense of what’s reality and what isn’t.

I groan, whirling again and storming for the door, gun in hand. But then, my eyes focus on the words scratched with a blade across the doorframe. Words that aren’t faded. Scratches that are *fresh*.

*Budet rasplata.*

*There will be a reckoning.*

The same words were on Lizbet’s windowsill.

My heart thuds. A cold sensation drips down my spine as I snarl and slowly turn. My muscles clench as I bring the gun up, fighting the chemicals dulling me as I peer into the darkness.

I'm not alone.

He's here, and I suddenly, I'm sure of it. The phantom who's been hunting her, is *here*.

I wasn't careful enough. I let it slip away from my focus enough. And now, he's followed me here. Now, he knows of this place.

And we both know there's only one of us leaving here.

The crack of broken glass on the floor has me whirling again. I hiss quietly, eyes narrowed, and gun raised as I storm through the doorway into the murk of the ruined mansion.

I walk with staggered, wobbly steps. The pain is overwhelming—like just being here is dousing my very skin with acid or napalm. My vision blurs, and the glitches just keep happening, until I can barely see straight.

I whirl around corners, snarling at every creak of the floor. Every snickered, echoed laugh in the shadows.

He's taunting me. Mocking me.

I growl as I smash down a door into one room, and then another to another.

"Where are you?!" I scream into the shadows, sweat clinging to my back.

*"Where the fuck are you?!"*

I roar like the devil in hell itself as I start to run blindly through the mansion. I crash into one room and then another. I

whirl maniacally into a dining room, down hallways, into more rooms.

I stagger into a library, and suddenly, he's there.

He's right in front of me, twenty feet away.

My heart thuds as the world grows muffled and muddled. My vision glitches as we lock eyes across the dark, dank room of old books. I see my demons sneering back at me. I see my nightmares, taunting me.

This will be the final showdown. Only one of us leaves here tonight.

Wordlessly, we stare at each other across the room. I grin a death mask grin, and so does he, right back at me.

My gun raises; so does his.

Our eyes lock as my lips sneer a cold, brutal smile.

*See you in another hell.*

The trigger pulls, and the gun explodes in my hand. I flinch, wincing when I see the muzzle flash of his right back.

But then, there's just the echoing silence of a gunshot in an empty room.

I blink.

So does he.

My eyes slide to his left, to the bullet hole in the wall right next to the mirror. They slide back, and suddenly, there in the jagged, cracked glass, I realize the truth I've feared.

I'm worse than I thought.

There's a darkness in me even I didn't realize. And suddenly, it all falls into place. Nothing is real, and yet it's also all *too*



real.

But mostly, I am *infinitely* more fucked up than I've ever allowed myself to believe.

The phantom looming after her—the daughter of the man who took my life from me. The carved warnings. The fire. The presence, always feeling like I've just missed him.

Because I have.

Because he's my shadow.

Because he's *me*.

I stand there numb, shaking. There is no other stalker out there hunting Lizbet. It's *me*.

I've been broken into two pieces. One fell in love with a girl I can't keep. The other is trying to kill her out of revenge.

Suddenly, with a roar, I charge the wall and slam my fist into the glass of the mirror reflecting my own demon-self—over and over, until the blood flows hot down my arm.

Reality glitches again. And this time, the pain is more than even I can bear. I stare at the ruined, bloody reflection staring back at me from a thousand shards of glass.

I see the boy covered in blood.

I see the man broken in two.

I see the devil, and the devil is me.

And then, I see nothing at all.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

I BARELY SLEPT. Eventually, I guess I nodded off alone in Lukas's bed. But when I woke up alone to daylight peeking in around the blinds, the panic came back.

The worry. The worst-case scenarios, and the doubt, and the fear.

Now, it's almost noon, and I'm having a hard time keeping my pulse normal. I've been trying to occupy my day with studying, and stopping by the cottage to check in with Julianna. But it is. Not. Working.

My chest feels tight, the claws digging in and making it hard to breathe. I wince as I walk along the path towards Lordship manor.

Breathe, I tell myself. Just breathe. He's fine. There's a perfectly good explanation to being gone all day yesterday. Then all night, and now still being missing.

My heart surges painfully. Not *missing*, I tell myself. Just... not here. Not answering his phone. And no one seems to know where he is.

I swallow. You know, the literal textbook definition of missing.

The claws sink deeper. My breathing gets ragged, and the pain in my chest turns into a burn as I stumble into the front door of Lordship. Ilya looks up sharply from the kitchen counter. He's got his usual scowl on—which seems to definitely always be there when I'm around. But when he sees me swaying and clawing at my chest, his frown turns to concern.

“Fuck, are you... *shit*.”

He rushes forward and steadies me as I drop back against the door.

“Jesus, Belsky.”

“Don't...” I groan as the dizziness spins my head. Ilya slips an arm around me and helps me shuffle into the kitchen and into a chair at the counter. He frowns as he pulls back.

“Hang on.”

He bolts around to the sink and pours me a glass of water. Then he's back, helping me bring it to my lips.

“Take a breath, Belsky.”

I swallow the gulp and then glare at him. “Don't.”

“Don't what?”

“Don't call me that.”

He eyes me coolly.

“I fucking hate that name,” I hiss.

Ilya smiles thinly. “Me too.”

I grin. So does he. But then his brow shadows again.

“What was that, over there?”

I shake my head. “Nothing, I just... I guess I was lightheaded or overheated or something?”

His brow raises. “You’re wearing a normal school blazer.”

“Yeah, exactly, I guess I just got too—”

“It’s *November*.”

I purse my lips.

“Okay, look, I’m just...” I don’t need to lie, I can just go with the other truth.

“I’m worried about Lukas.”

Ilya frowns. “Why are you worried about him?”

“Because he’s missing?”

Ilya stiffens. “What the hell do you mean he’s missing?”

“I mean I don’t know where he is and he’s not answering his phone, and I haven’t seen him since yesterday afternoon.”

His eyes narrow. Footsteps come down the stairs around the corner, and suddenly Misha steps into the kitchen. He nods casually at me. In my time being here as Lukas’s permanent guest, Misha has slowly warmed. Well, or just given me a pass. Even if Ilya’s still been scowly to me.

I mean, I guess it helps a little that my father *didn’t* try and kill Misha’s family.

“What’s going on?”

Ilya glances at him. “You seen Komarov anywhere?”

Misha’s brows knit. “What, like today?”

“Since yesterday. Or talked to him?”

He frowns. “No? Wait, what’s going on.”

“He’s... pulling a Lukas.”

My face scrunches up. “A what?”

“He’s doing a him. He...” Ilya eyes me. “He does this from time to time. He just sort of goes off grid for a day or two.”

“Should I be worried?”

I’m worried. I’m definitely, definitely worried.

“Not normally.”

He frowns with concern.

“Uh, okay, what do you mean not normally?”

“I mean normally, no. Lukas goes on one of his little walkabouts and then comes back, sometimes with some fucked up bruises or whatever, but he comes back. So, not normally. But now?”

He and Misha glance at each other, looking grim.

“Wait how is now different?”

“Because he has you,” Misha growls quietly. “That’s why we’re worried now. Fuck,” he hisses. “I’m going to make some calls.”

“Same.”

“Okay, I’m going to go look in the academic buildings and see —”

“No, sit,” Ilya orders.

I glare at him. “Excuse me?”

“Sit *please*,” he grunts.

“Why?”

“Because it turns out I kinda like you with my friend, so having you *not* pass out and split your head open on our front walkway would be a good thing.”

He smirks. “Sit and finish that water.”

I scowl, but he's right. My head is still swimming from my mini-attack. I sip the water as Ilya growls into the phone—the first few calls in English, and another in Russian. He's nodding and hanging up as Misha steps back in, scowling.

“Anything?”

Ilya shakes his head. “No. Tried a few people who I thought might, but nothing.”

Misha rubs his jaw, scowling. “Same. Nothing. Harlow hasn't heard shit either.”

“Did you try Josie?”

The two of them turn to look at me quickly. Ilya's eyes narrow.

“He told you about Josie?”

“Yeah. I met her.”

He arches a brow with a small smirk on his lips. “Interesting.”

“I tried her too,” Misha mutters. “Nothing there.”

“I might be able to help.”

The three of us whirl to see Konstantin Reznikov standing in the doorway, looking half smug and half sincere.

“Oh, I let myself in, if that's okay.”

“It's not,” Ilya snarls. “The fuck are you doing here?”

“Offering an olive branch, Volkov. Chill. I'm here to help.”

“Why would you want to help?” I hiss at him.

Konstantin smiles thinly. “I have my reasons?”

“Which *are*?” Misha growls as he steps forward.

“*My* reasons,” Konstantin shrugs. “Which will remain my reasons. But for now, our interest may just be aligned.”

“Who’s interests?” I snap.

“Why, your’s and mine, Lizbet,” he smiles thinly. “I know where Lukas is, and I can get you there.”

“Where the *fuck* is ‘there’?” Ilya grunts, storming closer to the gray-eyed Reznikov.

Konstantin ignores him, looking right at me.

“What’s the catch?” I mutter.

He grins.

“I’m going to help you, Lizbet. But *you* are going to help *me* in return.”

“How the hell is she going to—”

“Yes or no, Lizbet,” Konstantin says quietly, ignoring the other two. “This is just you and me. Yes, or—”

“Yes,” I blurt. “Now where the hell is Lukas?”

His smile fades as he turns to Ilya and Misha. “I assume you have a way off-campus?”

Their eyes narrow.

“The clock is fucking ticking here, fellas.”

“*Yes*,” Ilya hisses. “We do.”

“Good, because we’re going to need it.”

“When.”

He turns back to me. “Right now, actually. We have a plane to catch.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

I KNOW it's just the fact that we're right on the coast. I saw the ocean over the sides of the cliffs as we drove up here. But just the same, the clammy, damn, misty air that shrouds the looming mansion in front of us makes it seem otherworldly.

Haunted. Tainted. Like a bad omen surrounds the place.

But coastal weather or not, that much is true. There *is* an aura of evil hanging in the air as we stand in front of it.

Crna Kuca. *The Black House*.

I'm in Montenegro, alone with Konstantin Reznikov, looking at the place that turned Lukas's life into a hell. But I'm here for the man I love, and nothing is going to stop that. Not even every voice of reason that screams what a bad idea this is.

"This way."

Konstantin heads towards a spot in the chain link fence. The men behind us—okay, we're not really alone; he's got two bodyguards and a driver with him—start to follow. But Konstantin shakes his head and waves them back.

"Stay here."

He glances at me, his face grim. "Come on."



I follow him along the fence to a place where it's falling away from the posts. We both duck under it, and then slowly walk up to the black iron gates in the massive stone wall that surrounds this house of hell.

They're open a little. When I glance down, my pulse quickens. The dirt beneath the part of the gate that's pulled open has a fresh line dragged in it.

Someone's opened this. Recently. Konstantin sees the same thing. He turns to nod at me, and we both silently step into the grounds. I shiver. So does he.

The evil in this place seeps into both of us.

We walk up the front walkway, past hedges and gardens that were probably once manicured and clean but are now overgrown and wild. At the steps up to where a broken black door is hanging off its hinges, we pause.

I swallow as I turn to look at him.

"Well?"

He frowns. "Well, what?"

"He's here?"

Konstantin swallows, his face grim as he stares up at the house.

"I don't think anyone's here."

I whirl savagely, staring at him.

"*Excuse me?!*" I hiss. "I just flew sixteen-hundred miles with you to get here," I snap. "What the hell do you mean, no one's here?"

He turns to eye me quietly. "I sent him here, okay?"

I stare at him. “Why...” I choke. “Why would you send him *here*?”

Here, where his life was ripped to shreds. Where he lost his brother. Where he was brutalized and abused.

I squeeze my eyes shut. But then, does Konstantin even know the significance of this place?

“*Why* would you send him here?”

“This is...” he swallows. “This is where he was, before.”

A cold shiver creeps up my back as my eyes widen.

“How do you know—”

“I just know, okay?” He growls quietly.

We’re both silent as we turn back to stare at the gaping maw of the broken doorway into the mansion.

“So, he’s not here.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t think so. I think he *was*, though.”

“And now?”

He’s silent.

“*Konstantin*.”

“I need something in there.”

I shiver as I stare at him.

“Excuse me?”

“There’s a hard drive in there—it has a ledger of the patrons that used to come here on it. And I need it.”

“Good for you,” I hiss. “Now where the fuck is Lukas?”

He turns to me, his mouth thin and his grey eyes piercing.

“I need that hard drive, Lizbet.”

My eyes narrow. “Then go fucking get it.”

He shakes his head.

“I won’t go in there.”

I stare at him as he shakes his head again.

“I’ll never go into that place.”

“Scared?” I sneer.

“Yes.”

The instant reply makes me shiver.

“Where is he, Konstantin?”

“I have no idea.”

I stare. “*What?* You sent him here!”

“And now he’s elsewhere, it would seem,” he growls.

“Well we need to go find him!”

His eyes narrow. “Get that hard drive, and I’ll help you.”

I balk. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

My heart starts to race. “Do you seriously not know where he is?”

“No, but I have the resources and contacts to put the whole world on alert for him.”

“So *do it*,” I snap.

He shakes his head. “Hard drive first. Then I help you.”

My mouth drops. “This is fucking psychotic!”

His lip curls. “You wanted to run a Bratva family, Lizbet. This is negotiating. Get the hard drive, and I *will* help you find

Lukas.”

I stare at him coldly.

“Look for what it’s worth, I really did hope he’d still be here when we got here. This *is* where I sent him.”

“To the place where he was—”

I look away.

“Yes,” Konstantin whispers, looking cold and bristling. “He needed to... he had to...”

He takes a slow breath and turns to me.

“I’ll make this an even better deal. You get that hard drive for me, I’ll help you find Lukas no matter where he is, *and* I’ll get the best medical team on the planet to work with your sister. My cost.”

“Like *hell* I’m believing that or trusting you. You could also send me in there and *leave*.”

He rolls his eyes. “Why would I fly you to fucking Montenegro just to ditch you. Here, come.”

He beckons me to follow him back to the gate, where he nods at the guards and the driver on the other side of the chain link fence.

“Leave,” he snarls. “And do not come back here until *she* calls you,” he adds, nodding at me.

The guards glance at each other in confusion.

“That’s a fucking order.”

They nod at Konstantin and then get in the car. The engine starts, and I watch it pull away and head back down the twisting cliff-side road.

Konstantin turns back to me. “Satisfied?”

I chew on my lip. “What medical team?”

“You’ve heard of Doctor Alicia Dressner?”

I blink. I have. She’s unquestionably the best long-haul head trauma and coma doctor in the world. Her team has made breakthrough after breakthrough. She’s also booked for the next two decades and costs a fortune.

“Yes,” I say cautiously. “I have.”

“Yeah? Me too.” He smiles thinly. “Actually, we’re close.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means she’s on retainer as a family doctor for me.”

I stare. Konstantin’s mouth thins.

“Yes, before you ask, I was going to use it as leverage to pry your father’s holdings from you.” He shrugs. “Here.”

He pulls out his phone, taps it, and then turns the screen to me. Sure enough, it’s a retaining contract with her name and his at the bottom.

“This could be fake.”

“It could be,” he shrugs. “But this is negotiating. There’s a certain amount of trust involved with both parties.”

“And if I don’t trust you at all?”

“Keep it,” he grunts.

“Keep what?”

“The hard drive. When you get it, keep it. Don’t give it to me until I deliver. *That* is how serious I am.”

I swallow as the mist curls around me, staring up at Konstantin’s cool gray eyes.

“You really won’t go get it yourself?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“Why.”

“Because I’ve had nightmares about this Goddamn house since I was *twelve*,” he says quietly. His face is cold and pale.

“Almost every. Single. Night. There’s no fucking way I’m going in there.”

My lips purse as I turn to glance back at the black hole leading into the black house.

*Screw it.*

For Lukas. I’m doing this for Lukas, and for Mara.

“Fine,” I finally say. I turn to Konstantin. “Where the hell is this hard drive?”

I almost expect him to gloat or look triumphant that he’s “won.” He doesn’t. He just looks cold and afraid.

“There’s an office in the back. I’ve been told it’s in a red weather-proof case.”

I nod as I turn and start to climb the steps to the door.

“You’re not scared of anything, are you?”

I turn back to him and slowly shake my head.

“Not anymore.”

“I can see why he likes you.”

“And I can see why he *doesn’t* like you,” I hiss as I turn back.

“Lizbet.”

I glance over my shoulder at Konstantin.

“Be careful. Get the hard drive, and then get the fuck out of there.”

I shiver as I turn back and step through the broken doorway into the abyss of Crna Kuca.

Outside, I was shivering. Inside, it feels like pure evil is caressing my skin. I tremble, creeping softly through the forgotten mansion. I slip through a parlor of some sort, and then a billiards room with framed photographs on the walls.

Down a hallway, I finally see a door with a demur sign in Croatian. It's ajar, and when I push it open, I let my air out slowly.

This is it.

The elegant office looks like something an oil tycoon from the 1900s would sit in. Huge shelves lined with musty looking books surround a thick, enormous desk with a dusty leather chair. I yank open drawers and poke through a handsome wood filing cabinet. Until finally, in the last drawer on the right side of the desk, my eyes drop to a little red book—leather-bound and gold embossed, like an old-school address book.

When I open it on the desk, my pulse thuds. Inside, it's hollow, and there in the little carved out space, is a small hard drive encased in a semi-transparent red plastic case.

This is it.

I snatch it up and bolt out of the office, heading back through the house. But then suddenly, something stops me. I pause, turning to stare into the library to my left. But it's not the walls of old books that catch my eye.

It's the broken mirror on the wall, covered in fresh blood.

I feel cold. It feels like the evil of this place is surrounding me, creeping up behind—

The floorboard creaks. I choke on the gasp as I whirl, and come face to face with—

Lukas. But not Lukas. The face is hardened and mangled. Aged and brutalized. But those eyes...

I want to scream. But I can't. I want to run, but my feet don't work.

"*Lukas*," I choke at the haggard version of him.

It's face splits into a blackened, cracked smile.

"Lukas isn't here right now," the hellish spirit rasps through broken vocal cords. Its hand raises, and I jolt as the cold metal of a gun barrel press between my eyes.

"Why don't you come with me and see him, *Lizbet*," it snarls.

"*Lizbet Belsky*."

I gasp as it yanks me close. There's a sharp prick at my throat. I whirl as its hand draws back, holding an empty needle.

"What—who..."

The mist swirls. Darkness creeps.

I fade away.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)





MY HEAD SWIMS. But slowly, I open my bleary eyes. My vision swims in and out, and everything is out of focus and contrast. The lights are too bright. The shadows too dark.

I blink, forcing myself to focus until suddenly, it all aligns.

I go cold.

It's the basement. I'm in *the* basement of Crna Kuca—the place where my soul was flayed open and split in two. The place that broke me.

I'm in hell itself.

My blood thuds slowly, like ice in my veins. My eyes stare in horror through bars down a hallway, where I see two doors, side by side.

My brain shorts out for a second. My vision wants to quit on me, because it doesn't want me to see.

*Too late.*

I know those doors. Intimately. Horribly. They're two doors, to two rooms. I sway, feeling woozy and dizzy.

Yanis died in the room on the left. I was brutalized in the room on the right.

“*Yanis*,” I whisper, my head foggy. My consciousness jolts. My brain synapses struggle to connect and jump start. I blink as I glance around, feeling trapped.

I can’t breathe. It’s like the very air is too heavy down here. Too poisonous. Too real. I try and replay how I got here—how I’m somehow back in this hell, in this very basement. And then it all comes rushing back in a horrible smear across my consciousness.

I’m the monster.

All of it. That’s me. The one stalking Lizbet and carving death threats in the shadows of her life. I’m the one who set her house on fire while she slept. I’m even the one who was out on streets of Manchester murdering the very women I was trying to protect.

I’m fucked up; split in two. I’m me, and I’m me the monster. And I don’t know which is which. I don’t know when I’ve been me, and when I’ve been the other me.

I don’t know when I’ll be the other me again.

I whirl, sucking at the poisonous air before suddenly, my eyes focus in the dim light, and I see her.

*Lizbet*, tied to a fucking chair ten feet from me.

I grunt, lunging to my feet. But I realize I can’t, because *I’m* tied to the chair I’m in, just like her.

*Did I do this? Did I tie my own fucking self up?*

Confusion blurs my senses, spinning my head as I grunt and try to cling to reality. Whatever that is. I hiss, straining at the ropes. But I’ve tied them tight.

I’m literally my own worst enemy.

I hiss again, before I sense movement. I whirl, and my heart lurches as I come face to face with another mirror, just like upstairs.

It's me, staring back at me, looking haunted and hollow. Grinning a death's grin at me.

"Hello, brother."

My brain shorts out again for a second. This is a glitch. This is my mind making peace with its broken state. This isn't real, because it *can't be*.

The man in the reflection is me, but a horror version of me: gaunt and hollow, with skin made of crepe paper stretched over sinew and bone. The reflection grins at me again, showing a mouth of broken, black teeth.

"Yes," he snarls in a thick accent. "Accept it, Lukas."

I can't. Because this *cannot* be real. And yet, even in the madness, I know it is.

I'm not looking at me.

I'm looking at Yanis.

"They took me that day, brother," he rasps, his voice like shattered glass across concrete.

"I died. I saw the light, and I went to it gladly..." he grins hideously, his eyes manic and wild. "But I came back! God wouldn't look at me, Lukas. And Hell spit me out."

Yanis is alive.

*Yanis is alive.*

It's a reality my brain refuses to acknowledge. But I know what I'm looking at. And I know this is real.

He's alive. And he's got Lizbet and I tied to chairs in this hell. My eyes dart around the room, and my stomach churns.

We're in the cage—the room at the end of a hall with door of bars. Before, it was decorated like some sort of perverse sex dungeon—chains and clamps and shit hanging from the walls and ceiling. That stuff is mostly gone now, with just a few cursed remnants hanging from hooks on the wall, next the small first aid station they used when things got... rough.

“You... why didn't you...” I choke on the words. I'm angry. I'm elated. I'm confused. I'm sad.

“I've been...” he looks away. “In a cloud, Lukas. I've been free, from all of it, for years!”

He pulls his sleeve up, and my eyes drop to the gruesome and tell-tale track-marks of a heroin needle up and down his arm.

“I found a way to escape,” he grins.

“Where did they take you?” I choke.

“To another house.” He twitches, his eyes looking frantic as they dart around the room chasing something that isn't there.

“Like this one, but... different. There was no pain there, Lukas. Because he gave me magic.”

His voice fades, the volume dipping in and out. I watch as the shell that was once my brother shakes, scratching at his arm and staring at the wall next to us.

“Yanis,” I whisper. “Who...”

“Milo.” He smiles... almost forlornly. “His name was Milo, Lukas. He used to come here, like the rest. But he wasn't like the others. He was kind. He was good to me, Lukas. There was only him...” he twitches. “Sometimes a friend, sometimes two. But mostly just him. And he wasn't rough often.”

My heart shatters. For the thousandth time in my lifetime.

“Yanis,” I croak. “You’ve been there for *four years*?”

“It was good, Lukas!” He grins widely, manically. “I had a room to myself! And food, and TV. And...” he grins sheepishly and glances at his arm. “For free. As much as I wanted.”

I stare at him. “*Yanis*,” I whisper.

“But a little while ago, men came. There was shouting and yelling. And then there was shooting. I hid upstairs, Lukas. In my room in the house. When they were gone, I came down and found Milo dead.”

He frowns, shaking.

“I stayed there for two weeks, until I ran out of food. But then, I thought... I thought of... of you, Lukas!” He grins wildly. “So I came here! Looking for my long-lost brother, only to see that this cursed place was gone, and that my dear brother had been rescued! How overjoyed I was, Lukas!”

His eyes stare through me as he grins widely. And then suddenly, they focus, sharply. And the grin drops hard. It’s like a switch being flipped. Like manic drugged-out Yanis is gone, and a savage monster is leering into my face.

“And then,” he snarls. “I find he is the puppet son of the very men who put us in here?! Who preyed on us?!”

I shake my head. “That isn’t true.”

“The *Bratva*, Lukas?! That’s who you call daddy now?!”

My lips pull back. “My father is a good man—”

“Your *father*?” He chokes out a rough laugh.

“I’m the one who loves drugs, Lukas! Do you hear yourself?! He’s the Russian fucking mafia! They enabled this place!”

“Some men did,” I hiss. “*Not him*. Not those like him.”

“Lukas, Lukas, Lukas,” Yanis shakes his head, eyeing me pitifully. “I could overlook that. You survived as you could. You and I, we are good at that, eh?”

His eyes narrow.

“But *this*?” He hisses as he turns to jab a grimy finger at Lizbet.

“*This*?!” He snarls, looking enraged. “You marry the daughter of *him*?! Of *him*, Lukas?!”

He coughs violently, looking more and more erratic as he looks wildly around the room. He scratches at his arm as he rocks.

“We are survivors, Lukas. *Survivors!* So this too, I will overlook. I know we do what we must...”

He frowns when he sees me still staring at Lizbet, unconscious and tied to her chair. His eyes narrow dangerously.

“She isn’t dead,” he grunts. “Yet.”

He reaches down and picks a gun off the floor. My gun. He hefts it, and then glances at Lizbet.

He raises his hand, and I snarl.

“*Yanis!*” I hiss. My head shakes. “Don’t you fucking dare point that at her.”

He looks at me curiously.

“I need you to understand we are the righteous, Lukas. Milo taught me that. He was a good, Godly man.”

*Who kept you a strung-out, addicted sex slave for four fucking years.*

“*We* are the ones who were victims here!”

“Yanis, I know...” I’m eying the gun, and the erratic way he’s waving it around in her direction.

“And we will reclaim, Lukas!”

The gun swings over her again, and I snap.

“Not like this! Yanis! Not like—”

He levels it right at her, sneering at me as he moves close to Lizbet until the fucking barrel is pressed to the side of her head.

“*Yanis!*” I roar at him, straining at the ropes. My teeth bare as he looks at me in confusion.

“She didn’t do this!” I hiss. “Her father did!”

“The poison of the tree flows into the new saplings, brother,” he mutters.

“You don’t know that. You can’t—”

“Maybe our father was as fucked up as we are, Lukas.” He glares at me. “Our *real* father, not this Bratva piece of shit you call—”

“Our real father abandoned us to the hell of the streets,” I snarl. “Because *he* was a monster.”

“Just like me,” my brother hisses. “And just like *you*.”

“I’m not anything like—”

“Please,” he laughs coldly. “No sane person could look at you and call you normal.”

I growl lowly, twitching as he chuckles.

“It has been fun to watch you work though, Lukas. Out in the streets of Manchester, being a fucking superhero! Saving the world!”

He grins like a maniac at me.

“I was sorry to make more work for you, brother. I hope you know that. But those girls...”

My heart goes colder. *Oh fuck.*

“I showed them mercy,” he whispers. “That life of forced...” he snarls, shaking his head.

“I gave them peace. And mercy.”

He’s deranged. Not just fucked on heroin; there’s something loose or wrong in him. Like I’m looking at a jigsaw puzzle of a man I used to know as my brother, but some of the pieces are missing.

Suddenly, there’s the sound of scuffling sounds, and hissed swears. Men’s voices, and footsteps coming from around the corner, down the hall.

Three shapes—two shoving a third—round the corner and into the light cast from an overhead bulb. The two pushing the third look up, and the faces of my two friends go ashen when they see me through the bars.

“*Lukas!*”

Ilya and Misha rush to the barred door, and I realize Misha has his arm in a choke-hold around Konstantin. The door is open a crack—it’s not locked. But just as they get to it, Yanis whirls, pointing the gun at them.

“Stay back!”



Ilya, Misha, and Konstantin all stare at the zombie version of me, their eyes darting between the two of us in shock.

Yanis flails the gun wildly.

“You all! You stay back...”

He frowns. His lips curl viciously as his eyes narrow.

“You are... *his friends?*”

He turns back to me, snarling as the gun points at me.

“Sons of Bratva pigs, Lukas? *That* is who call friends?”

“Yes,” I hiss.

I need him to keep the gun on me. Off of my friends. Off of her.

“Yanis, *please*,” I growl. My fingers try and work the ropes at my wrists. But they’re too tight.

“Let me explain this all to you. I can help you, brother. We can all help you, and show you the good—”

“There is only one way through the fire, Lukas,” he says quietly. His eyes burn with a mania as they swivel to Lizbet.

“We must purge the demons, brother.”

“Don’t you *touch* her!” I snarl.

“He told me I was the pretty one, Lukas.”

The ghost of my brother turns to look at me with haunted, empty, faded eyes.

“He told me I was special. His special boy.”

My heart wrenches.

“*Yanis*, we can fix—”

“There’s no fixing this!” He roars. “There is only blood! There is only an eye for an eye. A life for a life, Lukas!”

“He’s *dead*, Yanis! Semyon is—”

“He took *both* our lives. Your’s and Mine,” Yanis croaks. “Two for two. And now I will even the score.”

He moves towards her. I growl as I strain hard at my binds.

“Don’t do this,” I hiss.

He eyes me, stepping back; stepping closer to her. My fury surges.

“*Don’t you fucking touch her!*” I explode.

His eyes narrow in a cold fury.

“What is this, Lukas? What do you, *love her?!?*”

“Yes,” I whisper. “Yes, I love—”

“Are you fucking *insane?!?*”

“Yanis,” I choke quietly. “You are my blood. But I swear I will spill yours if you touch her.”

He looks at me coldly, confused and angry. He steps back behind her, waving the gun between me, my friends at the door, and her. He reaches into his pocket and my jaw clenches when he pulls out a syringe from his back pocket.

My eyes narrow as my lips snarl. “You put that poison in her and I will send you to hell, Yan—”

“It’s not heroine, Lukas,” he mumbles. “It’s adrenaline.”

He smiles a small, crooked, black smile at me.

“I want her awake for this. Like I was, like you were, when they hurt us.”

“*No*,” I hiss. “No, goddamnit, Yanis, don’t you fucking—”

The needle jabs into her neck

“No!” I roar, straining as hard as I can as he pushes the plunger down.

*Her heart.*

Suddenly, Lizbet’s eyes fly open, wide in sheer terror. She chokes, sputtering and gasping as her face goes white and pained. Her eyes whirl wildly before they land on me and widen.

“*Lukas!*” she screams.

“Open this fucking door!” Ilya roars.

Lizbet whirls. Her eyes land on Konstantin with Misha’s arm around his neck, and her face pales even more.

“No!” She screams. “No! Don’t hurt him! Please! Don’t—let —”

She cries out, choking, gasping, and wincing in pain as her face twists in agony.

“Lizbet,” I hiss, my eyes burning into hers from across the divide between us.

“Just breathe,” I choke. “Just breathe! Look at me! Look at me, and breathe—”

She’s choking. Her face is turning gray.

She’s dying.

Something snaps in me. I roar like a fucking demon, lunging up and down, making the chair jump up and down off the floor with me. My muscles ache, my body jars hard with each impact. Yanis stares at me.

“Stop that!” he hisses. “Lukas, stop—”

The chair breaks. I go sprawling back on the floor with the wind knocked out of me. But before Yanis can even say anything, I'm lurching off the floor, yanking my arms free of the loose rope as I rush to Lizbet.

I shove my dumbstruck brother aside and grab her, cupping her face.

*"Look at me,"* I whisper heatedly. *"Lizbet, look at—"*

Yanis bellows as he grabs my neck and hurls me away from her. I tumble into the smashed bits of the chair, and snarl as I lunge for him. But the gun suddenly swivels to her terrified, pale, gasping face.

I freeze on the floor.

*"I'm saving you, Lukas,"* Yanis whispers.

My finger curl around a splintered chair leg.

*"I'm saving us both—"*

I whip my arm around and hurl the piece of wood at his head. He cries out as it smashes into the side of his face. The gun explodes, but he's reeling sideways, and the shot pings the wall next to my friends.

I'm already at him. I charge hard, slamming him into the wall with a thudding sound. Yanis slumps motionless to the ground as I whirl and start to madly yank at Lizbet's binds.

*"Lizbet!"* I roar, shaking all over as I clutch her to me. She's still choking, but she's breathing in stuttered gasps. She clutches her chest in pain as I hug her to mine, rocking her.

*"I'm here,"* I whisper. *"I'm here, I'm here... I'm here, love."*

*"You love her..."*

I look up in horror as Yanis drags himself off the floor, gun in hand. He looks at me in shock and confusion, his face manic and twisted.

“You... you really love her?”

“*Yes,*” I snarl.

“*Her...*” he shakes his head, dazed. “Her father—”

“We are not our fathers, Yanis,” I whisper.

He blinks. His face pulls gaunt and hollow.

“I—I was wrong?”

“Yanis, *please,*” I choke. “Put the gun—”

“I was wrong about this world, Lukas,” he says softly. “I’m not meant for it.” He looks up at me curiously, his face ticking.

“Do you know when I was happiest, Lukas?”

Tears bead at my eyes. “Yanis, *please...*”

“I was happiest when I was dead.”

He raises the gun to his head as my face falls.

“*No!*”

I lunge for him as his finger squeezes. I catch him, but the gun explodes in a deafening echo in the basement room.

The man who was my brother drops to the floor, blood gushing from the jagged hole through his neck.

Lizbet is screaming. But then suddenly, her face goes ashen. Her fingers claw at her chest as she slumps back onto the floor.

“*Lizbet!*” I scream, scrambling to her as the door kicks in and the three others rush inside.

“Lukas—”

I look up wildly, and my eyes land on Misha.

“Did you drive here?!”

His face tightens as he nods.

“Take her!”

“Lukas—”

“*Take her!*” I roar savagely. “Hospital. Fucking *now.*” I look Misha in the eyes, steadying myself.

“She’s having a heart attack. It’s her right valve. She has Ebstein’s. Tell them that.”

His face is hard and lined as I scoop her up and pass her into his arms.

“Drive as fast as you’ve ever driven.”

He doesn’t respond, he just whirls and bolts from the room, fast.

I whirl, yanking my shirt off as I rush to Yanis. I shred the shirt and start tying it around and around his gaping, gushing neck.

“Who knows CPR?”

The other two are silent. I whirl with a snarl. “CPR!?! Who?!”

“I do,” Konstantin grunts as he rushes over.

“Good, give it to him. Pump his chest, *now.*”

I rush to the medical station on the wall. Mercifully, I find the two needle ends and length of tubing I was praying would still be here.

I fall back to the floor next to my brother, running my fingers up my forearm, over my scars.

“Lukas,” Ilya growls quietly. “Lukas, what are you—”

“Looking for a vein. He needs a transfusion.”

“Lukas...” Ilya’s hand touches my shoulder. “He’s *dead*—”

“I know,” I choke. I turn to him with tears blurring my eyes and dripping through the blood on my face.

“But I need his fucking heart to keep beating.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LUKAS

I HATE HOSPITALS. They remind me of the state I was in when I was first rescued, those years ago. When I was broken and twitchy. When the psychiatrists would come “just to talk” hour after hour, for days and weeks.

But today, I’m barely even aware that I’m in one.

Fourteen hours after watching Misha bolt down the hall carrying Lizbet, we’re in London, at St. Thomas’ Hospital. Which is, ironically, also where Lizbet’s sister Mara has been for the last few years, in her coma.

It’s myself, Ilya, Misha, Konstantin. And my parents, who are both sitting beside me, their hands on my back as I rest my head in my hands and stare at the gleaming white floor.

All of us, and Lizbet. Who is alive, and about to go into surgery. They don’t know what’s going to happen. The doctors back in Montenegro stabilized her, but they say she had a massive cardiac episode.

Now, it’s not a matter of if. She *needs* that valve replacement. They’re going to find out when they get him on the table if I managed to keep Yanis’s heart pumping enough to keep it a viable transplant. Or if it still is at all after years of hardcore drug abuse. Mercifully, they’ve tested his blood, and he’s clean—no HIV or hepatitis, which would mean it’s a no go. It



would have also meant I'd have those things too, seeing as I had a needle flowing blood between his arm and mine for hours.

But that's a go. Now, we wait.

Ilya and Misha sit across from me. They know me well enough not to be offering to get me shit, or trying to comfort me. They know this is now in the hands of fate and very, very good doctors.

Konstantin is down the hall a ways, barking furiously into a phone as he paces. He occasionally looks over at us. When we've caught each other's eyes, he's just nodded solemnly before going back to his phone.

Viktor's hand lands on my shoulder and squeezes.

"Silence or words?" he growls quietly.

I close my eyes. He's fond of this saying. It's his way of asking if I want to talk or if I want everyone to fuck off.

"Words," I whisper.

"She's in the best possible place on earth for this. With the very best doctors anywhere."

I nod.

"I know this is a lot, Lukas," he says gently. "With... everything. With your..." his voice breaks. "Your brother. There will be a time to grieve, I promise—"

"I don't need to." I draw in a breath and sit up, turning to look at Viktor.

"I've already grieved for him." I swallow. "Yanis died four years ago, Viktor. The man in that basement..." I shake my head. "That wasn't my brother."

Viktor's arms go around me, and I welcome them. Fiona sobs quietly as she does the same behind me, and I lose myself in family.

"I'm so sorry, Lukas," Viktor chokes. "I'm so fucking sorry. If we'd only found you sooner, those years ago..."

"But you did find me," I say quietly. "And without you, I'd have been him."

He smiles wryly. But then his phone buzzes. He scowls and goes to silence it, but his face stills.

"Sorry," he frowns. "It's Lev, and he knows not to call right now."

"I'm fine, take it."

He nods as he answers quietly.

"Lev, I only have a min—"

His face still. His brow furrows as he nods and then stiffens. His eyes swivel past me, to Konstantin who's still down the hall growling into his phone and gesturing violently.

He nods. "Thanks."

He hangs up, his face lined and his mouth thin.

My brow furrows. "What?"

He clears his throat as he looks past me, to Konstantin again. Then back to me.

"Antin Reznikov was just killed."

I blink. "What?"

"By his own men, after evidence of his involvement in child trafficking and torture were shown to his organization."

My mind flashes back to the basement. I vaguely remember something that looked like a hard drive falling out of Lizbet's jacket pocket before Misha ran off with her. And I remember Konstantin picking it up later, I just didn't give a shit about it then.

"Holy shit," I growl.

Viktor nods grimly.

"The word is already out. *Konstantin* was next in line. He just became head of the Reznikov Bratva. There's a meeting later to..."

He frowns when he sees me staring at Konstantin.

"It doesn't matter," Viktor growls. "We can... Lukas?"

I stand, and I start walking over to the man on the phone. My heart thuds heavily, my lips pulling back in a snarl as I start to walk faster and faster. He turns just before I get to him. His eyes narrow as he slips his phone into his pocket.

"Hang on—"

I hit him hard. I snarl as I grab him by the shirt and slam him back against the wall.

"Did you use me?" I hiss.

He doesn't fumble at all.

"Yes."

I growl as my muscles coil. I pull him up and then slam him back against the wall again with a thud.

"Did you bring her there?"

His eyes harden. "Yes."

Rage explodes in me. "You *motherfucker*—"

“Choose your next words very fucking carefully, Luk—”

“If she dies,” I snarl into his face. “*You* will have no more words, ever. Do you fucking understand me?!”

A soft hand touches my arm. I hiss, whirling and then deflating a little when I see it’s Fiona. Her face is pale, but she’s forcing a sort of comfort to it as she looks into my eyes.

“Lukas,” she says softly. “You need to clean up.”

“I’m fine—”

“Mara Belsky just woke up from a coma.”

I blink. My hands drop from Konstantin, and my rage evaporates with it. I turn to stare at Fiona.

“She... what?”

“This new medical team came in a few hours ago, apparently.”

“Lizbet and I had a deal.”

I turn to look back at Konstantin. His face is hard.

“You might not like me, Lukas, but I will always honor a deal.”

He holds up a little red hard drive—the same thing I saw on the basement floor.

“Consider the deal settled for both sides.”

I turn back to Fiona, who nods.

“They... this new team, they used a new neural electro-therapy. And it worked. She’s waking up now, but...”

She swallows as she looks into my eyes.

“She’s going to have a lot of questions, Lukas. And with Lizbet...”

Her eyes squeeze shut as she chokes on a soft sob.

“I’ll talk to her.”

*OceanofPDF.com*



## LUKAS

SHE LOOKS ALMOST JUST like Lizbet. It's not quite like they're identical twins. But it's really fucking close. Eerily so.

Mara looks gaunt, and weak. But four years in a coma will do that. She sits up in the hospital bed and eyes me quietly—not cautiously, just curiously. Studying me.

She turns to look out the window, and just stares for a full minute. Eventually, she glances back at me.

“Sorry, what?”

“I didn't say anything.”

She nods, her brows knitting. “Right, sorry.”

“Don't be.”

“You're Lukas?”

I nod. Mara's brow furrows.

“Do we know each other?”

I tense. I've been warned that Mara might have memory gaps. The severity of that might be more shocking than I'm ready for.

She blushes. “It's not like I've forgotten everything. I mean I know I'm the queen of England.”

*Shit.*

My tongue runs over my teeth. But then Mara smiles a little.

“I’m just messing with you.”

I grin.

“I’m Mara. Belsky. Mara Belsky.”

She’s saying it, but it’s measured. Like she’s fact checking herself.

“And my sister is my twin. Lizbet.”

She looks back up at me.

“They told me you’re Lizbet’s husband?”

I nod. “Yes. We’ve never met, though. It was while you were out.”

She frowns. “She’s young. We’re both young.”

“You’re eighteen now.”

She nods. “Still young to get married, though.”

“It’s kind of complicated.”

“Does it have to do with our father and his business?”

I frown, but then I nod.

“Are you in the Bratva?”

My mouth thins. “Yes.”

“Do you like my father?”

I squeeze my eyes shut, resisting the urge to throw up or scream. I take deep, measured breaths, trying to bring my pulse back down.

“That’s a no, isn’t it?”

I nod slowly and then open my eyes to see her looking at me curiously.

“That’s a no.”

“*Good*,” she whispers. Her face hardens. “I hate my father.”

She glances around, paling.

“He’s not—”

Shit. Do I tell her, or not? I’m here in this room because I’m legally the only family available. Lizbet’s in surgery, Nadia can’t be reached, and Semyon is burning in Hell. And it’s only me here because of my legal marriage to Lizbet.

Mara pales. “If he’s—*Oh God*,” she chokes, looking terrified.

“Your father is dead, actually. He was killed two years ago.”

She stiffens and then suddenly seems to relax all over. Her shoulders sag.

“I’m glad,” she says quietly.

“Me too.”

She smiles wryly, and then frowns.

“You’re Lukas.”

I nod. “Still Lukas.”

“Sorry,” she mumbles, looking down. “My head...”

“You don’t need to be sorry.”

“I have this memory thing I guess.”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“And my sister, Lizbet,” she affirms. She looks up at me curiously. “Where is she?”

I swallow.



“She’s in surgery, in this very hospital.”

Mara pales. “Did—is she okay?”

“Yes.”

*I hope so.*

“Yes,” I nod. “She has a heart condition, but it’s being fixed right now.”

“What’s her condition?”

“Her heart was...” I frown. “It was broken.”

“Is that a joke?”

I shake my head. “No, I mean literally broken.”

“And they’re fixing it?”

I nod.

“Did you help?”

I look away.

“Yes.”

“So you fixed her broken heart?”

I smile wryly.

“That makes me happy,” Mara says with a small smile. Then she frowns. “She’s going to be okay though, right?”

“Yes.”

*Please.*

Mara turns to stare out the window.

“I missed the world. There are so many things to look at.” She breathes deeply and then slumps in the bed.

“I’ve been asleep for four years. So why am I so tired?”

I shrug. “Taking in the world is exhausting.”

She smiles. “I like you, Lukas.”

Her eyes close and then open again.

“I think I have to sleep.”

I nod as I stand. “You should rest.”

She smiles at me. “Thanks for saving my sister.”

I smile back. Her eyes slowly close, and I start to turn.

“Hey, would you stay here? While I sleep?” Mara frowns. “Is that weird to ask?”

I shake my head as I sit again. “No, it’s not.”

Mara smiles. “Nice to meet you, Lukas.”

“Nice to meet you too.”

Her eyes close, and she slowly fades to sleep. I can feel my own brow getting heavier as I sink into the chair. I haven’t slept in like forty hours, and it’s starting to catch up with me. Slowly, my lids close, and I nod away.

I dream of a black house, with a black door. My hands grip the frame of that door, though. And I’m pushing—heaving with everything I have.

I strain, snarling as I push and push. The wood splinters. Windows shatter. The foundation cracks and crumbles. And then the whole fucking thing goes over the side of the cliff, crashing into the waves below.

I shake, trembling with power.

But then I wake up. Someone is actually shaking me.

I jolt, gasping as I bolt out of sleep and lunge out of the chair.

“Whoa! Hang on!”

Strong hands grab me, calming me. I blink and focus on Ilya, standing in front of me in Mara's room. When I glance at her, she's still sleeping. I turn back to Ilya.

"Come on," he growls.

"Where—"

"The doctor wants to talk to you."

I tense, a knowing twisting in my gut.

"What did they say?"

He frowns. "Nothing. I'm not her husband." He eyes me cautiously. "I'm here, for whatever you need, whatever happens, man."

I nod, my mouth thin.

"Thanks."

"Come on."

I follow him out of Mara's room, then upstairs to where we were before. A middle-aged woman in scrubs nods as I approach.

"Lukas?"

I nod quietly.

"I'm Doctor Kemp." She smiles thinly and gestures to the row of seats in the hallway next to us. "Why don't we sit—"

"I'm fine standing."

She smiles. "I only meant because you look exhaust—"

"Lizbet," I growl. "How is—"

"The surgery was a success."

The world goes numb, still, and quiet.

She's talking in the background, but the sound is muffled as if through a wall, or water. Doctor Kemp is saying something about the valve transplant being a success, and her body reacting well to the anti-rejection medications so far.

"What?" I snap out of it, focusing on her.

Doctor Kemp smiles warmly. "She's resting, but she's good."

"And going forward? She'll be—"

"She'll need to recover, Lukas," she says quietly. "But my professional assessment is that she's out of the woods."

My legs give out. The world spins as I fall back on my ass on the floor. Doctor Kemp lunges, calling for help. But I'm just laughing. I'm laughing like the fucking maniac psycho I am as I drape back across the floor with my hands raised.

I'm just fucking *smiling* up at the ceiling.

She's going to be okay.

We're going to be okay.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## LIZBET

*Two Weeks Later:*

“*MOVE.*”

Lukas glares daggers at the orderly who almost bumps into my wheelchair in the hallway. The man apologizes, paling as he sees the glare on Lukas’s face.

“It’s fine, I’m fine,” I blush, rolling my eyes as my husband pushes me past and down the hall towards the exit.

I turn to glance up at him, smirking.

“You realize you don’t have to *scare* the world away from me, right? I’m not going to fall over and break.”

“You’re right, you’re not.” He grins. “Because I’ll be scaring any fucking idiot who might bump into you away before they do.”

I giggle as I slide my right hand up over my left shoulder—still in a sling, as that’s the side, just under my armpit, where the incision is. My fingers thread with Lukas’s, and I squeeze.

After two weeks of testing and monitoring, I’ve been granted leave. Not a single day has gone by without Lukas right there in the room with me, hanging on my every breath.

It’s been the best therapy I could have asked for.

We're leaving today, but we're not going back to OHA. Not right away, at least. We've both been granted extended medical leave from school, and we'll be staying here in London, in a loft rental, for another three weeks.

I need to rest, and be near St. Thomas, and it also keeps me close to Mara. I grin, replaying our conversation earlier today, when I promised to come visit her tomorrow. It's surreal that she's here, back from the dead.

Same as me.

Same as Lukas.

It's surreal that I've spent hours and hours and hours over the last two weeks just talking to her, endlessly. Catching up, filling in some of the blanks. She's got these gaps. She forgets things. But she's here, and she's going to get better.

Just like I will.

Just like he will.

"Look, I'm not trying to be a spoil-sport, but there's a bunch of them outside waiting to surprise you." He scowls. "I told them that wasn't a good—"

"Lukas."

He sighs and grins as he stops the wheelchair. He looks down at me.

"Yeah?"

"No one likes spoilsport."

He rolls his eyes. I grin at him and squeeze his hand with mine.

"And I'm not going to break. Not anymore."

My eyes hold his, and my teeth drag over my lip.

“You don’t have to save me, Lukas,” I whisper. “You already did.”

His eyes hold mine as he lowers his face to mine. His lips press softly to mine, and my heart thuds as I kiss him back.

Without fear. Without reservation.

“I love you,” he whispers into my lips.

“I love you so much,” I whisper back, cupping his face softly.

“Do me a favor?”

I nod.

“Pretend to be surprised, like I didn’t ruin it, when we get out there?”

I giggle, kissing him again and again before I point to the door.

“Okay, get me the hell out of this place.”

He chuckles as he pushes me down the hall and then out the sliding doors. I don’t have to pretend. I’m genuinely shrieking in glee as all of our friends cheer when we walk out. Ilya, Tenley, Misha, Charlotte, Julianna, Viktor, Fiona. Oddly, or maybe not-so-oddly, even Konstantin is there, smiling thinly and giving me a curt nod.

He’s visited once when I was first recovering. I know what was on that hard drive now, and that he used it. I know that he needed that information to just “surface,” without him hunting for it, or it would have looked mutinous.

I know I helped him take control of his father’s empire. But I don’t care. He held up his end. He saved my sister and woke her up.

He and Lukas meet each other’s eyes, and they both nod silently—a wordless thanks.

But then, we're surround by everyone else. Julianna hugs me tightly, crying into my good shoulder. Viktor and Fiona embrace me. Misha tears up, even if he tries to hide it.

Lukas's fingers slip into mine, and I squeeze tight.

Without fear. Without reservation. Without any past dragging us down.

Only love, pulling us out of the shadows, and into the light.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## EPILOGUE



LUKAS

*One month later:*

WE STAND in front of the cursed house—Ilya, Misha, Konstantin, and myself.

My heart beats evenly, quietly, as my eyes stare into the black maw of the ruined front door. My hand closes around the box of matches. My nostrils flare, breathing in gasoline.

Misha's doused the whole place. He volunteered, and given his own history with burning down houses, I decided to defer to him. Plus, I don't need to step foot in this place ever again.

In a minute, *no one* will ever step foot in this cursed house again.

This is the final healing in a long saga of healing.

Lizbet is doing amazing with her recovery. She's back at OHA, though with a lighter course load. But her transplant is working flawlessly. Her vitals are up, and her doctors are unanimously calling it a success. They say she's completely out of the woods now.

I almost lost her. Now, I never will.

Mara is still back at St. Thomas, but she's in long-term care there, now. She's getting better, day-by-day. And Lizbet gets to visit her almost every weekend.

Their mother, Nadia, was more than a little pissed when Konstantin called off their sham engagement, which was obviously just a bid for him to take over the Belsky holdings. But with that over and done with, so was Konstantin's interest in Nadia.

Shocker.

But, Nadia finally seems to be taking it better. She's back to dating a male stripper she was once apparently engaged to.

Konstantin is now the head of the Reznikov empire. I don't know, or want to know, or *need* to know the details. But there was apparently a much deeper darkness and divide between him and his father.

That's what his interest was in sending me to this house... he needed the member ledger, which the people who ran this place kept alongside damning blackmail to keep their members under secrecy. When that "came to light," Konstantin made sure those directly under Antin saw it all and saw who their boss was really was.

An abuser of children. A monster.

The Bratva may be a violent and criminal world. But these are men with children of their own. There's a line, and Antin was far over it. They made sure to bury him on that side of it.

Konstantin is technically the head. But he's got his new second in command, Vadim, running things while he finishes school. It turns out, hard or not, he likes it at OHA. And without the clash of interests between Reznikov and Kashenko over the Belsky holdings, so has our clash gone away.

Neither family ended up with Semyon's money. After setting aside enough for Mara to live quite well for the rest of her life, if she's never able to work or anything, Lizbet had the entirety

of the rest of Semyon's fortune donated to the Free Them Foundation—my parents' organization.

So this is the final nail. This is the last, cathartic piece of healing.

I glance at my friends and then raise the box of matches. I strike one against the side and watch it flare and burn. I touch it to the whole box, letting it spark and engulf in flame before I toss it up the front steps and into that dark, gaping hole into hell.

We all collectively step back as the fire catches gasoline. And suddenly, the whole place goes up in a whooshing roar.

A crusade against evil. A funeral pyre to a brother I lost years ago, who left me with one final gift.

He erased the period at the end of Lizbet's chapter. He gave me her.

We all watch as the black house with the black door, on the edge of the cliff, burns. Ilya and Misha leave first. Konstantin watches with me for another hour in silence. When he lands a hand on my shoulder, I nod, and he's gone too.

I wait.

I watch until the house on the cliff is fucking *ash*. Until the evil is scorched off the face of this fucking planet. Until the wind scatters it's remains into the sea.

Then, I can go.

The past is going to stay there, now. The future is her.

The future is us.

---

IT'S LATE when I get back to Lordship; a long flight, a long drive, a long night later.

The house is asleep, but I don't feel the need to leave it now, as I would have before. I don't have the pull to go on the prowl, or to numb anything.

The pain is gone.

Mostly.

It'll always linger in the corners, hidden a little in the shadows. But that I can manage, easily.

I head up the stairs and into my room, slipping my shirt and pants off as I crawl into bed. The warmth of her skin on mine makes me grin. She turns, and her lips press to mine softly.

"Yes?" she whispers.

I nod in the darkness.

"Gone."

She kisses me softly.

"What do you need?"

"You," I smile gently as I cup her cheek. "Just you."

"You'll always have me."

I kiss her again, and suddenly, the familiar spark catches. I growl as I kiss her harder, feeling her tongue seek mine. She moans into my lips as she reaches for the waist of my boxers.

"Your heart," I murmur.

It's been a while... in terms of sex. But, for obvious reasons. Her doctors have actually given her the green light as of a few days ago for "intimate activities" so long as she goes slow. But I've been waiting. Not because I don't want to rip her clothes

off and claim her over and over again. But because I want to make sure.

I just got her back. I don't want to break her.

But she grins in the darkness as she kisses me, her hand slipping into my boxers. I groan when her fingers curl around my thickness.

"I'm fine, Lukas," she purrs.

"Lizbet..."

"I'll tell you, I promise," she whispers.

We pause for one last quarter second. Then we crush against each other, kissing each other deeply.

Clothes are ripped away, skin presses to skin. I groan as I feel her leg slide over mine, rolling me onto my back. She strokes my hard cock, then centers the swollen head at her slick entrance. I hiss, feeling her wetness coat me, dripping down to my balls.

She groans, her breath catching as she starts to sink down.

"Oh *fuck*..." she chokes.

I frown, tensing as I grab her. "Lizbet..."

"No, I just..." She moans softly. "I forgot how big you are."

I grin. "Did you now?"

"Well," she blushes. "Parts of me did, I guess," she breathes.

She lowers her mouth to mine, and I claim her mouth as she sinks the rest of the way down onto me. She eases lower and lower, taking me deeper until we both groan as her clit grinds into my base.

I hold her, and she starts to move. She rises and falls, up and down, moonlight on her skin. My fingers slide up her ribs, over the small scar just under her armpit. She moans into my mouth, clenching around me as my hands fall to her ass, grabbing it tightly.

I almost lost her. But now, I never will.

I kiss her deeply, savagely—thrusting deep as she moans for more and claws at my chest. Our bodies grind together, breaths panting as her tight little pussy clenches around me.

“*Lukas!*”

She comes, moaning and whimpering into my mouth, and I’m right behind her. I growl, holding her tight and pushing my hips up to get as deep in her as I can. My cum spills into her, and lips lock.

My heart beats. So does hers. And they’re going to keep on beating.

Together.

---

Haven’t gotten enough of Lukas and Lizbet? Sign up for my newsletter and read a steamy extra scene! This isn’t an epilogue or continuation to *Brutal King*. But this extra hot “follow-up” story is guaranteed to fog up your Kindle! You’ll also get a free full-length book when you join!

[Get the extra scene!](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

COMING SOON



Did you think this was the end of the Savage Heirs series? Well, it's not. Sorry, definitely not sorry. *Forbidden Kingdom*, a dark, forbidden age-gap romance set at Oxford Hills Academy, is coming soon.

And perhaps another after that...

Don't forget to [sign up for my newsletter](#) to stay in the loop!

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## SAVAGE HEIR PREVIEW



While technically “book 3” in the Savage Heirs series, *Brutal King* was written to be enjoyed as a standalone (and I hope you did!). If you’d like to go back dive into Ilya and Tenley’s story in *Savage Heir*, book 1 of this series of standalone, you can read on for a sneak peek from that book.

---

### Chapter 1





## TENLEY

“They call him ‘The Wolf’ for a reason, Tenley,” my roommate says quietly.

I swallow. It’s not the first time I’ve heard the nickname.

In the three days since I moved into the student housing with Charlotte, I’ve heard the moniker whispered like a curse, or maybe a prayer, throughout the common areas of campus.

Ilya Volkov: The Wolf of Oxford Hills.

I’ve looked him up online. I mean how do you *not* after a nickname like that. I’ve never even met him or seen him face-to-face. But one Google image search later and I fully understood why he’s the Wolf.

Because when that man looks into a camera lens, it’s like a predator ready to pounce on his prey.

Well, that and the fact that his last name is literally Russian for “wolf”, I guess. His last name is also as synonymous with organized crime in Russia as “Capone” would be in the states. In fact, his uncle is *the* Yuri Volkov, head of the notoriously brutal and cold-blooded Volkov Bratva family.

My face flushes as I think back to the face of Ilya spread across the search engine page. Dark hair, green eyes, and the chiseled good looks and bone structure of an aristocratic model. But the whole visage is washed in a brooding darkness that you can’t help but shiver at.

Just like I do, right now, even thinking of it. But I steel myself and shake that shiver off. Ilya Volkov might be “The Wolf.” He might—allegedly—be heir apparent to one of the most dangerous, powerful, and wealthy crime families in the world. He might, bewilderingly, be on academic probation after some issues last year.

But I won’t let any of that affect me or throw me off. Because all of this is part of The Plan.

Okay, so The Plan has been slightly edited by the media and consulting team surrounding my father’s anticipated political moves. But it’s still mostly The Plan I’ve had in my head since I was twelve.

Graduate valedictorian, then Columbia for undergrad where I will, of course, graduate with honors. After that, it’s right to Harvard Law, and interning at the renowned Welsley and Kane who will make me a Junior Associate. From there, I’ll make moves to the even more prestigious Lancer, Stein, and Ramirez firm back in DC, where I’ll make partner within two years. After a few years there, I’ll climb the ladder into a judgeship for the District of Columbia. And by the time I’m forty, I’ll make the push to the final goal: Supreme Court Justice Tenley Chambers—the youngest Justice in history.

Lofty? Perhaps. Impossible? Not with The Plan, which is why I have it.

In the last year, though, The Plan has changed. Sort of. It’s been “recolored,” as Jill, my father’s new PR chief, put it. Because The Plan now involves a lot more than me.

The Plan now involves my father possibly becoming the next Vice President of the United States.

Currently, my dad is the US Secretary of State. Which, I'm under zero illusions, is almost entirely why and how I'm at Oxford Hills. It's the power and prestige he wields, not the money. We were never struggling when I was growing up. My dad did well as a Naval officer and lawyer with the military courts.

But there's "doing well" for normal people, and then there's "doing well" for the kind of people whose kids go to Oxford Hills.

And Oxford Hills is in a class entirely its own.

The students here are the upper echelon—the elite of the world's elite. The sons and daughters of billionaire tycoons, oligarchs, and royalty—literal, real royalty. I'm from an upper-middle-class suburb and public school. The other students here are from actual castles, or houses with their own zip codes, and have never washed a single teaspoon.

But six months ago, my dad was approached by Senator George North. The New York Senator is highly speculated, by the entire political media spectrum, to be the next President of the United States. He's already gotten a thumbs-up from the soon to be exiting current POTUS, and his team has picked my father to be his potential running mate when he announces.

Six months ago, life got *very* complicated. Suddenly, public school and the burbs wasn't enough. Being a model student with the highest marks possible wasn't enough. No, I needed "elite status." I needed "pedigree."

I needed "a social life."

So, here I am: out of DC and across the ocean to the bucolic English countryside where Oxford Hills sits. Here, my image will be "perfected" by elite classes and elite friends.

But at least the new roommate is all sorts of awesome. Charlotte's like me. Which is to say, being here gives her imposter-syndrome to the max, too. Char's been at Oxford Hills for a year already. But like me, she doesn't *really* belong here.

A little over a year ago, Charlotte's mother, a very regular, normal schoolteacher from a London suburb, married the King—the actual, real King—of the small country of Luxlordia. That makes Charlotte an actual, real princess. Or, to a “normal” person like me, it does. To other royalty, it makes her an imposter.

That's basically how we became fast friends two months ago when we were notified we'd be roommates this term at Oxford Hills. A single phone call turned into almost nightly FaceTiming, and now we're best friends. And all because of the joke that the only reason we've been put together as roommates is because we're the “imposters.”

The faux princess and the presidential race prop.

“Tenley.”

Her voice snaps me out of my own head.

“You can't—”

“Charlotte, I'll be *fine*.”

*It's just tutoring. I've done this hundred of times.*

I smile. Even though inside, my stomach knots. My heart clenches along with my fingers into the palm of my hand. I'm trying to be brave. But I can't help but feel like I'm about to walk right into the lion's den.

Or The Wolf's, as the case may be.

I glance outside through the elegant paned windows at the rain pouring down on the English countryside. I pull up the hood of my burgundy raincoat and turn back to the mirror. My blue eyes meet their reflection. I tuck an errant lock of red hair behind my ear, under the hood, and I take a breath.

Okay, I can do this. It's all for The Plan. And Supreme Court Justice and Time Magazine Person of the Year Tenley Chambers is *not* afraid of the Big Bad Wolf.

I glance back at Charlotte, curled on the couch, and smile. "I'll be back in an hour or so I guess."

"Yeah, unless he *eats you*," she mumbles with a worried frown. I roll my eyes, wave, and turn to head out the door into the rain.

Ilya Volkov is *not* going to eat me.

Student housing at Oxford Hills is quaint, but moneyed. There aren't big buildings full of dorms with communal bathrooms or anything like at other private schools. Students are paired two to a "cottage"—whimsically beautiful Tudor-style houses arranged in quads with three others just like it, with a shared, gorgeously manicured and landscaped backyard area.

Each cottage has a downstairs kitchen—though there's a Great Hall dining area that serves three meals and two teas a day—a study library and living room. Upstairs, there are two bedrooms with private bathrooms, and a common area between them.

Outside, I tighten my hood against the downpour and trudge across campus. The housing address for Ilya that the student services office gave me simply says "Lordship Manor." I haven't explored much of campus since I moved in three days ago. But an online map had it situated on the far side of the

stables—yes, there are stables—and past the archery range. Yes, there’s an archery range.

My rain boots splash through puddles along the slate and cobblestone walkways that crisscross the grounds of Oxford Hills. There are only a few other people out in this weather, but they seem to ignore me even when I give a wave.

I’m quickly learning that the children of the world’s elite aren’t the friendliest bunch.

I pass the stables, smiling at the smell of hay and horses. The archery range is empty and gray in the downpour. I’ve got my head down to ward off the rain, so I don’t notice the wall and the gate until I’m almost smacking into it.

I startle and step back. I glance up, and my eyes widen.

Past the ivy-covered stone wall and ornate iron gate, is a *stunning* old home. It looks like it belongs on the grounds of Versailles or something—a huge, beautiful and yet imposing stone manor, half-covered in ivy. Black-iron windows dot the facade, and the front door looks like it would withstand a siege from a rival kingdom.

I’m about to dig my phone out and figure out how close I am to Ilya’s cottage when my eyes suddenly snap to the words carved into the stone wall next to the gate. My mouth falls open in shock when I read “Lordship Manor.”

What. The. Fuck.

*This* is where Ilya Volkov lives? It’s no cottage. It’s a fucking castle. I shake my head in disbelief. But, this is it, alright. And palace or not, the student I’m supposed to tutor in order to bulk up my resume is in there.

This will be fine.

*Unless he eats you.*

I tremble as I push the gate open and step through. I fast-walk up the stone walkway to the enormous, black iron and old-wood door. There's no doorbell.

I frown. What the hell am I supposed to do, use a battering ram? Have my squire call up to the Lord of the realm?

I take a breath, haul my fist back, and pound. Then I pound again, and again. Finally, I hear the sound of a lock being drawn back. The door cracks and then swings open. I blink in surprise.

The girl is not who I expected. She's... stunning. Tall, leggy, blonde, and absolutely gorgeous. And here I am standing in the pouring rain in a baggy red raincoat, hair stuck to my face, no makeup, looking like a shipwreck survivor.

The wrinkled-nose look of disdain she gives me seems to back that up.

“Who are you?” She sneers in a haughty, posh British accent. Her manicured brow arches with distaste.

“I—I'm the...”

I suddenly realize there's a party going on behind her. The inside of the manor is even more gorgeous than the outside. And it's full of students drinking, dancing, making out, smoking cigarettes—and something else by the smell of it—and roaring with laughter. Music thuds.

“Were you *invited*?” She sneers.

I frown. “No, I—I mean, I'm the—”

She suddenly smiles widely. “*Oh!* Oh, no, honey,” her smile thins. “We won't need the maid service until tomorrow. And

when you do come back, do make sure you come through the service entrance at the back, yeah?”

Her cold eyes pierce me as her lips thin. “Kay, *bye...*”

She starts to shut the door in my face. But my rain boot juts out to stop her. She looks at me like I’ve just peed on the royal jewels.

“Are you *fucking*—”

“I’m actually the tutor?” I smile weakly. Then I take a breath and compose myself. I stand a little taller. “I’m the tutor. I’m here for Ilya.”

She stares at me. But slowly, her lips curl in amusement.

“Ilya?” She says with a smirk.

“Uh, yes. Does he live here?”

She grins widely. “You’re sure you’re looking for Ilya. Ilya Volkov.”

Good grief.

“I’m sure,” I say tightly. “Can I—”

“Stay here, I’ll get him.” She starts to turn. But then she glances back at me and shakes her head. “You’re sure about this?”

“Pardon me?”

She chuckles as her eyes slide up and down over me, like she’s sizing me up. Her lips smirk.

“Oh, hon,” she shakes her head and gives me a faux-sympathetic look. “Just remember, you had the chance to run, and didn’t.”



She shuts the door. I stand there in the pouring rain, blinking and trying to figure out what the hell just happened.

The minutes tick by. After about five of them, I realize I'm being pranked, or hazed or something. Yeah, screw this. I can tutor anyone. But I don't need to deal with this mean-girl shit.

As I start to turn to head back home, though, I hear the door creak. I roll my eyes, ready to give miss Ice Queen the finger. Slowly, I turn with the sneer on my lip as the door swings open.

And then my heart stops beating for a second.

Suddenly, I'm face-to-face with The Wolf himself.

The dark hair, the piercing green eyes. The dark, menacing look on his perfectly chiseled face. My eyes drop, and I blush.

He's also shirtless. Shirtless, and... built. And tattooed to hell and back. My face burns as my eyes drink in the broad, muscled shoulders, the lines of his photoshop-perfect chest and abs, and the grooves of his hips diving into the waist of his black jeans.

I slowly drag my eyes up to his stern but slightly amused face. And I tremble.

Ilya Volkov is stunning. And terrifying. And gorgeous. And dangerous looking. His hair is both tussled and perfect. Those almost supernatural green eyes pierce into my very soul. There's a smug smirk on his perfect lips, and what looks and smells like a spliff dangling from them.

He leans against the doorframe holding a crystal tumbler with what looks like whiskey or scotch in it. His cold, amused gaze sweeps over me.

I shiver under it.

“Well?” He growls—growls, literally. Like a... well, like a wolf.

I frown. “Well... what?”

His smirk deepens. “Well are we doing this outside in the rain or in my room?”

“I... uh, your room would be good?”

He chuckles darkly. I glance past him at the raging party going on.

“Look, if you’re in the middle of something, I can always come back later—”

“I’m ready right now.” He shrugs, his eyes never blinking or leaving mine. “We could go right there on the floor in the middle of it, if an audience is your thing.”

I frown in confusion. “I’m sorry, do you know who I am?”

He shrugs. “I know what you want, and that works for me just fine.”

My frown deepens. “You know what I—” I shake my head. “I’m Tenley.”

“And I’ve got things to do, Tenley,” he grunts thinly. “So if it’s a shag you’re so desperate for, why don’t you turn around, lift that skirt, and say please.”

My mouth falls open, and I *stare* at him. “*Excuse me?!?*”

His lips grin; the spliff still dangling from them as smoke curls around his piercing green eyes.

“I said to be sure you said *please*—”

I don’t know what takes ahold of me. I just know that I am *not* putting up with frat-boy bullshit like this. I’ll take the being relocated to another fucking country. I’ll deal with political

image crap. I'll cater my perfect Plan to fit the new realities of my life. I'll even deal with snobby rich brats talking down to me because I wasn't born with a jeweled scepter up my ass.

But I will *not* put up with this shit.

Without really thinking it through, my hand darts out. I snatch the glass from his hands, haul back, and splash the contents of it right into his face.

I swear, the music behind him stops. The people behind him freeze and stare with horrified expressions. And it's only then that I truly realize what I've just done.

I just threw a drink in the face of The Wolf—heir apparent to the most brutal mafia family in the world.

And yet, he says nothing. He doesn't even blink. His gorgeous face drips with scotch. The spliff in his lips dangles limp and soaked against his chin before he spits it out. His jaw grinds.

But suddenly, a fire sparks like molten green magic in his eyes. I gasp as he rapidly closes the short distance between us. His hand juts out, and I choke on my breath as he grabs the front of my raincoat at the neck in a fist. Fear spikes through me as he yanks me hard into him.

The glass drops from my fingers, landing in the wet grass next to the walkway. The hood falls back off my head. Rain pours down over the both of us in sheets as those eyes burn like green fire right into mine. His perfect lips pull back into an animal snarl, white teeth flashing in fury.

I'm petrified. I can't even scream, let alone try and break free and run for my very life. All I can do is shake as my wide eyes stare up into his.

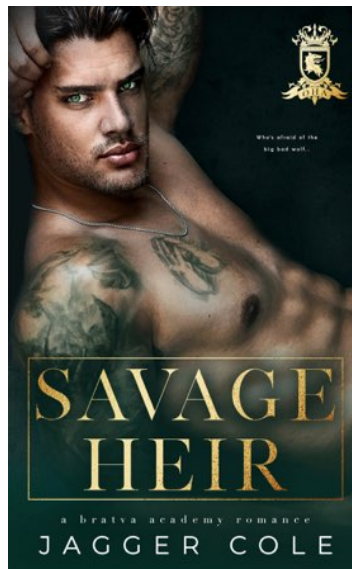
The seconds tick by as I wait for death. Until finally, his mouth opens.

“*Run away, little red,*” he snarls thickly and quietly. His grip tightens, almost choking me with the neck of my coat. “Run away, before I *eat you up.*”

He shoves me back and lets go. I don’t think. I don’t ask what he means. The fight or flight internal war is over in a quarter second: flight wins.

I turn, and I *run* as fast as I can from the big, bad Wolf of Oxford Hills.

Keep reading!



Savage Heir - Exclusively on Amazon and in Kindle Unlimited!

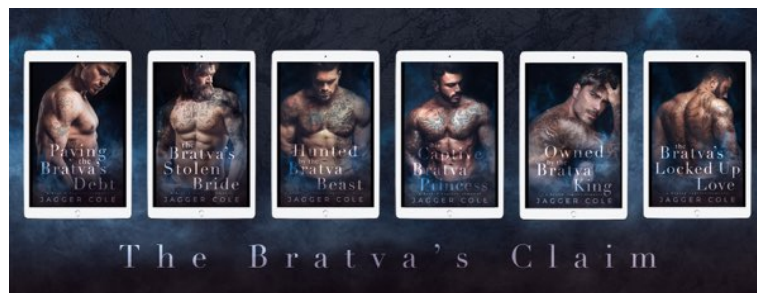
---

Come hang in my readers-only Facebook group for first glimpses of covers, new books, ARC opportunities, and live readings. See you there!



[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## PAYING THE BRATVA'S DEBT PREVIEW



Looking to dive deeper into the Kashenko and Volkov Bratvas? Viktor, Yuri, Maksim, Lev and more mentioned in *Brutal King* already have their own books!

The Bratva's Claim series is written to be read and enjoyed in any order, as standalones. However, you may find that reading them in the order below offers the best over-all story-arc experience.

[Paying The Bratva's Debt](#)

[The Bratva's Stolen Bride](#)

[Hunted By The Bratva Beast](#)

[His Captive Bratva Princess](#)

[Owned By The Bratva King](#)

[The Bratva's Locked Up Love](#)

Read on for a sneak peek of *Paying The Bratva's Debt*.

---

## Chapter 1

### Fiona

“Don’t you have a sewer to crawl back into, Chet?”

Zoey suddenly shoves her way between me and the creep hitting on me, glaring at him.

“Zoey Stone,” he growls, frowning.

“She’s not interested. Fly away, scumbag.”

“Why don’t you let her speak for—”

“Trust me, she’s not interested. You’re not her type, Chet.”

He glares at her, and then turns to me. “Why don’t we let Fiona tell us what her type is?”

“Because I already know it’s *not* the type who like his girls young, rich, and *unconscious*,” she hisses.

He bristles, snarling at her. “Listen to me, you little—”

“Fuck off, Chet. Now.”

“*Bitch*,” he mutters. He glares at Zoey before he turns and slinks away.

“Ugh, fuck that guy,” she groans.

“My dad sent him over.”

“Well, your dad has really terrible taste in men for you.”

I sigh. “He checked all the boxes—rich, successful, and apparently a...” I frown into my friend’s face. “Wait, did you and—”

“Oh my God, *no*. Not me,” she makes a face. “Crystal Shoenburg used to date his brother though. *Lots* of family donations to sweep his predatory bullshit under the rug.”

I blanche. “Wait, that was Chet Brubaker?”

“*Yep*.”

I groan. “As in...”

“Son of Melvin Brubaker, CEO of Adonis Capital. That’s the one.”

I roll my eyes and turn to glare at my father across the fundraising party. He’s not even looking though. “Glad to see we’ve evolved past arranged marriages for political means,” I grumble.

“I mean, does it actually surprise you? How many guys has your dad tried to set you up with because of their family’s money or political connections?”

“More than I want to count.”

She sighs. “So, you’re going to tell him today?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Well, I’m here if you need me.”

“Thanks, Zoey.”

The plan is to finally tell my father I’m leaving my gilded cage. I mean I’m twenty-two, I have a law degree, and it’s ridiculous that I’m still living under his roof as basically a captive doll. So, I’m leaving. Even if it means getting cut off completely, I have to get out.

And today, I’m telling him that. No more suitors pushed on me. No more being a pawn for his political career. I want my life, and I want it now.



I arch as my father shakes some hands. Wilson, his chief of staff, comes up and whispers something in his ear. My father frowns and nods quickly, then he turns and makes a beeline for his office down the hall.

“Where’s he off to?”

“Oh, probably has Satan on the phone, offering my first-born child in exchange for a State Senate seat.”

Zoey snickers. “Well, no one’s allowed in his office, right?”

“True.”

“So, wouldn’t now be an opportune time?”

I bite my lip. She’s right. He’ll be alone and cornered. If I’m going to do this, it might as well be now. I turn and pass her my glass.

“I’ll be back.”

“Be brave!”

“Thanks.”

I slink away through the crowd. No one tries to congratulate me or stop me, not without my father watching. And that’s fine with me. I slip down the hall until I’m right outside his office door. I go to open it, but suddenly I hear voices arguing inside.

“Look, I already told you,” my father is saying sharply. “I can get you money now, or if you want to wait until after the election, whatever contracts you want are—”

“I am not interested in gambling on your political aspirations, Thomas.”

I freeze. The other man’s voice is dark and gritty, with some sort of Russian or other Balkan accent.

My dad laughs nervously. “Gambling? Please. This is a sure thing. And trust me, once I’m in, those contracts are going to be so sweet, you’ll get cavities—”

“I already told you, I am not interested,” the man with the smokey, dark, powerful voice sighs heavily. “We had an arrangement, Thomas.”

“I know, I know, and I’m trying—”

“I did you a favor.”

“I know that! And I’m so appreciative, I just—”

“A debt is owed,” the voice snarls quietly. “And today, I am here to collect.”

“Look, I’m trying, okay?! If you just give me a month, Mr. Komarov.”

I freeze, dread filling me. The behind-door crooked dealings with my father, the Russian accent, and now, a name I’ve seen in newspapers. The man my father is speaking to is the single most dangerous, violent, and notorious man in organized crime in Chicago. Perhaps even the whole country.

He’s talking to Viktor Komarov, the vicious, powerful head of the Kashenko Bratva.

“I’m not interested in giving you a goddamn thing, Thomas,” the Russian mobster hisses. “Except a further three seconds to tell me how I’m going to get my money, today. One.”

“Mr. Komarov, please! This is not how things are done—”

“Do *not* lecture me, Thomas. We had an arrangement. That is how things are done. Two.”

“Mr. Komarov!”

I hear the sudden metallic click of a gun on the other side of the door. I gasp loudly.

*Too* loudly.

The barking sound of a snarled command in Russian echoes through the door. Footsteps cross the room, and I gasp as I pull away from the door. But it's too late. The office door yanks open, and two burly, terrifying men suddenly grab me. I scream, and my father is yelling, but they ignore us both. They yank me inside and throw me to the ground. The two of them storm over to me, when suddenly, there's a barked command.

*“Ostanovka!”*

The deep, gravelly voice booms through the room.

I feel my heart pounding in my throat as I slowly look up. The two burly men move aside, and suddenly, I'm looking at a tall, broad-shouldered, completely gorgeous tank of a man. He's even taller and bigger than his two bodyguards, and you can almost see the power rippling off of him. His deep blue eyes look right at me, captivating my gaze.

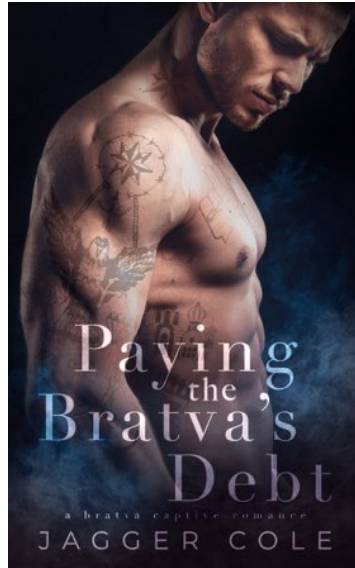
“Who are you?”

“Mr. Komarov,” my father fumbles, almost tripping over himself as he stutters over. “This is Fiona, my daughter.”

The brooding Russian's eyes glimmer. They narrow at me as a shadow of a smile curls at his lips.

“Thomas,” he growls. “Our debt is settled.”

[Keep reading!](#)



[Paying The Bratva's Debt - Exclusively on Amazon and in Kindle Unlimited!](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

ALSO BY JAGGER COLE

Savage Heirs:

Savage Heir

Dark Prince

Brutal King

Forbidden Kingdom

Bratva's Claim:

Paying The Bratva's Debt

The Bratva's Stolen Bride

Hunted By The Bratva Beast

His Captive Bratva Princess

Owned By The Bratva King

The Bratva's Locked Up Love

Standalones:

Bosshole

Grumpaholic

Her Rough Mechanic

Cherished

Captivated

Roping His Bride

Stalker of Mine

Hungry For Her

Wrapped Up In Her

Be Ours

The Sciami Crime Family:

(All standalone books which can be read in any order.)

The Hitman's Obsession

The Boss's Temptation

The Bodyguard's Weakness

Power Series:

(All standalone books which can be read in any order.)

Tyrant

Outlaw

Warlord

Wants & Needs Duet:

All He Wants

Everything He Needs

Forever Always Duet:

Forever His

Always Hers

Tuff Built Series:

Big Deck

Hard Screw

*OceanofPDF.com*

## END NOTES

Some of the themes discussed in this book are both horrifying and, tragically, quite real within the actual world outside fiction. While the Free Them Foundation might only exist within my books, there are several powerful, dedicated organizations out there doing the very real work of stopping human trafficking and child abuse. If you'd like to help or to read more about some of these groups, these are just a few that I feel are worth donating to or learning more about:

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

1-800-843-5678

<http://www.missingkids.com/home>

Center for Human Trafficking Awareness

888-373-7888

[ActNow@spcollege.edu](mailto:ActNow@spcollege.edu)

<http://haltt.spcollege.edu>

Polaris

202-790-6300

[training@polarisproject.org](mailto:training@polarisproject.org)

<http://polarisproject.org/>

National Human Trafficking Hotline

888-373-7888

[help@humantraffickinghotline.org](mailto:help@humantraffickinghotline.org)

<http://humantraffickinghotline.org/>

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jagger Cole

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at

[www.jaggercolewrites.com](http://www.jaggercolewrites.com)



[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)