



A DARK MAFIA STANDALONE ROMANCE

DANGEROUS VOWS

M. JAMES

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Marika



I sit alone at my vanity, wondering when I'll hear the knock at my door.

We don't have all that much time. I have a dinner tonight—family dinner, once a week now that I live alone at the mansion I once shared with my father and brother. Now, my brother, Nikolai Vasilev, lives with his wife on their estate—I still live here.

To be honest, I like the solitude. It's a little strange—this house felt too big even when it was only the three of us—but it fits my mood these days. I can wander around most of it without so much as even running into a staff member or security, who do their best to stay out of my way.

No one knows how to handle it when the Bratva princess comes back battered and broken.

No one except Adrik.

There have been so many days in the last few months since Narokov's threat was neutralized and my brother disappeared into married bliss with Lilliana, where I've wondered how I would ever piece back together who I was—who I am now. It feels, honestly, as if it's been longer than months.

Maybe that's why I feel the way I do about him. I'd never been alone in my life, and then suddenly, I was, more often than not. Once a week or so, I see my brother and his wife—usually together, sometimes apart—when they're not enjoying the new estate they purchased after their honeymoon, eager to

fill it with the family they've already started creating. And in the days in between, there's Adrik.

He's the reason I haven't finished getting ready yet. No point in putting on makeup when I know he's going to kiss it right off.

Even though I expect it, the knock at the door makes me jump a little. That's something that's stuck after the events at the compound where Ivan Narokov made his stand. I jump at things now. Shadows, knocks, strange noises. I knew Adrik was coming, and it still startled me.

I tug my silk robe a little closer around me, and get up to answer the door.

Adrik is standing just outside of it, tall and handsome and blond, a man who was once just another of my family's security and now has become so much more to me. An anchor, I think, sometimes, during days when I felt like I might float away. He saved me when I couldn't have done much to save myself.

"Marika." His deep, accented voice ripples over my skin. "May I come in?"

I nod wordlessly, stepping to one side to let him in. He steps into my bedroom, closing the door behind him, and it still surprises me a little to see him here. It still feels forbidden, taboo. It is.

Bodyguards do not sleep with Bratva heiresses. They don't take their virginity and become their lovers. But that's exactly what's happened with Adrik and I.

"Are you alright?" He steps forward, touching my face, his fingers skimming over my cheek. His thumb grazes over my cheekbone, and where I was chilly a moment ago, I feel my skin warm beneath his touch. "I know today was difficult for you."

I went to visit my father's grave today. I woke up alone this morning, dressing in all black and asking for a car. Adrik insisted on accompanying me. It's been rainy and wet for a week now, the end of winter turning into the first damp chills of spring. I stood out in the wet cold for a long time, under my umbrella, staring down at the gray stone numbly until Adrik finally came out and urged me back to the car, solicitously convincing me to go back home.

I told him he could come up and see me later. I haven't left my room since.

I nod, still trying to find my voice, glancing over at the rumpled sheets of my bed. I've never had a secret like Adrik before. For a little over a month, I've kept it. And I don't know what I'm meant to do.

"Do you want me to go?" His fingers are still gently touching my face. "We don't have to do anything you don't want to, Marika."

"No," I say softly. "I don't want you to go."

He smiles faintly. "That's what you said to me downstairs, remember? When I came and sat with you, and we—"

I swallow hard. "I remember."

"I will always be thrilled I asked to stay on your security detail," he says, that faint smile still on his lips. "Otherwise, this—" he brushes his thumb downwards, over my lower lip, "this would never have happened."

Of course, it wouldn't have. Adrik and I are something that shouldn't have happened. I should have told him no. I should tell him no every time he comes to my bed. But I can't.

I want him too much.

"Sometimes I think it only happened because you were lonely," he says softly, drawing me into his arms. I turn my head, laying my cheek against his chest, breathing in the faint, warm scent of male skin and a hint of cologne, the laundry detergent used to wash his uniform. His arms are broad and strong, and I feel safe in them. I have felt safe in them ever since he picked me up off of the concrete floor in that compound, beaten half to death, and carried me to safety.

"I was lonely," I whisper. "But that's not the only reason why."

Nikolai left strict instructions for me not to leave the mansion unless I was heavily guarded, while he went on his belated honeymoon with Lilliana. I didn't begrudge them that—they needed their space to heal and reconnect, too. I had been left with my security—one of which was Adrik—at the mansion.

At some point, as I came out of the fugue I'd been in, I remembered that he had saved me. I wanted to thank him. So I had offered him a drink.

"It should have been in a proper bed," he says, a slight laugh behind his words as he kisses the top of my head, turning me slowly towards the rumpled sheets still left from my afternoon nap. "I've tried to make up for that, since."

"You've done a good job." I turn in his arms, looking up at him. "I think I like how it was, the first time."

"You're a Bratva princess." His hands smooth downwards, over my back, down to my waist. His fingers are rough against the silk, catching on it a little. "You shouldn't have lost your virginity on a vintage sofa."

The memory comes back, as sharp and piercing as the moment of pain when he'd first slipped inside of me, and with the same burst of heart-racing desire at the reminder of just how it had all happened.

Adrik telling me that he was on duty, that he shouldn't have a drink. Me insisting, telling him that he saved my life, and I only wanted to thank him. Flirting, maybe, in the way of someone who doesn't really know how to flirt.

It would be hard not to flirt with Adrik. He's gorgeous—six foot three inches of muscled, tattooed perfection, always dressed in fatigues meant to be loose but pulled taut over muscled thighs and an immaculate ass, and a tight black t-shirt. Even without meaning to, he's made to be flirted with.

I don't even entirely remember how we ended up the way we did. I remember that he asked me how I was doing, if I was healing well. I had said yes, that my injuries were getting better. It was all very formal. I turned my head, reaching for my glass, and suddenly felt his hand on my face. There had still been a bruise there, healing, on my jaw.

"Do you think it would have happened," I whisper, "if you hadn't touched me like that?"

He knows what I'm talking about. I see it from the wry twist of his mouth. "I shouldn't have," he says quietly. "It was out of line. But—" he hesitates, brushing his fingers over my lips again. "I can't say I regret that I did."

“You could kiss me like that again,” I whisper, tilting my chin up, and I see the smile on his mouth as he bends to kiss me. I feel it against my lips as his press against mine.

He was my first kiss. My very first, sitting on a chintz sofa in the informal living room, the taste of vodka lingering on both of our mouths. His fingers that had grazed below the bruise on my jaw found a place to rest on my waist, his other hand coming up to touch the unhurt side of my face, and I had discovered what it was like to be kissed by someone I chose, and kissed in return.

It was unexpected and better than I could have ever imagined, having spent my whole life believing that the only intimacy I would ever experience would be within a marriage arranged and brokered without my input.

I had known I shouldn’t allow it. I still had value to my family. My innocence still had value. Even a kiss was too much.

But as Adrik said, I had been so lonely. I had experienced so much pain—ached for a gentle touch. To feel pleasure instead of hurt. Adrik’s mouth was full and soft and warm, the kiss eager and careful all at once. I could feel that the desire in it had been there for a long time, maybe even before my kidnapping, before my rescue. I thought of him watching me over months and years, wanting me, pining for me from afar. It was all so romantic that I let myself be swept up in it without even really knowing if it was all true.

Nikolai had been somewhere far away, and no one would find out. I was still a virgin—my kidnapers hadn’t taken that from me—but they had hurt me, shamed me, and stripped so much else away. Adrik’s hands, I had felt, could piece that back together. He could give me something that no one else could.

And he still was.

His mouth moves over mine, strong and sure, without hesitation. I sometimes wonder, afterward, how he seems to have no fear with me. What he’s doing could cost him his life. I can’t imagine that a night with me, a week, or the month that we’ve spent doing this, is worth what would happen to him if Nikolai found out. And yet—

He doesn’t seem to care.

“Marika—” He breathes my name against my lips, his hands finding the silk tie of my robe. I’m nude underneath, and when the silk falls away, I hear his groan of pleasure, his hands touching bare skin. They’re broad and rough, gripping my delicate waist. I love how he makes me feel—fragile and protected all at once, as he lifts me onto the bed, him still fully clothed, and me bare as the silk flutters to the floor.

“You liked it when I did this to you.” He slips one hand between my thighs, parting my folds for a thick finger, sliding over my already aching clit. “When I touched you like this—”

“Yes—” I’m already breathless. My gaze flicks downwards, seeing the thick ridge of his cock, pressing against the fly of his fatigues. I can feel the slick shape of the buttons beneath my fingers before I even touch him. How it feels to try to quickly get them open, slipping my hand inside to find the hot, hard shape of his cock. I know the sound he’ll make when my palm brushes against him for the first time since he came into the room.

There are a dozen or more small intimacies that I know about him now that I shouldn’t—and the same for him with me.

He bends down, turning me so that my ass is at the edge of the bed, kneeling down so that his mouth is level with the apex of my thighs. “I did this to you, remember? Kneeling in front of the couch to eat your sweet pussy for the first time—”

I suck in a breath as his lips graze over my inner thigh, sliding higher. “I wouldn’t have been able to take you if you hadn’t,” I whisper, the words breaking in between each one, my voice cracking with desire as his mouth moves closer to where I need it the most. “You were too big. And I—”

“I was the first.” There’s a raw desire in his voice when he says it, his lips brushing directly between my thighs. “The first to taste you. The first to fuck you. The first to do this—”

His tongue presses between my folds, sliding hotly over my clit, and my head falls back against the blankets. There’s no more talking, no more teasing. There’s only his mouth pressed between my thighs, the hot, wet, sweet pleasure of it, his tongue sliding and rolling over my clit as he holds my legs apart and I press into his hands, wanting more. It feels so good—I could

never have imagined that anything would feel so good.

I feel his fingers slide against my entrance, teasing me. I arch into his touch, impatient, and I feel the vibration of his laugh against my skin.

“You want it,” he murmurs. “I gave you one taste, and you’re insatiable.”

“Adrik—” I moan, hips bucking against his mouth as I reach down, running my hands over the short crop of his blond hair. “Stop teasing me.”

“Oh, this isn’t teasing, princess.”

He pulls his mouth away from me as he says it, and suddenly he’s leaning over me, his fingers nimbly undoing the buttons at the front of his pants as he frees his cock. He’s hard and thick, filling his own palm as he strokes his hand over the throbbing length, and suddenly I feel the hot, swollen head pushed against my clit.

“This is teasing,” he murmurs, and leans down to kiss me again.

I gasp as he rubs himself against me, the slick mixture of his pre-cum and my arousal mingling together to create a delicious, hot friction between the head of his cock and my clit, and I know I’m going to come. Every time I start to twitch and shudder, he pulls away, dragging the head of his cock lower to circle my entrance before sliding up again, until I can feel how swollen and sensitive my clit is, aching to come. I buck helplessly under him, glaring up at his satisfied expression.

“Please,” I whisper, and he laughs, low and lustful, kissing me again.

“The Bratva princess, begging her bodyguard to make her come.”

“Adrik, I swear—”

He laughs again at that, but when he pushes the swollen head of his cock against me again, more of his slick pre-cum dripping onto my flesh, he doesn’t pull away—and I feel my body tighten, the orgasm unfurling somewhere deep within me before my nails dig into his shoulders and my head tips back on a wordless cry, his body pressed against mine as he kisses me hard. I arch against him, grinding out my orgasm against the slick length of his cock.

I'm still coming when I feel him push inside of me, his hands on my waist, my hips, as his mouth slants over mine. I gasp, tightening around him, and I feel his groan against my lips as he lifts me up, turning me on the bed so that he's atop me, my head against the pillows.

I want him undressed, skin against skin. I strip away his shirt as he thrusts into me, fingers raking over all that broad, bare muscle, pushing his pants down his hips so I can enjoy as much of him as I can pressed against me, skin slick with sweat. It was cold in here before, but now it's all heat—Adrik and me, and I feel as if I can't get enough of it.

"Come for me one more time," he breathes in my ear. "I'm so close—one more, before I have to pull out."

I want to tell him not to. I want to come while he fills me, to feel the hot rush of it, feel him throbbing inside of me, as deeply as he can go while we come together. But I know better. Even in the rush of lust, I know that it would be a bad idea to let him finish inside of me.

We should be using protection. The fact that we aren't is bad enough.

He thrusts inside of me once more, hard, and just the knowledge that he's holding back his own orgasm to let me come again is enough to send me over the edge. I wrap myself around him, legs tangled with his and fingers clinging to his shoulders as I clench and shudder around him. I hear the soul-tearing groan that comes out of his mouth as he pulls free of me, his hand jerking over his slick length as he aims it at my stomach and spills a rush of pearlescent fluid over my skin.

I'm still breathing hard as he collapses next to me, his fatigues around his thighs, his hand still loosely wrapped around his cock.

I don't want to tell him to leave. But I see the clock ticking away next to the bed, and I know that if he doesn't go soon, I'll be late getting ready for dinner. And if Lilliana or Nikolai were, for some reason, to come up and check on me and find me here—

"I have to get ready." I turn and look at him regretfully. "Nikolai is coming over—"

"Shit." He sits up, his fair skin still flushed. "I should go."

I nod, swallowing hard. I never know what to do after this. The lust is the easy part. Wanting him is easy. Knowing what to do with the feelings afterward is so much harder.

Especially when I don't know what kind of future we can have.

"I'm sorry." I bite my lower lip, feeling my heart ache in my chest. "I know this is complicated—"

"It's alright, *kotenok*." He kisses my forehead, brushing my now-tangled hair away from my face. "I'll go."

I watch him gather his clothes, and I would enjoy the sight of him buttoning up his pants and pulling his shirt back on, the flex of his muscles beneath the fabric, more if I didn't feel such a tangle of confusion.

Am I falling in love with him?

It feels like it, sometimes. The things he says to me, the way he makes my heart race and my stomach knot, the way I feel cared for and safe when he's close—so much of it feels like the beginnings of love. And yet—

I've never been free to choose who I love. I don't know if that's changed.

My brother is the *pakhan* now. He doesn't believe in all of the old ways, but some of them are harder to shake than others. The value that I could have as a means to strengthen the now-weakened Bratva he's taken over is one of them.

When Adrik is gone, I get up and shower. I go to the closet after, my hair blow-dried in a soft, straight fall down my shoulders, and look through the clothes hanging there. There's no real need to dress up for dinner, but our father always insisted on it, and it's one of the traditions that Nikolai has kept for the family dinners we have now. I glance over at the rumpled bed—with Adrik's sweat and cologne washed off of me, it's the only sign left that he was ever here.

How exactly do you think this is going to end? I ask myself as I take a pair of slim black slacks and a cream-colored cashmere sweater out of the closet. *Not with a happily-ever-after for you and Adrik, most likely.*

Nikolai himself has seen the trials that come with an arranged marriage, how close he came to a union of endless contention or, at best, a tentative truce. But that doesn't mean that he'll be convinced that I should be allowed to make my own marriage—least of all with my bodyguard. At best, I might hope to be allowed some input into my own fate.

Sighing, I sit down at my vanity once again—twenty minutes until Nikolai and Lilliana arrive for dinner. Adrik stayed longer than he should have—but even now, I have a hard time wishing it had been anything else.

The time that he spends in here with me, in our own private space away from everyone and everything else, is my only escape. It's the only time that I feel that there's even the slightest chance that I might get to have something that is mine, and mine alone—for no other reason than that I simply want it.

After everything that's happened, it's hard for me to not believe that I deserve it, in some small way. I had so much of myself taken away when I was kidnapped. When I'm with Adrik, I feel like myself again. Like my body, my choices, belong to me.

I know that in this world I was born into, that is rarely the case—and it might not always be the case for me.

But do I love him? I don't know the answer to that. And all I can hope for is time—time for us to find out, before I have to decide whether or not to take the risk of telling my brother and upending both my life and Adrik's forever. The risk of what might happen to him if Nikolai is as furious as I think he would be.

It's not something to take lightly. And it's not something I can decide minutes before a family dinner.

Closing my makeup case, I check my lipstick, and stand up.

Earlier, I was Adrik's lover. Now I have to go back to being Marika Vasilev—Bratva daughter, sister—and heiress.

Nikolai and Lilliana arrive right on time, and I let them in, leading the three of us to the informal dining room—having dinner in the formal room, at a table that could seat an entire dinner party’s worth of guests and then some, feels a little too ridiculous.

“How is the new estate?” I ask them as the first course of dinner is served. I’d spent a lot of time planning the menu—something to occupy my time—and there’s a salad studded with cranberries and goat cheese and a pumpkin-crab bisque for the first course.

“We’re rattling around in there a little,” Lilliana says with a smile, reaching for the pitcher of sparkling water instead of the wine Nikolai and I are drinking. “But we’ll fill it up soon enough.” She pats her still-flat belly with a smile at her husband. “Although it might always feel a little too big. I would have been happy with something smaller, but you know—”

“Can’t have the *pakhan* of the Bratva living in a two-story brownstone,” Nikolai says with a smirk. “You’ll be glad for that space when we start having dinner parties.”

“What makes you think I’ll be excited to have dinner parties?” Lilliana asks teasingly, and I watch their banter, glad to see them teasing each other playfully, without the acid bite that there used to be to it. They’ve both come a long way since the rocky start of their arrangement.

“You’ve got to be getting lonely here,” Nikolai says, glancing at me as we finish the first course and one of the staff members brings the second. “This place is too big for one person.”

“It’s not one person.” I feel my stomach tighten a little at the tone of his voice—it sounds like he’s leading up to something, and I’m not sure that I’m going to like it. “It’s me, an endless amount of security, and the staff besides.”

“That’s still lonely.” Nikolai dips one of the shrimp served on the chilled plate into a small crystal bowl of cocktail sauce. “But I think that might change soon, Marika, if you’re open to hearing what I have to say.”

I know well enough that I don’t really have the option. Nikolai is my brother, and he loves me dearly; I know that. But I can hear the tone in his voice—the *pakhan*’s tone—it’s one I’m not accustomed to. I don’t like the sound of it,

and I do my best to keep calm as I answer.

“I think you’re going to tell me one way or another,” I tell him simply. “So you may as well.”

I don’t miss the glance Lilliana gives Nikolai, and it makes me wonder how much he’s told her of whatever it is that he’s about to say. There was a time when he never would have shared any sort of information that might be held in confidence with a woman, not even his wife, but things are different now. *Nikolai* is different, softened by what he’s found with Lilliana. I’d hoped that newfound softness might extend to my own situation, but I have a creeping sense of unease that that’s not the case.

His next words confirm it.

“Theo McNeil is looking for a wife,” Nikolai says bluntly. “He’s gone on too long without an heir, and from what I’ve heard, the other Kings are starting to pressure him about it. Most of them have heirs, and they don’t want a civil war breaking out if he were to die without someone to take over for him.”

I frown. “He’s not that old, is he? Not on death’s doorstep, anyway.”

Nikolai chuckles. “No. Forty-three, I believe. But he needs to find a bride first, wed her, produce an heir, and let that heir get old enough to comfortably take over in the circumstance of his passing—and that’s a lot of things to happen when a man in our line of work can find himself on the wrong end of a bullet at any time. They’re taking all that into consideration. We don’t always get the pleasure of growing old.”

Those words aren’t unfamiliar to me, but they hit harder now, in the wake of my father’s death and my own brush with mortality. I swallow hard, holding my brother’s gaze as I ask the question that I feel fairly certain I already know the answer to.

“What does that have to do with me?”

Nikolai’s expression was guarded as he looked at me. “Theo’s organization is the only one more powerful than the Vasilev Bratva,” he says finally. “The Kings have resources beyond what we do, coming in not only from their home organization in Dublin, but plenty of other places as well. Theo has turned his attention to our territory, and I have it on good authority that he’s

considering moving in on us. Trying to take our contacts, our territory, our business.”

“That would start a war.” I stare at Nikolai. “That—”

He nods. “And if he’s considering it, it means he feels fairly certain he can do so and win. That puts all of us in danger and everything our family has built.”

“So you’re going to try to make an alliance with him.” It’s not even really a question. It’s how this always goes. An alliance needs to be made, and the innocent, unmarried daughter is how it’s brokered—or, in this case, the innocent, unmarried sister. I’m no longer innocent, but Nikolai doesn’t know that.

For the briefest moment, I consider telling him—shouting it out over a rack of lamb and roasted potatoes, just to see the expression on his face. *I’m not a virgin. Adrik fucked me on the couch in the living room. Yes, the informal one. You can see the bloodstain if you like; I never did manage to get it all the way out.*

I really do think about it, just for a second. But I can’t. Not only because of the punishment that would undoubtedly be visited on Adrik if I did, but because, after everything, I can’t bear to see the look of disappointment on my brother’s face. He’s the only family I have left—the only *blood* family—and the idea of him seeing all his plans wither because of my foolishness feels like too much to bear. He’s my big brother, and he’s never been disappointed in me in all my life. I hate the idea that he would be, now.

“Yes.” Nikolai still has that guarded expression on his face, as if he’s waiting for my reaction. “I think you know how that will be arranged, Marika.”

Lilliana is very quiet across from him. I wonder if they had this discussion before, if she tried to talk him out of it, or if she understands *the way things are* now. If she’s come around to the way that the Families do things, now that she’s chosen to accept her place in it—if she’ll be as accepting one day when it might be her own daughter handed over to broker a business arrangement.

Love has a funny way of making people see things very differently than they used to.

“With a marriage.” My voice sounds flat and distant, like I’m hearing it down a hallway. “Between Theo and I.”

Nikolai lets out a breath, as if he were expecting a tantrum from me, and nods. “That’s exactly it. But, Marika—” he pauses, considering his next words. “It won’t be forever.”

“What do you mean?” I look at him confusedly, and he glances at Lilliana before returning his gaze to me.

“This is an arrangement that has an end date,” he says. “I’m planting you as his wife, Marika. You will go through with it in reality, of course—the wedding, the consummation, all of it. But I intend to have you find information that will enable me to put an end to Theo and his branch of the Kings before they can do the same to us.”

I stare at him. “You want to use me as a spy?” The possibilities feel different now. I still don’t *want* to marry Theo McNeil, or go to bed with him, or pretend to be his happy wife—but this isn’t the same as saying *til death do us part* and meaning it. This is something else.

“I want you to be careful,” Nikolai says firmly. “But essentially, yes. I want you to find whatever you can—get him to talk to you, any means you can devise of finding out what’s going on that I can’t access. You will be able to get closer to him than I or anyone else possibly could, especially if he thinks you’re happy with him and you please him.”

I see Lilliana wrinkle her nose at his phrasing, but she says nothing.

“Once he’s taken down and his organization disbanded, you’ll be a widow,” Nikolai continues. “I’ll write the deed to the mansion over to you. You can do as you like after that—marry or not marry at all, sell the house or keep it, whatever you choose.”

I look at him for a long moment, unsure what to say. “This is a dangerous plan,” I say finally, picking at a loose thread on the seam of my pants. *What will Adrik think?* It shouldn’t even be a consideration—it shouldn’t matter. But I think, for a moment, of his hands and mouth on me, the eager passion every time he takes me to bed, and I wonder if he’ll be willing to stand idly by while I marry someone else, even for a little while.

But I haven't made him any promises, and I'm not even sure if there's a future for us. That's not a choice I've made. It's not one I'm ready to make any time soon.

This is a choice I have to make now—if I even have one.

“What if I say no?” I ask Nikolai softly, and he sighs.

“I'm not going to force you, Marika. I'm not Lilliana's father, or ours. I am going to give you a choice in this. But I think you know the choice that I want you to make.”

I do, of course. And I also know that I don't really have one. My purpose has always been to marry for the advancement of our family, and that hasn't changed just because our father is gone. I was a fool to think that it might have.

I don't think there's a single future where I don't end up married to someone to benefit our family's future. At least with Theo, there's a purpose to it beyond just warming the bed of some crime organization's heir and providing him with children. I can keep our family from being hurt by this man. And then—

There's a possibility of a future with Adrik. It feels far away—almost impossible to think of right now. I don't know if Nikolai would allow it, even after I've done what he wants. But there's a chance—a chance, at least, for me to find out if that's what I want. Space for me to make a choice without being rushed into it. It seems better than the other options that I can see unfolding in front of me, if I tell Nikolai no this time.

“Alright,” I tell him quietly, the food in front of me forgotten. “I'll do it.”

Theo



“The Vasilev Bratva is ripe to be taken down. Now is the time, if we’re going to make a move.”

Finn O’Sullivan, my right-hand man and the one man I trust to tell me the truth, is sitting across from me at the Kings’ table, all the other chairs now empty. The meeting we’d been in is over, the other Kings are gone, and I’m left with the decisions that they want me to make.

I’m used to that. I was born to it, and it’s been my entire life. I was raised at the elbow of the man who made these choices before me, seated at the table when I was old enough to have a voice, and now I’m the head of it all.

“There are generations of McNeils to think about,” I tell Finn, tapping my fingers against the scarred wood of the table. “My father and grandfather and his father before him worked their way up from nothing to make this what it was. My great-grandfather wasn’t born a King. They sent him here to Chicago, from Dublin, to see what he could make of himself. To see if he could *earn* it. And he did.” I flatten my hand against the table, feeling the roughness of it against my palm. “This has to be done carefully, or not at all.”

“You know how the others feel.” Finn rakes one hand through shaggy ginger hair, shaking his head at me. “Their Bratva is in shambles, torn apart from the inside. Nikolai Vasilev didn’t think he’d take over for years yet. He executed more than half of the men in the organization for their treachery.”

I shrug. “I’d have done the same, if that happened here.”

“That means there’s a lot of fresh blood, though. Men who are acting through fear, not years of loyalty, and a lot of shifting pieces. Now is the time to strike, before he gets a handle on what he’s doing, and it all coalesces again. Stronger than before, maybe. The old man had gotten a little careless in his older years.”

I rub a hand over my mouth, sinking back into my seat. “And here? They want a great deal from me.”

Finn frowns. “They want you to marry, Theo. It’s not unreasonable. You were just speaking about all the generations of McNeils who worked to make this branch of the Kings what it is. What happens if you don’t have an heir? There will be no McNeil to take over. All of that, gone. And a civil war, most likely, as all the remaining Kings bicker over who takes the seat. Is that what you want to leave as your family’s legacy?”

“Of course not.” I stand up abruptly, striding to the wooden bar at the far end of the room, and pour myself a healthy slug of whiskey into a glass. “You know that.”

“Then what are you waiting for? You could have heirs three times over by now, or more. You could have a son old enough to start learning who he will grow up to be.”

I press my lips together in a thin line. The answer isn’t one I can say aloud—Finn understands me better than most. Still, I’m not sure even he would understand this...the desire I’ve long had to have a wife who is more than a pawn, more than a means to produce heirs.

I don’t need to marry to keep my bed warm. There’s no shortage of women eager to fill the empty space on the other side of my pillow. What I don’t have is companionship, tenderness, or the privilege of a woman who can truly stand at my side, one who could be my confidant and friend as well as a bride.

But that’s not something easy to find in this world. Men like me marry for connections and money, to broker alliances, and build empires. The women who facilitate such things are often either sheltered and cowed, raised by domineering fathers who have driven or beaten every original thought out of their heads, or want the money and status themselves as well, without any

real interest in the man offering it.

This world is dangerous. My life is always at risk—thus the Kings’ insistence that I’ve gone far too long without securing my family line—and a woman inclined towards love doesn’t often wish to marry a man who she might lose in a deal gone wrong or a territory dispute. The recent upheaval between the Vasilev *pakhan* and Ivan Narokov is a prime example—the head of a family gone, two fathers, and very nearly a daughter and wife as well, not to mention the Vasilev heir. Our lives are privileged—until they’re not. Without care, it can all come crashing down—sometimes even with it.

“I was contacted by Vasilev today,” I tell Finn, downing the whiskey and pouring another glass. “He wants me to consider marrying his sister.”

Finn raises his eyebrows, whistling. “You could do worse. It would solve two problems—but not all the Kings will like it. Taking over their territory will bring more profit than a simple alliance.”

“But it comes with more bloodshed.” I return to the table, pushing a glass to him as well. “Do they want to sacrifice men? The possibility of their families’ safety? I don’t wish to, if there’s another option. I prefer measured risk, as my father did. We’ve grown powerful and rich with that philosophy. I see no reason to change our tactics now.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you.” Finn shrugs, reaching for the glass. “Do you think the girl wants to marry you?”

“Does it matter?” It matters to me, but that’s not something I’m inclined to say aloud. “If her brother orders her to, then she will. That’s the way of things.”

Finn shrugged again. “It’s a question worth asking. So you’re going to say yes?”

“What makes you think that?” I give him a wry grin, because Finn knows me well enough to say such a thing. I was an only child, with no siblings, and I often wanted a brother. Finn, for all that he technically works for me, all but fills that role.

“I know the look on your face when your mind is made up.” He tosses back the last of his whiskey, taking the glass back to the bar. “For what it’s worth,”

he adds, the clink of glass on glass letting me know that he's pouring himself another, "I think it's the right choice."

Technically, Finn's approval doesn't matter. But privately, I'm glad to have it. "I'll contact him in the morning," I tell Finn. "Sleep on it tonight."

"That's wise." He raises the glass, grinning at me. "To Theo McNeil finally getting hitched."

I glare at him but toss the rest of my whiskey back anyway.

Looks like I'm finally taking a bride.

—

I have a business dinner that evening, and it's enough to take my mind off Nikolai Vasilev and his sister for a little while. The meeting in question is at a highly-starred restaurant that's all black leather and dim corners, chandelier lighting, and beautiful, soft-spoken women in designer dresses on the arms of powerful men in designer suits—the sort of place that doesn't come as naturally to me as it should. Still, I've long learned to blend in since I was young enough to understand my place in the world. I am what I am, one of these powerful men, even if sometimes I think I might have preferred a quieter life.

But my family worked for generations to ensure that the McNeils had a name, that we were synonymous with power and wealth, and with that comes a responsibility that I can't shirk.

The meeting is with an investor in a new string of clubs, another front for all of the illegal business dealings that provide the real money. It's the usual talk of finances and business plans, a ledger and portfolio open on the table in front of us between the plates of expensive hors d'oeuvres and glasses of top-shelf whiskey and cognac. It goes on for so long that I'm beginning to get tired by the end of it, when the paperwork is signed and the bill is paid. I sit there for a moment longer after he's gone, contemplating another drink, and that's long enough for a pretty dark-haired woman in a skin-tight red dress to slip into the chair across from mine, her chin resting prettily on her hand.

“Your company left,” she observes. “Let me buy you a drink.”

She’s forward. She might be an escort, but I don’t think so. There’s a certain nervous bravado to her that tells me she’s been watching me for a good part of the night. If I had to guess, she has a group of friends in another part of the restaurant who are all silently cheering her on right now. I glance a little to my left, covertly as I’ve been long taught, and I see exactly that—a table of five other women, all in equally tight and expensive dresses, whispering behind their hands as they watch her.

“I’m a bit old for you.” The words sound ridiculous even to my ears—except for a bit of grey at the temples, and here and there in my stubble, I don’t look forty-three, and age gaps between me and the women who warm my bed for a night have never bothered me in the slightest.

If I was truly worried about that, I wouldn’t be contemplating marriage to Marika Vasilev. I’m not even sure she’s twenty.

The girl giggles, a light and playful sound that should send all the blood rushing to my cock, but instead just faintly irritates me. *What the hell is wrong with me?* I could take this girl up on her offer of a drink and have her back at my penthouse within an hour, her legs up around her ears or her mouth around my cock. She’d probably do anything I asked of her, and I get the feeling that she’d probably do it well.

The problem, of course, is that I’m getting sick of meaningless sex. Which actually does make me feel fucking old.

I’ve had a monumental amount of it in my life—so many women in and out of my bed that I’ve forgotten what a lot of them looked like and certainly most of their names. It’s been so much that I’ve gotten tired of it. They’ve all blended together, into a teeming mass of pointless conquests that all seem to look and sound and feel the same, until it feels like more of an effort than it’s worth to take this girl home instead of just pumping my fist over my cock myself a few times and calling it a night.

What I want is a woman who gives a shit about me in bed for some reason other than just what I can buy her or the story she can tell her friends over brunch. I want—as I’d thought earlier—companionship. A woman that matters—who I matter to.

The girl is still looking at me. There's a slight pout around her mouth, because I haven't given her anything close to the answer she wants—in fact, I haven't really given her an answer at all. And everything in my mind are thoughts that I can't say aloud, because a man like me, in my line of work, in this world, isn't meant to want those sorts of things.

“Not tonight,” I tell her, doing my best to sound regretful. “Sorry.”

She looks more than a little upset. I get up, walking past her, phone out already to text my driver to come around and pick me up. I see the call from Nikolai Vasilev earlier today, and I think of what I told Finn earlier—that I'll contact Vasilev tomorrow about the marriage.

Maybe the Kings pushing me into this isn't so bad. I can't see how a girl Marika's age will be what I want and need in a wife, but stranger things have happened. And if I find in time that I want to go back to the meaningless sex that I once so enjoyed—well, fidelity has never been part and parcel of a mafia marriage, anyway.

At the very least, she will give me what I need most.

An heir.

Marika



In the morning, I wake up to a text message from my brother.

Be ready to meet Theo in three days. Lilliana will be over after breakfast.

I roll my eyes as I get up, pushing my tangled hair out of my face. It's just like my brother to tell me that sort of news with a text message, as if he were asking me if I wanted to make plans to go out to dinner instead of informing me that I would be meeting my future husband in a matter of days.

A phone call would have been nice, at least.

It also doesn't surprise me that he's sending Lilliana over to smooth things out, although I'm glad he is. Lilliana and I are closer now than I'd ever hoped we would be—especially at the start, when she wanted no part of our family or the marriage she'd been pushed into. But I'd tried to help her at the beginning of it all, to make it easier for her, and now I think she means to try to do the same thing for me.

I have a hard time eating breakfast. Adrik is nowhere to be seen, which I'm glad for, because I have no idea what I would say to him right now. *I'm sorry, I'm getting married, but once my husband is dead, we might be able to work things out.* Adrik has always been patient with me, but I know that's not the sort of thing that any man would want to hear. I poke at my omelet, my appetite non-existent, and sip on orange juice until I see one of the staff hovering at the door, looking nervously at me.

I'm pretty sure they all think I'm on the verge of going mad, the way I stay here all alone and wander around the house, going from room to room in search of something to occupy myself with. "What is it?" I ask, setting down my fork.

"Mrs. Vasilev is here," the girl says, and I get up, abandoning my breakfast to go meet Lilliana. I'm glad to have an excuse, honestly.

Lilliana is already in the living room—not the smaller one where I fucked Adrik for the first time, but the larger one with the big windows and French doors that open out onto the pool. Right now, it's drained and covered, the last snow still clinging to it, and the sight just weighs down my already questionable mood.

"Nikolai wanted me to come see how you're doing." She pauses, sinking down onto one of the plush couches. "I wanted to come see how you're doing."

"I'm fine." I shrug, sitting down across from her cross-legged, feet tucked under my knees. "Three days until I meet Theo."

"Have you never met him before?"

I shake my head. "I've seen him in passing. Meetings with my father. But I've never spoken to him or met him personally. He wasn't friendly enough with my family to be invited to dinner parties or galas or charity events."

Lilliana's mouth twitches. "I always find it ironic that an organization as brutal as the Bratva holds charity dinners."

"I suppose you have to try to wash the blood off somehow." I twist my hands in my lap, and Lilliana's gaze drops to them.

"Marika—you helped me when I was like this over Nikolai," she says gently. "I was scared and abandoned here by my father, thinking I was going to spend one night with yours, only to have your brother lay claim to me and say he was going to marry me. My entire world was turned upside down in a single night. And you were sweet and kind and the only bright spot I had—even if I wasn't as appreciative of you as I should have been, under the circumstances."

“It was understandable, under the circumstances,” I tell her wryly. “I would have hated me, too.”

“I never hated you.” Lilliana shakes her head. “I was just terrified and angry. And you have every right to feel the same way.”

“Not really.” I twist my hands together more tightly. “You weren’t raised to think you’d be a Bratva bride. I’ve known since I was old enough to understand who I was that I was going to be married off to someone for the gain of the family. It was just a matter of who it would be—and now I know. So there’s really no reason for me to be upset—” I break off, realizing that I’m suddenly very near tears.

“It’s going to be alright.” Lilliana reaches out, grasping my hands. “Nikolai is nothing like my father. He’ll keep his promises to you. This will just be a means to see Theo dead and the Kings brought down, and then you’ll be free of him.”

“I know he’ll keep his promises.” My voice is a hush now, and I can see my knuckles starting to turn white. When I look up, I see the worried look on Lilliana’s face.

“Whatever it is, Marika, you can tell me.” She squeezes my hand again. “I won’t say anything to Nikolai, if you don’t want me to. You can talk to me.”

For a moment, I wonder if it might be better if I didn’t. I think I can trust Lilliana—but she *is* Nikolai’s wife. There’s a bond of trust between them now, and I don’t want to weaken that by asking her to keep secrets from my brother—her husband.

But I also feel like I might actually go mad if I don’t tell someone—especially now that I’m almost certainly going to marry Theo. And I have no one else to tell.

“I’m not a virgin.” The words come out hushed, tripping over each other, and when I look up, I can see Lilliana staring at me in shock.

“You’re joking.”

I yank my hands away, feeling suddenly defensive. “I shouldn’t have said anything,” I mutter, starting to turn away, but Lilliana grabs my hand again.

“I’m not judging you,” she says quickly. “I just—I wouldn’t have expected that. I imagined your father kept as tight a guard on you as mine did. I just—*how?*”

Her shocked, questioning tone almost makes me laugh. I rub a hand over my face, suddenly feeling like I want to go back to bed.

“It was recent,” I tell her quietly. “While you and Nikolai were gone. You’re right that I would never have gotten away with something like that with my father watching me.”

Lilliana blinks at me. “*Who?*” she asks curiously. “I mean—if you don’t want to tell me—”

“It was Adrik. It *is* Adrik. The bodyguard who rescued me from the compound. Rescued all of us, really—” I can hear myself tripping over my words again, trying to justify myself, but I don’t think I really need to. Not to Lilliana. I look at her again, and I can see that she really isn’t judging me—she’s just shocked.

I can’t really blame her for that.

“Did he hurt you?” Her lips thin, and I can see the wheels turning in her mind. “While Nikolai and I were out of the country? Did he force—”

“No!” I exclaim, shaking my head. “No, nothing like that happened. I—it was my choice.” I can feel my cheeks starting to heat. “We talked. Had a drink. One thing led to another—” I stop talking, suddenly feeling even more embarrassed, like a walking trope. *One thing led to another*. It’s a line out of a bad movie, and I hate that I said it.

“I wanted to take something back for myself,” I say quietly, looking back at Lilliana. “The men at the compound didn’t violate me, but they did hurt me. I didn’t feel like myself for so long. Adrik wanted me—and I wanted him too. It felt good to make that choice. I wasn’t really thinking what it meant. Just that I wanted to make a choice about my own body.”

“I can understand that,” Lilliana says quietly. “Believe me, I can.”

“I know.”

We both sit there in silence for a long moment. “This world is really shitty to women, isn’t it?” Lilliana asks, looking at me. “It turned out well for Nikolai and I—but it so easily could have not. And for you—”

“I have to do this.” I wrap my arms around myself, feeling suddenly cold. “This is what I’m supposed to do.”

“What about Adrik?” Lilliana gives me a shrewd look. “Are you in love with him?”

The question is startling to hear. “I don’t know,” I admit. “I’m not really sure what that’s supposed to feel like. I like sleeping with him—”

“So you’ve kept having sex with him?” There’s still no judgment in Lilliana’s voice, just curiosity, and that relaxes me enough to answer.

“Yes.” I press my lips together, glancing at her. “There’s no one to stop me here, really. And I liked it. So it just—has kept happening.”

“Do you want to be with him? *Actually* be with him—in a relationship?”

“I don’t know.” I bite my lip. “I haven’t thought about it long enough to know. I think I might—but it feels impossible. He’s a bodyguard, and I’m—me. Nikolai would be furious. I know he has feelings for me—but I still feel so fragile from what happened. I can’t sort out what’s real and what’s just lust, because all of this is so new.”

“You could tell Nikolai,” Lilliana suggests gently. “He wouldn’t be able to marry you to Theo, then.”

“I know,” I whisper. “That’s the problem, don’t you see? He’ll be furious with me for losing my virginity to a fucking *bodyguard*, but he’ll also be disappointed in me, and that’s so much worse. He’s sacrificed his whole life to being the heir, to leading the Bratva, and there’s *one* thing I’m supposed to do. I’ve fucked it up—or will have, if anyone finds out.”

“So you’re just going to marry Theo and fake it? Marika—”

“I have to.” I feel my teeth sink deeper into my lip. “If it was going to be forever, then maybe I wouldn’t. I’d be so afraid, always, that it would come out eventually. But the whole point of this is that Theo ends up dead, and I

end up a widow. And then it won't matter."

"That's a dangerous game to play," Lilliana says quietly. "I think Nikolai would understand—"

"You promised not to tell him." I look at her sharply. "You promised."

"And I won't." Lilliana lets out a sigh. "If you're not going to tell Nikolai—then what? You're going to go through with it?"

I nod. "Don't you think I should?"

Lilliana stares at me for a long moment. "Maybe," she says softly. "If you're not going to be honest with Nikolai—and again, I'm not judging you, just stating the situation as it is—then it's better this than someone else. It will all be over before you know it. And then you can decide what to do about Adrik."

"He's not going to be happy about it."

"Probably not," Lilliana agrees. "But he's the least of your worries, right now."

She isn't wrong, and I know it, as much as I'd like to argue otherwise. For all that, I feel sure that Adrik will be upset to learn that I'm going to marry Theo; his emotions are far outside the realm of what I really need to be worried about.

Nikolai has asked me to do something dangerous. Dangerous enough that I need to be careful of what distracts me. And Adrik, as much as I hate to think of him like that, is a distraction right now.

I'm going to have to tell him eventually what's happening. But right now, I don't want to think about it.

Lilliana pats my hand. "We could go shopping," she says teasingly. "That was your solution when I was staring down my marriage, wasn't it?"

"Did it help?" I smile faintly at her, and she laughs.

"A little. Why don't I come back the day after tomorrow, and we'll go shopping. I'll make a couple appointments at a bridal salon for you, and you

can try on some dresses and have something to look forward to. I know it's not a perfect solution, but maybe it will cheer you up a little."

"Okay." Shopping is the last thing I want to do right now—surprising for me—but I know Lilliana is doing her best to help. "Day after tomorrow."

And then the day after that, I'll meet Theo. I have no idea how I'm going to avoid Adrik, but I want to know what's going to happen for sure, before I tell him.

It all feels like it's happening so quickly, like a roller coaster I can't escape. And I only see one way out.

I'm going to have to marry Theo McNeil.

Theo



I arrange to meet Nikolai in a neutral setting, at a private supper club in town. It's a place that requires a certain amount of status to get entrance, and also a place where violence won't be tolerated, which makes it a common meeting spot for business like this, among men like us. Neither of us would have agreed to meet on the other's turf, so instead, I sit in a leather booth in a dim corner that smells faintly of tobacco, with a glass of whiskey, and wait for Nikolai Vasilev to show up.

He's on time, which I'm pleased about—that he hasn't kept me waiting. He slides into the seat opposite mine, motioning to the pretty blonde waitress who is hovering a little ways away, and orders a vodka for himself.

"I should have guessed." I nod at his drink. "I thought of ordering for you, but I wasn't sure if you had more unique tastes."

"I don't object to a good whiskey." Nikolai nods to my glass. "But I find in situations like this, sticking to what I know is preferable."

The tension could be cut with a knife. I don't doubt that we're both armed—everyone in the establishment likely is; the gentleman's agreement that no one does violence to anyone else is the only thing preventing a bloodbath. Most of the men in this place probably have a grudge against each other of one sort or another, and most of them would be happy to pay it out in blood.

"Why are you offering me your sister?" I ask bluntly, and Nikolai laughs.

“Straight to the point, aren’t you, McNeil? Blunt to a fault. I can’t say I didn’t expect that from you.”

“I find that dissembling is a waste of time.” I tilt my glass, looking at the light from the lamp above reflected in the amber. “I *do* respect you enough, Vasilev, not to waste yours.”

“That’s a large word from a man whose stock comes from potato farmers.” Nikolai raises an eyebrow, and I know he’s expecting to get a reaction from me. He’s testing me, to see if I’m the sort of violent, intemperate man that rumor likes to suggest. It’s not at all the case.

“The things my enemies like to say about me are far from the truth.” I hold his gaze evenly. “It’s true, my ancestors dug in the dirt and lived in hovels. Now, I have my food delivered, and I live in a penthouse. I keep in mind the heights to which other men have aspired before me and the responsibility on my shoulders. Which is why we’re having this discussion right now, Vasilev, rather than me telling you to go fuck yourself *and* your sister, and going ahead with the plan that at least half the Kings preferred, which was to move in on your territory.”

Nikolai’s lips thin. “You should be careful how you speak about Marika.”

“And you should be careful how you speak to the man you plan to give her to in marriage.” I take another sip of the whiskey. “You’re putting her in danger, Vasilev, if you believe the things my rivals say about me. So either you think that saying my ancestors were potato farmers will really cause me to flout the conventions of this place and shoot you where you sit, or you’re just being an asshole.”

A small smile tilts the corners of Nikolai’s mouth. “I’m glad to see that you are a temperate, if cold, man. I don’t expect you to be a warm husband to Marika—most men like us are not. But I do expect you not to harm her.”

“I have no intention of doing so.” I finish my whiskey and motion to the waitress to refill both of our drinks. “But you still haven’t answered my question. Why are you offering her to me at all?”

“I want to do things differently from how my father did them,” Nikolai says simply. “My father would have taken your threats and used it as a reason to

bury you—or to try,” he adds hastily. “I’d prefer not to bog this discussion down in questions of who the winner would be in an unfortunate conflict between our organizations.”

“So you feel it would be unfortunate.”

“I, unlike my father, believe that bloodshed where peace is possible is always unfortunate.”

“That’s not the reputation that precedes you.” I narrow my eyes at him. “Nikolai Vasilev is a man, so far as I know, who tortures without mercy and has the art of extracting information down to a science. He is brutal and ruthless and bloody. Is that not who is sitting in front of me?”

“All of that was in service to my father,” Nikolai says bluntly. “And I don’t deny that I could still be that same man, if pressed. I have no doubt I may still need those skills in the future. But I prefer to keep them for necessity. My father tortured for pleasure,” he adds. “I never have.”

“Still.” I tap my fingers against the wood. “We have always been enemies, your family and mine. I find it suspicious that you would choose to set all of that aside, generations of enmity, for peace now. Especially when it’s your sister that you have to offer up to broker it.”

“Exactly that.” Nikolai takes another drink of his vodka. “Why would I offer her to you if I didn’t want to make peace? I want my sister safe. So if I felt that you were not honorable, or that peace wasn’t possible between our families, why make the offer at all?” He shrugs. “I wouldn’t unnecessarily put her in danger.”

I sit there for a long moment, watching his face. I like to think I can read others well, and Nikolai is younger than I am. He has fewer years of practice at controlling his expressions, though he’s quite good at it. “I hope you know there is no truth to the rumors,” I say finally. “You know what I’m talking about.”

“Of course.” Nikolai swirls his vodka in his glass. “If I thought that there was, I wouldn’t have offered you Marika. That would be offensive, to her and to our family.”

“Very well.” This is the point, I know, at which a decision has to be made.

I'm not at all sure that Marika is who I want to choose for a wife. She's young and innocent, and what I want, I'm not confident that she can give me. But refusal means war.

In two and a half decades, you haven't found a woman you wanted to marry. What makes you think you'll find one now?

Marika is the wise choice. She provides a much-needed alliance, and the source of the heirs that the Kings are beginning to demand I provide. Our organization is not a democracy, but that doesn't mean I can't be ousted if my leadership is called into question. It has happened before—in Boston, even, quite recently.

“How would you like to do this?” I ask finally. “How should I meet her? In your family home, I assume.”

“We'll have dinner at our family estate,” Nikolai says calmly. “Three days from now. It will all be arranged then, once you and Marika have met. Our family still keeps to the old traditions,” he adds. “There will be a blood contract.”

“Mine keeps to some of the old ways as well.” I tilt my glass back, finishing my whiskey. “Very well. I'll come to your home in three days. There will be no violence. A truce, while this matter is decided.”

Nikolai nods, finishing his drink as well. “Agreed,” he says. And then he holds his hand out, and I take it.

A handshake, and he's gone. I don't blame him for not wanting to spend more time in my presence than necessary—we're not friends. But it leaves me in the booth brooding, motioning for one more drink, glad at least that there will be no one approaching me here.

Unless the girl tries to call it off at the last minute—which I can't imagine she will—the deal is all but done. Marika Vasilev will be my wife, and I will, at long last, have a bride.

I can picture her, barely. I've seen her on a few occasions, when I was leaving the Vasilev mansion after heated meetings with her father. I remember her being very beautiful—and also very young, and I feel a little ashamed that that excites me. I remember the sight of a slender blonde

moving down a hallway, a quick flash of long silky hair and bright blue eyes, and my cock twitches in my suit trousers.

Considerably younger than me. Twenty-three years, likely, if not more. *What the hell am I going to talk to her about?* I wonder, but my cock is swelling at the thought of what she might look like naked, already skipping ahead to the wedding bed, reminding me that conversation isn't a necessary part of marriage.

But unfortunately, I personally would like for it to be. I've put off matrimony for exactly that reason—because I wanted a wife I *liked*. I have no idea if I will like Marika Vasilev.

If you don't like her, you don't have to talk to her. You can do what you need to in order to keep her happy and content, and go about your business. This is your world, and it bends to you.

I've always said, though, that if I married, I would be faithful to my wife. It's another reason I've put it off so long. Once I say those vows, I intend to keep them. I've made sure to keep my word, for better or worse, in every other part of my life. Why would I want it to be different for my marriage?

It had seemed like a hardship in my younger years—giving up the vast bevy of women eager to climb in and out of my bed. Now, it no longer does. In fact, I'd *rather* have one who stays, now. But I don't know if Marika is that woman. If she will be enough for me—or if I will be what she wants and needs in return.

There's only one way to find out.

I feel restless and irritable by the time I walk into my home. My family mansion, which I've always been proud of, feels cavernous as I step inside alone, flicking on a light to flood the wood-floored hall with light. As I walk to the gleaming staircase, I can't help wondering what my new wife will think of it when I bring her here—the dark green-painted walls, the deep wood wainscoting, the paintings and family portraits hung on the walls. The house is a mixture of the touches the family members who lived here before have put on it, and the work of hired decorators, history and modernity mingled together, and I like it. I always have.

You're putting too much thought into this, I tell myself as I walk to my suite of rooms, tugging my tie loose and tossing it over a chair with my coat. Marika will like the house because she's expected to, and she will be happy because it's her job as my wife to be happy. But I have that small voice in my head reminding me, as I sit down on the edge of the bed and look out of the wide window to the distant lights of the city, that that's not what I want.

A pliable wife, one who hides her true feelings and placates me, is not what I desire.

And I have no idea what kind of wife Marika will be.

Marika



I'm relieved when Lilliana comes to pick me up—ten a.m. on the dot as promised—for the day of shopping. Even though it's going to involve looking for my wedding dress—which I'm not at all excited about—I'm glad to get out of the house. I've been dodging Adrik for two days now, hiding in my room, pleading a migraine, and ringing for food to be sent up to me. I don't know how much longer I can ignore him before he insists on checking on me.

It's like having a live-in boyfriend who sleeps in a different room. I'm under no illusions that Adrik and I have a strange, unconventional relationship, one that I don't fully understand or know what the boundaries of it are. Thanks to my impending marriage, we won't be able to figure it out anytime soon.

I'm going to have to decide how to break that to him, and after thinking about that for half a day, it *did* give me a migraine.

Lilliana looks fresh and bright in a yellow floaty skirt and button-down white top tied just above the waist, her stomach still smooth and flat. "I can't believe I haven't had *any* morning sickness," she tells me as I slip into the backseat of the car. "The doctor says I'm the luckiest mother-to-be she's ever met. I was worried it meant something was wrong, but the last appointment was fine. I just won the lottery with this, I guess. Which probably means the next one will be miserable," she adds, as she leans over to get the fixings for a mimosa for me and a bottle of sparkling water for herself.

It's so reminiscent of the trip I took her on when she was panicking about Nikolai that I can't help but laugh at the irony of it—that now I'm the one staring down the barrel of an unwanted marriage while she talks about her second baby with him before the first is even showing. I'm happy for her—I wanted nothing more than for her and my brother to find some way to make their marriage work—but it's hard, knowing that mine doesn't have that same kind of future to hope for.

Not that I *want* that. I don't want any part of a future where I'm in love with Theo McNeil.

"I made an appointment at the same bridal salon we went to for me," Lilliana says, handing me the mimosa glass. "I thought it might be nice. Nostalgia and all of that." She smirks at me, and I laugh, a startled sound, as I realize she's making a joke. A dark one—but the humor relaxes me a little.

"I really do appreciate you doing all of this," I tell her, swirling the mimosa in the champagne flute. "You didn't have to put so much work into making me feel better."

"Of course I do," Lilliana says firmly. "You're my sister-in-law, Marika—my *sister*. I never had one, and I always wanted a sister, even though I would never have wished my father on anyone else. You helped me when I was going through a hard time, and I'm going to do the same for you." She reaches out, squeezing my hand.

"I'm meeting him tomorrow." I take a long sip of the mimosa, hoping the champagne will help blur the edges of my nerves a little bit. "It's all happening so fast. Did you know Nikolai told me to get on birth control?" I laugh, the sound coming out a little off-kilter. "So there's no chance of me getting pregnant during this. It really is all a ruse. And if Theo finds out—"

"He won't," Lilliana says firmly. "He has no reason to think it is, and Nikolai would never put you in danger if he thought there was a chance of that happening. You're going to be fine, Marika."

I nod, sucking in a breath and downing the rest of the mimosa. I hand the glass back to Lilliana, and she starts to fix me another one. "I'm going to have to fake my virginity," I tell her anxiously. "Fake blood, or something. He's going to expect to see it."

Lilliana shrugs. “Prick your finger. It doesn’t have to be a lot. Just something to reassure him. Just find some moment when he’s not paying attention, before you get out of bed, and bleed a little.”

“You really were, weren’t you?” I look at her curiously. “You didn’t have to worry about it, with Nikolai.”

She laughs. “I don’t think it’s possible to be more of a virgin than I was when I met your brother. So no, I didn’t have to worry about it. But we had—other problems.”

I don’t ask her what those were. I know a little of it, and I know that if she wanted to tell me more, she would.

“They resolved themselves,” Lilliana says firmly. “Or we worked them out. Yours will work out, too. I’m sure of it.”

The car pulls up in front of the bridal salon, and the driver comes around to open the door. I can feel my palms sweating, and I wipe them on the thighs of my jeans, feeling my pulse pick up nervously as I follow Lilliana into the salon. *Oh, how the tables turn*, I think wryly as I see Lilliana talk to the woman at the front desk, who nods, motioning us both back to the curtained dressing room with the velvet chairs and gilded bar cart full of petit fours and mimosas that is standard for bridal appointments here.

The attendant helping us is a sweet blonde woman named Sara, who eagerly pulls a selection of dresses for me. I have a small moment of regret for not being as understanding of Lilliana as I should have been—I can’t begin to think of what kind of dress I would *want*. What I want is to not have to go through with a marriage at all.

Still, I can’t be completely disinterested in it. My stomach is in knots thinking about meeting Theo, so I can’t really enjoy any of the tiny pastries on the tea stand one of the attendants set out, but I do take a glass of champagne, nervously sipping at it as Sara brings a pile of lacy, silky dresses into the changing room and hangs them up one by one.

The first one I try on is similar to what Lilliana picked—a sleek silk dress with straps and a fitted bodice that flows out from my hips. It’s pretty enough, but it feels too much like what she wore. “I should pick something

different, right?” I ask her as I look in the mirror, smoothing my hands over the skirt. “It’s nice—but I should try to pick something unique.”

“Sure.” Lilliana shrugs. “Nikolai and I are happy now, but my wedding day wasn’t exactly the best day of my life. Pick whatever feels good. I won’t mind if it looks like mine.”

I try on two more, much more princess-y styles, and none of those feel good, either. I feel swallowed up by them, too petite to wear a full skirt, and the strapless ones make me feel too exposed.

“What about this?” Sara holds up a dress that’s all lace—capped sleeves and a trumpet skirt, tiny pearls sewn onto the lace flowers. “I think this would look lovely on you.”

She’s right, of course. It *does* look lovely—the sweetheart neckline gives me a bit more cleavage than I’m accustomed to, and the fitted silhouette gives me curves that I don’t normally have. Paired with a fingertip veil with a matching lace edge, I look like a picture-perfect bride. I could be an ad in a magazine.

“This one,” I tell Sara decisively, and Lilliana bites her lip.

“It’s beautiful on you,” she says. “But do you want to think about it? Maybe go get lunch and then make a decision?”

I shake my head. “I’d rather just have it done,” I tell Lilliana quietly, turning away from Sara so she can’t hear me as well. “I like the dress. I think that’s the best I can hope for in this situation.”

Lilliana gives me a sympathetic look. “I can understand that,” she says quietly. “And it *is* beautiful.”

“It’s perfect,” I say as decisively as I can. It *is* perfect in every way that matters—not too sexy to wear for a wedding in a cathedral, but still flattering, and the type of dress that I think I would have chosen if I *wanted* to be picking out a wedding dress right now. As Sara helps me out of it, I’m even a little sad to be taking it off, if only because it *did* look beautiful.

After the bridal appointment, we do a little other shopping—shoes for the wedding, and some new clothes, since I’d lost weight after the kidnapping and my usual wardrobe doesn’t fit me as well right now. “He might want to

take you on a honeymoon,” Lilliana suggests. “You should have some new clothes just in case.”

I know what she’s doing—she knows very well that I like to shop and always find it to be a good distraction. I appreciate it, too, even if it’s not as effective as it usually is. We get lunch, and as we come out with the last of our bags and wait for the driver to come around, I stop in my tracks.

We always have a security entourage with us—I did even before the kidnapping, and Nikolai has been even more strict about it since. I saw the guards who came with us today, although they typically try to blend into the shadows, and when we come out of the restaurant, the detail has changed.

One of them is Adrik.

“Shit,” I mumble under my breath, and Lilliana looks at me curiously.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, and I nod as surreptitiously as I can toward where Adrik is standing, talking to one of the other men.

“Oh,” she whispers. “Is he—”

I nod, and she presses her lips together, clearly trying to hold back some amusement.

“Well, you certainly could have done worse,” she says, a tinge of laughter in her words. “He’s gorgeous.”

“I know,” I whisper back before I can stop myself. He *is* gorgeous—and I feel a faint, sudden ache at the idea of what I’m going to have to tell him.

“Do you want me to handle it?” Lilliana asks, seeing that I’m frozen in place. “I can say something to him—ask him to go back to the house—”

“No.” I shake my head. “It’s okay—I can’t avoid him forever. I’ll go talk to him.”

Adrik sees me as I walk towards them, and I motion to him, trying to look as much as possible as if I need to talk to him about something in the capacity of an employer—or at least as the sister of his employer—keeping as serious of an expression on my face as I can. He says something in a low voice to the man he’s talking to, and then nods at me, walking over to the spot I’d crossed

to a little ways away from both Lilliana and the other security, on the other side of the shop windows.

“Marika.” His voice is low and urgent the moment he’s close enough to speak to me. I give him a warning look not to come too close, glancing sideways toward Lilliana and the others.

He glances in the same direction and gives me a surreptitious nod, picking up on what I’m trying to tell him. He keeps an arm’s length away from me, but I can tell it’s difficult for him—that he wants to come closer. To tell the truth, I want him closer. I’ve missed him—over the past few days, I’ve managed to pretend well enough that I didn’t, while I was alone. Now that he’s here, standing in front of me, it’s so much harder. “What is it?” he asks, still in that same low tone. “I haven’t seen you in three days. I heard you were sick. Are you alright?”

There’s an urgency to his voice that’s touching. I don’t have so many people in my life concerned for my welfare that it doesn’t mean something for there to be another—especially when it’s *him*...the man I’d given something important to and shared a bed with for over a month, off and on.

“I’ve been better,” I say softly, feeling my stomach clench with nervousness. “I—” I swallow hard. “Adrik—can we talk later? When I’m home, and Lilliana is gone—”

His face changes in an instant, and I can see the struggle to keep his expression as impassive as possible. “Marika—can you just tell me? I’m going to wonder—are you sick? Really sick? Something from what happened at the compound—”

I can see the wheels turning in his head, the ideas of permanent injuries and long-term effects from the abuse I’d suffered occurring to him, and I feel even worse, because I hadn’t meant to make this harder than it already was. “It’s nothing like that,” I tell him quickly, wondering if what I actually need to say will be somehow worse. “Please—I don’t want to say this on the sidewalk in the middle of the street, and—”

He sucks in a slow breath, and I can feel the tension escalating. “Why did you bring me over here, then?”

“You would have asked me where I’d been—”

“Because I care about you! I asked to be on your rotation today because I wanted to make sure you were alright, to see for myself—if you’re not sick, and you’re not hurt—”

“I’m getting married.” The words come out before I can stop them, all the emotion and frustration of the past days welling up. “I wanted you to hear it from me before you heard it from someone else, but I wasn’t going to tell you like this—”

I see the instant his face drops, the moment where he struggles between wanting to think I’m playing some horrible joke on him, and the fact that he knows me well enough, even now, to know I wouldn’t do that.

“You’re getting married?” His voice raises a little, and I can’t help but glare at him. “To who? This soon after—how could Nikolai—”

“Keep your voice down!” I hiss sharply. “You know what would happen if —” I swallow hard, looking over at Lilliana, who is making small talk with one of the other guards—presumably to keep them from noticing that Adrik and I are still talking. “No one can find out about us. You know what Nikolai would do to you.”

“Marika.” He’s still staring at me as if I’ve grown another head. “Who are you marrying?”

I’m not sure, exactly, why that’s the first thing he’s latched onto, the who of it—unless he’s debating how easily he could remove my future husband from existence. I know the truth isn’t going to improve matters—but I can’t lie to him. He’d find out eventually, anyway.

“Theo McNeil,” I whisper, and his eyes widen.

“Nikolai is marrying you to the fucking leader of the goddamn Irish Kings? What the fuck is he thinking—”

“That he wants to stop a war,” I say quietly. I can’t tell Adrik the rest—that Nikolai is intentionally setting me up to bait Theo into a trap—or much more of any of it, really, but I can say that much. He’d figure it out on his own, anyway.

“So he sells you off.” Adrik’s voice is tight and angry, and I can feel that he’s on the verge of lashing out—not at me, but at something. I’m all too familiar with male anger and the forms it takes. What I can’t afford is for him to create a scene—not out here, especially.

“I have a duty to my family,” I say quietly. “This was always going to be my future. I should have known that what happened between us wasn’t going to change that—”

“No?” He presses his lips tightly together, and I see his hand flex, the muscles tight across his shoulders. It’s taking everything in him, I can see, not to let on how angry he is, to try to keep it from anyone watching. “Nothing changed when you gave me your virginity?”

“Adrik!” I look sharply towards the other guards, hoping they’re still distracted by whatever bullshit small talk Lilliana is managing still. “You’re going to get us both in trouble. You know as well as I do—”

“Leave with me.” He says it bluntly and suddenly, and I stare at him for a long moment, unsure if I’ve heard him correctly.

“*Leave* with you?”

“Yes.” His hand twitches, as if he wants to reach for mine, but he stops himself. “I rescued you, Marika. I got you out of that hellhole of a compound. I kept Ivan from killing you—and Nikolai. And now you want to go to Theo? I know you’ve heard the same things everyone else has—that he’s just as bad or worse. He’s the only man in this city more powerful than your brother. You think he won’t use that against you?”

“I’ve already said I would do it. You think leaving with you will make things better?” I look at him, torn between wanting to plead with him to understand and utter exasperation.

“I can protect you.” Looking at Adrik’s face, I can see that he really believes it. He really thinks that he can keep me safe from Theo fucking McNeil.

“What there is between us—” I keep my voice as hushed as I can, still trying to look as if I’m telling him something in an official capacity. “—that’s not something I know how it turns out, Adrik. I don’t have any experience with relationships, and I’ve never been with anyone else. Two months ago, I was

kidnapped, brutalized, and nearly killed. I'm not in a position to *choose* right now."

"You're choosing Theo." He glares at me, and I can't tell if he really doesn't understand or if he's being purposefully obtuse.

"I'm choosing what my family needs me to do, because that is the choice I've always been expected to make. I'm not saying it's an easy decision—but it's the one that I know I'm meant to choose. I'm doing my best with the situation there is, Adrik—I can't throw my life away for someone I barely know. I'm sorry to be harsh, but that's what this is right now. I don't know you well enough to know if this is forever. And if I'm going to defy my brother—"

I sink my teeth into my lower lip, willing him to understand what I'm trying to say, but I can tell it's only making things worse. "You're doing that with Theo," he snaps, still low enough that no one else can hear, but I can tell he's on the verge of raising his voice. "You don't know *him*, either."

"No, but I know what my family needs from him. Adrik—" I can't tell him all the details. Divulging my brother's plan would be a worse betrayal than losing my innocence to a man I wasn't supposed to touch. "I need you to trust me. There's a reason I'm doing this. And when it's done—when this is over —"

"There's an over?" He looks at me, and I can tell he's not sure if he believes me. "That's not how these things usually go, Marika."

"I know. I can't tell you more." I blow out a slow breath between my lips, trying to think of how to get him to calm down. "I want to try to figure out if there's a future for us, Adrik. I do. I need you to be patient. When this is done —"

"Marika!" Lilliana calls my name, and I can tell she's trying to give me an out. I'm not sure it's good to leave this conversation unfinished, and Lilliana at least knows what it's about, but I don't want to give the other guards a reason to gossip.

"We'll talk about this later," I tell Adrik. "I need you to trust me. If you care about me, you'll trust me."

I can tell that he doesn't want to let it go. I can feel it emanating off of him, the desire to keep pushing, to keep talking, to make me understand where he's coming from—as if I don't. As if every part of me isn't screaming to take his face in my hands and tell him that I'm sorry, that this isn't what I want either, that if I thought I could make a different choice right now, I would. But there are eyes on us, and I can't be anything other than what I am—the Bratva princess I was raised to be.

“Later,” he says finally, his voice rough and low. “But Marika—we will talk about it.”

Something about the tone of his voice sends both a strange thrill and a jolt of anxiety through me all at once. But I don't have time to think about it. He's already striding away, every line of his body tense with an obvious anger, and Lilliana is waiting for me.

I force myself not to look at him as I walk back to her, and it's one of the hardest things I've ever had to do—to let him walk away like this, and not think about it. To pretend not to care, when I feel sick with anxiety over it all.

—

I don't feel much better about the entire situation, the next night as I'm getting ready for dinner with Nikolai, Lilliana—and Theo. Despite his insistence that we would talk later, Adrik has avoided me since our unexpected conversation on the sidewalk, which worries me. I don't like the idea that he might be stewing about how to fix this without my input—but I'm also afraid to seek him out myself and try to explain anything else. I don't know what to say to make it better, and I'm afraid that I'll accidentally make it all so much worse.

Can it be any worse? I ask myself as I poke through my jewelry box...but I think it can. I think there's always a chance it could be worse.

I pick up a pair of sapphire earrings, look at them, and toss them back into the box, letting out a frustrated breath. I'm angry with all of this—being made to marry a man I don't know and have reason to hate, and the way it's made me

feel about Adrik...dreading seeing him instead of looking forward to the next time. *Don't I deserve some kind of happiness?* I think, looking in the mirror, and I quickly blink back tears before I can smudge my mascara. The last thing I want to do is have to redo it all.

I'd dressed up for tonight, because I know better than to show up to the dinner looking ill-prepared to meet Theo, but I know Nikolai would have preferred I not dress in a dark shade. I didn't pick black—it washes me out, and I'm vain enough to not want to look like a sallow ghost—but I chose a simple navy blue dress from my closet, a cocktail dress with a ruffled asymmetrical hem and straps a few inches wide, with a v-neckline that doesn't cut too deep. I dusted a little bronze eyeshadow over my lids and added a thin cat eye and a nude lip, and hoped that would meet my brother's approval. As for Theo, I don't really give a fuck.

You need to, if you're going to do what Nikolai wants you to.

I've never been a good liar. It got me in trouble with our father more than once during our childhood. And now so much depends on my being able to lie and fake my way through a marriage with a truly dangerous man.

I wish there was some other way. But I believe that if there was, Nikolai would have chosen that. One that didn't end with more bloodshed and danger than this option.

I pick up the sapphire earrings anyway, since they're the ones that go best with my dress, and slip them into my ears. They're heavy, inherited from my mother's collection—large, deep blue round sapphires surrounded by a halo of diamonds, with smaller teardrop sapphires hanging from them. They make a statement, and I slip my hair behind my ears—blown out straight and sleek—so that the earrings stand out.

Checking the clock, I can see it's almost time to go down and meet the driver to head over to Nikolai's new estate. I'm glad he chose to have the dinner there—the last thing I need is Adrik on the premises when Theo is there.

Speak of the devil. I'm barely to the staircase when I see him coming up, a set expression on his face, and I know he's looking for me. *Shit.*

The moment he sees me, his face changes. It sends a flood of mingled

emotions that I can't begin to untangle through me, because the desire on his face is so evident. He looks at me and wants me—and then, in the next second, I can see him remembering that I've dressed for another man tonight. There's a look of such instant hurt in his eyes that I wish I could tell him that I was wrong. That I won't be marrying Theo—not that I'm going to meet him tonight.

“Marika.” His voice is clearer now—he knows there's less to worry about here. “We need to talk.”

“Shh.” I glance at the staircase, still worried. “Adrik, there's still ears here. Staff, the other security—you know that. They love to gossip—”

He looks at me, and I can see the tension running through every inch of him, as if he hasn't relaxed a single bit since he walked away from me downtown. “We can talk out here, where you're worried about ears, or somewhere private, but we need to talk before you leave. Your choice.”

“I'm going to be late—” I can hear the desperation in my voice, not just because I know the conversation will make me late—which will piss off Nikolai—but because I still don't know what to say. There's nothing I can say that will make this any better, and I could easily make it so much worse by accident.

“I'm not waiting until after you've signed the contract.” He looks at me, his gaze skimming over my dress, the sparkling jewels at my ears. “That's where you're going, right? To agree to marry that potato-farming fuck?”

“Adrik!”

“What?” He glares at me. “Not happy about me talking about your *husband* like that?”

“He's not my husband yet.” I glare at him, frustrated, and my own emotions rise up hot and thick, making my voice sharper than I mean for it to be. “Fine,” I snap. “Let's go down to the library. We can talk in there.”

The library is on the second floor, a huge room with a fireplace and massive windows filled with wall-to-wall shelves of books that I normally love spending time in. I've had fantasies about bringing Adrik in here, although we've never made it this far before falling into my bed. This conversation

hasn't been a part of any of those fantasies.

I shut the door carefully, turning to face him. "Adrik, please listen to me—"

"No. I need you to listen to me." The anger in his eyes is mixed with something hot and desperate, and it makes me ache to see it, because there's nothing I can do to fix it. The only fault in this is that of the world we live in—it's not mine or Adrik's...or even really Nikolai's, the way I see it. If there is a fault, it's Theo's, for pushing my family to this. But Nikolai is doing his best with what he knows, and as for Adrik and me—

I could have never slept with him. Everything would be so much easier if I hadn't. But looking at him, I can't imagine how I could have ever told him no. Not when I was so lonely, and he seemed to know so clearly what it was that I needed.

He looks at me, reaching up to touch the side of my face, his fingers brushing over the edge of my jaw. "You look so fucking beautiful, Marika."

The hurt in his voice is so evident. It makes it so hard to resist him, and tonight, of all nights, I need to resist him. All the memories in that touch and all the ones we could still make if not for this—I can't lose myself in that. It's already so hard for me not to give in, not to tell him that yes, I'll go with him, instead of going to my brother's house and into an unwanted marriage that's been arranged for me. And when I meet Theo—

I need to be on my guard. I need to be ready for what it is that he might want from me, ready to play the game that my brother is setting up, because it's a dangerous one. The distraction that Adrik poses could be deadly to us both—to all of us.

I reach up and grab his hand, pulling it away from my face. "I can't do this right now, Adrik," I tell him pleadingly. "I need to focus. I *have* to marry Theo. I can't tell you why, but—"

Before I can get another word out, he backs me against the door, his other hand sliding into my hair—and then his mouth is on mine, kissing me with a hunger that makes my knees weak.

My defenses are so thin. His lips are warm and full against mine, the kiss hard and urgent, and I know he's a few moments away from sliding the dress

of my skirt up, lifting me, and fucking me against the door. And the worst part is—I *want* him to.

Nothing between Adrik and I has been forced, ever. I wanted him when I let him take my virginity on that floral couch in the informal living room, and I've wanted him every time in between, and I want him now. I can feel the pulse of desire through my blood, feel my lips part under his, and I know I'm so close to giving him what he wants.

What would it hurt, really? You're already not a virgin any longer. Who would know? You can be a little late.

Nikolai will be furious if I'm late. He'll tell me I'm putting the entire plan at risk. And he'll be right. But Adrik's mouth is on my throat, his lips brushing against the spot below my ear that he knows I like best, and his hand is inching up my skirt, just as I knew he would.

"Don't do this," he whispers in my ear. "God, I want you so badly it hurts, Marika. I don't want to let you go."

I close my eyes, fighting back tears for the second time tonight. Not because Adrik is hurting me—but because I don't want to let him go either...not yet, and maybe not ever. I want time to figure out what this is, if it's just the first rush of lust or if it could be something more, if he'll tire of me, or if his feelings are genuine. And I don't have that time. Not yet.

His hand is between my thighs, and my defenses crumble. He reaches for my other hand, placing it against the front of his fatigues, and I can feel how hard he is. Hard and aching for *me*, and I can't deny him.

I can't deny myself.

His fingers slip between my folds, and he groans against my ear. "You're so wet for me," he whispers. "You can't tell me that you don't want me, Marika. I can feel how much you do."

"I never said I didn't," I whisper weakly, feeling his fingertips graze over my clit.

"Let me inside you." His teeth graze over my earlobe. "I want my cum in you when you're sitting there talking to that man. I want him to be able to fucking

smell me on you if he breathes in hard enough. Give me this, Marika—”

I’ve only been on the birth control for a day. I don’t think it’s enough—but I could get a contraceptive, for extra peace of mind tomorrow. I’ll tell Adrik after to get it for me. I can hear myself rationalizing it in my head, because what he’s saying is so fucking hot.

“Please, Marika—” he groans, his other hand pushing my skirt higher, his fingers under my panties tugging them to one side. “Let me fuck you and come inside you. Before you—”

“Yes.” I breathe the word, gasping it as his fingers roll over my clit, my pussy so wet that I know I soaked through my panties just from his kiss, before he touched me. I’ve never really understood what it was like to want someone until Adrik, and now I can’t imagine wanting anyone else.

Especially not the brutal man I’ve been promised to marry.

My hands fumble at the buttons of his pants, undoing his fly as he teases my clit, making it harder than ever for me to get it undone. He groans the moment I free his cock, my hand wrapping around the heated, rigid length of him, and he doesn’t waste a second before he grabs me, his mouth hard on mine.

He picks me up, shoving the silk skirt to one side as he holds my panties away from my swollen flesh, and my legs go around his waist without a thought, my entire body aching for him. I’ve forgotten where I’m supposed to be and what I’m meant to be doing, everything except the swollen head of his cock pressed to my entrance, the way my body throbs with anticipation, the pleasurable stretch of him as he pushes himself inside of me with one hard thrust that I know is meant to be possessive, that he wants me to feel the entire time I’m sitting down to dinner.

I shouldn’t find that erotic, but I do. The thought of sitting across from Theo McNeil, the most powerful man in Chicago, the man who is going to be my husband—and still feeling the ache from Adrik’s cock, the soreness of my bruised flesh, the hot dampness of his cum soaking into my panties—

“Fuck, oh god—” I moan against Adrik’s mouth, my entire body clenching hard as I come at the thought, my hips rocking against his in a desperate,

needy movement as I grind against him, wanting more of the pleasure as it tears through me, his own hips moving against me in hard, pounding thrusts that are more brutal than he's ever fucked me before. I can feel the desperation in it, the need, and it makes me feel as if my next climax is building again before the first ever fully recedes.

“Christ, Marika, it's so good—” he groans against my lips, pinning me to the door, and I know if anyone walks by, they'll be able to hear. I should be more worried about it, should be concerned about us getting caught—but all I can think about is how good he feels, how much I want him to keep thrusting into me, filling me, and the thought of him coming inside of me for the first time has me on the edge all over again.

It feels forbidden and taboo and everything that I should never, ever allow myself. But I am, and I can't pretend that I don't want it as much as he does.

“Oh god, Marika—” His mouth drags down my throat, his hips hard and urgent, his hands holding me against the door, digging into my waist. “I'm so fucking close. Tell me to come in you, tell me to fucking come—”

I could tell him no. I should tell him no, but I want it too. “Come in me,” I breathe, grinding against him, my legs against his waist, pulling him closer, and I know this is the moment when I make yet another choice that could turn everything upside down.

The sound of pleasure he makes is so guttural that it almost sounds painful, his entire body jerking against me as I feel, for the first time, the hot rush of him coming inside of me, the swollen throbbing of his cock as he buries himself inside of me as deeply as he can, holding himself there for a long moment as I shudder against him with my own pleasure.

He presses his mouth against my shoulder, and then gently, he slips out of me, setting me down on my own two feet. He reaches beneath my skirt, tugging my panties back into place—and his fingers pat gently against the damp material as he kisses me once more. “There,” he whispers against my mouth. “I'll be in you all fucking night.”

He steps back, a heated possessiveness in his eyes that makes my knees feel a little weak—and then I look at the clock, wondering just how long it's been.

Too long.

Adrik is looking down at me with an unreadable expression on his face. “Go, Marika. You’re going to be late.”

His sudden acquiescence surprises me, and I look at him, startled. “I—” I swallow hard. “I need you to get me a contraceptive to take tomorrow. Just—leave it in my room, where no one can see. The door is unlocked.” I hate asking him right now, but if I don’t, I have no idea if I’ll get a chance to. He can do it more easily without anyone knowing.

Adrik looks at me for a long moment. “Fine,” he says suddenly. “Whatever you want.”

His jaw is set, and he steps back, tucking himself away and zipping up his pants. I start to reach for the doorknob, but he grabs me again before I can, moving in on me with one quick step and grabbing my face in his hands.

“I want you to remember what I felt like in you, while you’re talking to him,” he breathes against my mouth. “Remember how hard I fucked you, how hard I came in you. Remember what it felt like when I made you come.”

He releases me again, so suddenly that my knees almost buckle, and steps back. I grab for the door, desperate to get out before I make another mistake, and end up later than I already am.

This was a mistake. There’s no doubt about that. And I’m anything but focused.

I duck into the nearest bathroom, looking in the mirror frantically as I smooth my tousled hair and reach for my clutch to fix my lipstick, checking my throat for any marks. *This is the situation you’ve gotten yourself into*, I tell my reflection sternly, making sure my eye makeup isn’t smudged. *Ensuring you don’t go to one man with the marks of another on you, even though his cum is inside of you. What do you think you’re doing?*

I don’t know. I truly don’t. And as I stare at my reflection, I contemplate the wisdom of telling Nikolai everything. It wouldn’t fix my problems with Adrik—it might make them worse—but it would keep me from having to marry Theo.

He would be disappointed in me, but I don't think he'd throw me out or disinherit me. I don't think he'd treat me as worthless, the way some families would. And I don't think he'd hate me.

But the disappointment is bad enough. And if I don't marry Theo—

What will I be responsible for? How much bloodshed, because a war is started without a marriage to smooth things over?

Marika



I'm thirty minutes late when I get to my brother's estate, and I can almost *feel* the tension emanating throughout the house as I step inside. It might just be my imagination—but when I hand the maid my coat and turn to see Nikolai striding towards me, his face set in stern, glowering lines, I know it's not.

"I've never known you to be late in your life." His voice is terse, not at all the way I'm used to him speaking to me. "What the fuck are you thinking, Marika? If you were going to screw this up for us, you could have just said no. Not left me dancing attendance on the only man in Chicago richer and more powerful than me, while you keep him—*both of us*—waiting."

"I'm sorry." I look at my brother, trying to keep my expression as contrite as possible. I don't have to force myself to look unsettled or nervous—I *am*. Nikolai is right that I've always been punctual. I don't want him to get any ideas about why I wasn't—and I don't really want to incur Theo's anger, either. I don't think this one misstep is going to be enough to make him call off the marriage, but it certainly might be enough to make that marriage a lot more miserable for me.

"I had a migraine," I tell him, and I'm pretty sure I look pale and tired enough to be convincing, even with the makeup I put on for tonight. "I set an alarm, but I slept through it. I'm really sorry. I'll apologize to Theo myself."

"You certainly will." Nikolai looks more tense than I've ever seen him.

“Lilliana is talking to him in the dining room. We’ve already been seated for dinner. Hurry up.”

A part of me rebels at hearing my brother talk to me like that, but I don’t say anything. I know it’s worry—for himself, his family, and me—making him behave this way. *He cares about you, I remind myself. He loves you, and he loves Lilliana and the baby that’s on the way. All of that is at risk right now, if Theo isn’t mollified. That’s all that’s going on.*

It’s just another reason not to come clean about Adrik. If he knew what I’ve done, how I’ve given away the thing that all of this rests on, he’d be more than furious. I’m not even sure he’d forgive me any longer, after seeing how upset my tardiness made him.

I can feel the dampness left from Adrik, every step of the way as I walk to the dining room. I’m terrified that it’s soaked through my panties and left a spot on the back of my skirt, but I don’t have time to excuse myself to go to the bathroom and check.

Lilliana is seated to the right of the head of the table, and I see her as I step into the dining room. I see someone else, too—a man sitting with his back to me on the left side, and as Nikolai clears his throat, Lilliana smiles. It looks genuine, but I suspect it’s as forced as mine feels.

“Marika!” she exclaims. “You’ve made it.”

As soon as she says my name, the man facing away from me pushes back his chair and stands, turning towards me—and I suck in a breath with surprise.

I’m not sure what I expected. I’d caught glimpses of Theo McNeil a few times in the past—not enough to know what he really looked like, but enough to know he wasn’t fat and balding. Still, the man that turns towards me is nothing like the picture I’d had in my head, knowing he was over twenty years older than me.

Theo McNeil is gorgeous.

Not just in an older man, silver fox kind of way—but objectively *gorgeous*. He’s tall, over six feet, and clearly keeps in shape. His navy blue suit is obviously bespoke, tailored to every inch of his body, and I can see that he’s slim and fit—and tattooed. I’m no stranger to tattooed men; my brother is

covered in ink, and so is just about every man in the Bratva—but for some reason, I hadn't expected it of him. I can see it extending over the backs of his hands, a bit showing at his collar, though it doesn't extend all the way up his neck like my brother's do. He has thick, auburn-brown hair that's silvered slightly at the temples and stubble that's a bit more reddish-auburn, with flecks of silver through it, too. His eyes are green, the color of ferns, and they fix on me instantly. I notice that, unlike so many other men, his gaze doesn't sweep over me appraisingly or lewdly. He looks at my face, still taking the measure of me, but not in a way that makes me feel as if he's undressing me with his eyes.

I take in the sight of his handsomely chiseled face, that strong body poured into the tailored suit, and I feel an instant attraction that I hadn't expected. I hadn't thought I would *desire* him, that there would be any chemistry between us at all.

What are you doing? I can hear the screaming voice in my head, telling me not to lose it just because he looks better than I thought he would. *You don't want him. And Nikolai is using you to set him up. Don't get fucking distracted just because you didn't know he would be this handsome.*

I swallow hard as Theo steps forward, taking my hand in his and raising it to his lips. They're cool and dry, and my heart skips a beat in my chest as they touch the back of his hand.

"A pleasure, Ms. Vasilev," he says, a thick burr of an accent lacing his words, and something else twists in my stomach. I've never heard him speak before, and it makes me wonder what my actual name would sound like on his lips.

What it would sound like if he groaned it in my ear, while he thrust inside of me in bed.

What the fuck, Marika. I can feel Adrik inside of me still, and this man is making me wonder what he would sound like moaning my name. Either losing my virginity has turned me into a nymphomaniac, or I'm losing my mind.

Surely, the situation I'm in warrants a little of the latter.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting." I keep my voice as cool and poised as I can,

ignoring the shivering feeling prickling across my skin. “I wasn’t feeling well. But that’s no excuse, of course. I hope you won’t hold it against my brother.”

“Not at all.” He smiles at me, a perfect, charming smile. “I hope you’re feeling better now.”

“I am.” I stand there for a second longer, until he lets go of my hand, and then I join Lilliana on the other side of the table. Nikolai sits at the head, and a moment later, one of the staff appears with the first course, setting two trays of carefully plated appetizers in front of us before she starts to pour the already-decanted wine.

“I’m sure you know why I’m here, Ms. Vasilev,” Theo says. He doesn’t reach for the food. I know my brother will probably be annoyed at me for not waiting on our guest, but I haven’t eaten since breakfast, and I don’t really care. If he wants to marry me, he’s not going to change his mind because I reached for a prosciutto-wrapped scallop before he did.

I can feel Nikolai’s eyes on me, but I fill up my small plate anyway.

“Of course.” I give him a polite smile as I reach for my wine. “You and my brother have an arrangement.”

“One that I hope you’re amenable to.” He gives me a slight smile, and I’m startled by how sincere the words actually sound. If I didn’t know better, I’d think that he actually does care whether or not I’m happy about the situation.

I wonder if he cares about his bride-to-be lying to him, because what comes out of my mouth is absolutely not the truth.

“Of course I am.” I keep the polite smile fixed on my face. “That’s what I was meant to do. Make a good marriage for the sake of the Vasilev family.”

Next to me, I can feel Lilliana twitch slightly. She knows exactly how hard it is to keep the sarcasm out of my voice, to make it sound as if everything I just said was sincere.

“I’m sure you know that I’ve never married,” Theo continues. “And I know that might seem odd for a man of my age, in my position. But I wanted to save the prospect of matrimony for the right woman.”

“And I’m the right woman?” It comes out a bit more biting than I intended, and I can see Nikolai’s eyes narrow out of the corner of mine.

“I think that you are. Your brother has made quite the convincing argument.” Theo smiles at me. “If you have no objections, Ms. Vasilev, then I propose we enjoy our dinner and then go forward with the proceedings.”

There’s a sudden tightness in my throat, a twist in my stomach that I do my best to ignore. *There’s no turning back once you sign the contract.* It would be better to tell Theo McNeil no outright, than to break a contract signed in blood and ink. Our traditions are old and run deep, and I’m sure his are the same. Refusing him would have consequences, but breaking a betrothal contract would be suicide.

But with that contract comes the expectation that I will go to his bed a virgin. That’s impossible now—which means I’m entering into it a fraud. If Theo ever finds out...

He won’t. You can fake it just fine. There’s no reason for him ever to know, unless Adrik says something, and—

I can’t believe that Adrik would. Not only for my sake—and I do believe he cares for me—but for his own. Admitting that he deflowered the Vasilev princess would mean his death—and a slow one at that.

“I have no objections.” The words come out slow and flat, but they’re spoken nonetheless, and Nikolai looks pleased. I can’t read Theo’s expression, but I’m not sure that I care to. Whatever he’s thinking, it doesn’t matter to me.

He’ll treat me however he chooses to. I don’t believe that I have any influence in that. The best thing I can do for my own sanity is to think about him as little as possible.

The rest of the dinner is uneventful. We work our way through a soup course and a course of perfectly cooked filets and seared shrimp with garlicky potatoes and roasted vegetables, wine accompanying every course, and despite my nerves, I eat all of it—as much out of defiance for any idea Theo might have about how his wife ought to eat as my own appetite. But he doesn’t seem to have any reaction, if anything, he seems to be faintly amused by the fact that I finish all of my food, while Lilliana picks at hers.

When the dessert course is swept away, and we're left with glasses of port, Nikolai looks at Theo. "The three of us can go to my study, then? The contract is prepared. All you need to do is read it, and if it's to your approval, we can move forward."

Theo nods. Lilliana gets up gracefully, kissing Nikolai on the cheek. "I'm very tired," she tells him, and I know it's as much out of courtesy as actual tiredness—she knows this part of the evening isn't something she's meant to be present for. Lilliana, for all that she fought against it tooth and nail, has picked up the niceties of Bratva life very quickly, once she fell in love with my brother. "I'm going to go up to bed."

She gives me a reassuring look, and Nikolai returns the kiss, brushing his lips over her cheek before finishing his port and looking expectantly at Theo. "Should we go to the study, then?"

I follow them there, my stomach knotting with nerves as we walk. There's a ceremonial aspect to all of this that I've never experienced before, the precursor to all the ceremonies that will be a part of our wedding, and it feels like a slow march to my own doom. Once this step is taken tonight, it can't be undone.

Til death do us part has never been so literal. And it needs to be Theo's.

Not mine.

I just have to get through it until Nikolai's plan comes to fruition. Until I find enough to make it possible. I can keep a secret for that long. Months. A year at most. And then I can decide if I want to be with Adrik—or if I just want to be me.

Either way, it will be my choice.

Nikolai turns on the light as we walk into the study, going to the bar cart near the fireplace and pouring drinks. Whiskey for Theo, vodka for himself, wine for me. I'd rather we skip the drinks and go straight to the part where we sign the contract, and I can go home, but there are steps to all of this. Protocol and tradition and all of the things that make up the lives we lead. Theo is used to it, and so am I. It's all expected.

Even if right now, it feels very unnecessary.

I sip at my wine while Nikolai gets out a leather folder and opens it, pulling out several thick sheets of paper and handing them to Theo—our betrothal contract. They're not handed to me—as the bride-to-be, it's my job to acquiesce, not understand. Even my self-proclaimed progressive brother isn't going to change that, not in front of my intended. He'll let Theo think he's just as backward and traditional as our father was, because that's to his benefit.

Unfortunately, he's playing the part so well that it's starting to make *me* wonder.

I'd half expected Theo to just flip idly through the contract and hand it back, but to my surprise, he reads it thoroughly—every word. I'm finished with my wine by the time he hands the papers back to Nikolai, and I wonder how annoyed my brother would be with me if I poured myself another glass.

“Is it acceptable?” Nikolai asks, and I bite back the retort that comes to my lips at the idea of being termed “acceptable.” Of course, the question wasn't directed at me.

No one is going to ask me if I find Theo acceptable. He's rich, powerful, and a man—so of *course* he is.

“It is.” Theo takes a sip of his whiskey, watching as Nikolai opens a wooden box and slips out a small, ivory-handled penknife. He unfolds the blade and drags it across his thumb, pressing it next to his signature on the paper, already signed. The blood seeps into the thick, cream-colored vellum. When the thumbprint is firmly apparent, he removes his hand, wiping his thumb on a clean white handkerchief as he pushes the papers towards Theo, and hands him the knife.

Theo doesn't hesitate. He reaches for the proffered fountain pen, signing his name. A quick swipe of the blade across the pad of his thumb, pressed to the signature spot, and his part is done—leaving only me.

I don't like pain. I never have. I wince, looking at the knife, but I can feel my brother's eyes on me. This is part of our traditions—there's no choice. If I'm going to accept the marriage, this is how it has to be.

I sign my name, and then I press the blade to my thumb. *You're going to have*

to do this again on your wedding night, if you plan to get away with what you've done, I tell myself. Consider this a down payment.

I tug the blade across my skin, wincing at the sharp burn, and press my thumb to the paper. I watch it seep into the space next to the damp ink of my name, and think *it's done*. There's a certain relief in a decision made and finalized. There's no backing out now.

When I pull my hand away, and Nikolai hands me the handkerchief, I think that's the end of it. But Theo finishes his whiskey, setting the glass aside, and looks expectantly at my brother and me.

"Now for my part of it," he says, and I look at him confusedly.

"There's more?"

He turns those fern-green eyes on me, and I see a slight contempt in them. "Did you think yours were the only traditions that matter, *cailín*? My family has our own."

To my surprise, I feel a prickle of shame at the way he's looking at me, replaced by a sharp anger that he would even dare look at me that way. "I would have thought you would have told my brother ahead of time about any *traditions* that you wanted to uphold."

"He did." Nikolai's voice is cool, and I realize then that I'm the only one who's been left out of the loop. That just makes me even more pissed.

"So what?" I look at Theo evenly. "Are we drinking each other's blood now, too?"

To my surprise, he smirks at me. It softens the lines of his face and makes him look younger—even more attractive. My heart flutters sideways in my chest again, and I hate him a little for it. "Aye, well, you're not the first to accuse the Irish of that, lass," he says, and it's not until he gets nearly to the end of the sentence that I realize he's thickening his accent on purpose. He's mocking me a little—and I think more than that, he realized the effect it had on me, earlier.

I glare at him, refusing to let him see it do *anything* to me again.

“But no,” Theo continues. “It’s our custom that the betrothal be blessed by a priest, on the night of the contract signing. So, if you and your brother will be so kind as to bring it, and yourselves to the Holy Name Cathedral, Father O’Halloran will be there waiting for us.”

I don’t know why that surprises me. Of course, he’s Catholic, just as surely as my family and every other Russian I know are Orthodox. He probably pays it just as much mind, until it comes time to follow *traditions* like these. Still, I don’t have any great objection to it, and it’s likely to be more pleasant than slicing my thumb open a moment ago was.

Which is how I find myself in the back of a town car with my brother at nearly ten at night, headed to church.

I can still feel Adrik inside of me. I think of him telling me that he wanted Theo to smell him on me, and a thrill of lewd desire washes over me at the same time that I wonder what Adrik would have said if I’d told him I’d be going into a church tonight full of his cum.

I think it would have turned him on just as much. Maybe more.

“You could have warned me,” I tell Nikolai tightly, shaking my head. I feel the heavy sapphires and diamonds of my earrings swing, bumping against my chin.

“Like you warned me you were going to be late?” His voice is cool and flat, and I once again feel a twist of anxiety that maybe he knows more than he’s letting on about *why* I was late. “Did you really have a migraine?”

“Are you accusing me of lying to you?” I look at him, but I can’t read anything on his profile, silhouetted in the passing lights of the city. “What else would it be?”

He shrugs, still not looking at me. “Maybe you planned to leave me hanging. Revenge for setting this up in the first place.”

“Nikolai.” I stare at him, wondering if that’s what he really believes, or if he’s trying to bait me into revealing the truth. I hate all of this—my brother and I have always been close, and it feels like this is genuinely driving us apart.

This is your fault, too. If you hadn't given in to Adrik—

I push the thought away. “Nikolai, I was just sick. I’m sorry. And you’re right—I should have called.” *I just couldn't, because my bodyguard's fingers were between my legs. I'm so sorry.*

“Yes.” The word comes out clipped. “I need you to be more careful, Marika. Theo is not a man to trifle with.”

I realize then that some of his anger is coming from worry. That tonight, Theo might not have been angry, but he’s afraid that in the future, I’ll do something that *will* anger him. That I’ll push Theo and end up hurt in the bargain. Or I’ll be careless, and Theo will catch on to what we’re doing.

It makes me feel even more guilty, once I realize that.

“I know,” I tell him quietly. “I’ll be careful. I promise.”

Nikolai nods. The rest of the drive is silent, until the car pulls up in front of the church, and the driver gets out to open the door for us. “I expect Theo is already inside,” Nikolai says, as he starts up the steps.

Once again, waiting on us.

The inside of the church is warm and low-lit, smelling of incense. I stand in the nave for a moment, breathing it in, letting it calm me. My father has never been devout, nor have Nikolai or I, but my mother was. I have very faint memories of her bringing me to the Orthodox church here, of the rough carpeted pew under my knees, the scent of incense, and the low hum of others around us. I have very few memories of her at all, and that one is comforting.

“Marika.” Nikolai’s voice is stern, cutting through my thoughts, and I follow him into the church.

Theo is waiting for us. He’s at the lectern, speaking to the priest, who is a man actually younger than Theo himself. The folder containing the betrothal contract is in front of them, and I wince at the idea of yet another man reading it when I don’t even know what it contains.

Does it really matter? It's all going to end up the same, no matter what.

Theo turns as we approach, and once again, I'm struck by how handsome he is—in the low light, even more so, as if the sharp angles of his face were made to be softened by it. He's sternly handsome normally, but younger-looking like this. I can almost see what he would be like if he were a more ordinary man, one without the power and responsibility that comes with his leadership. I see it in Nikolai, too—the way it ages him, giving him a gravity to his features that likely wouldn't be there otherwise.

Nikolai nudges me forward, and I walk up to join Theo, standing in front of the priest. Father O'Halloran, he'd said his name was, although the priest doesn't bother to introduce himself. Theo reaches for my hands, and I let him enfold them in his, ignoring the way it makes my heart stutter in my chest again. His hands are strong and long-fingered, elegant hands, and I like the way they feel around mine more than I should.

“It is your wish, Theo Duncan McNeil, that your betrothal to this woman be witnessed and confirmed tonight?”

“It is,” Theo says firmly, and I swallow hard.

“And is it your wish, Marika Irina Vasilev, that your betrothal to this man be witnessed and confirmed?”

Not really, but you see, I don't have much of a choice in the matter.

“Yes,” I say it as clearly as Theo did, and I can tell he's pleased by that. His mouth softens at the edges, and I once again wonder at the seeming sincerity behind it. It's not what I expected from him, and I'm suspicious of it.

Father O'Halloran nods to Nikolai. “And you are here to witness their betrothal?”

“I am.” He steps up, and the priest turns back to Theo and me.

“Then you may consider this betrothal blessed and confirmed, in the sight of God and man. Theo and Marika, you may seal your engagement with a kiss.”

Fuck. I hadn't expected that. Suddenly, cutting my thumb to sign the contract at Nikolai's doesn't seem as bad. But Theo is already pulling me a little closer, one hand going to my waist as he leans in, and I realize that he's going to kiss me.

I tell myself that I'm going to hate it. But the problem is—I *don't*.

His lips brush against mine, and they feel soft and full, the lower one a little more so than the top. I only have a moment to realize that I'm thinking far more about his lips than I should be, before his hand tightens a little on my waist, his mouth parting around my lower lip, and I think for one brief second, *is this man going to kiss me with tongue in front of a priest?*

The pressure intensifies, just a little. In reality, afterward, I realize it must have only been a few seconds. It wasn't a long kiss. But it *felt* like it to me, and worse still, I feel myself leaning into his touch, my eyes fluttering closed as warmth spreads from my mouth across my skin, and I feel a flicker of disappointment when he pulls away. For a brief second, I don't move—and then I see the amusement in Theo's eyes, realizing how much I enjoyed the kiss, and I'm certain I hate him all over again.

I step back stiffly. His gaze doesn't leave mine, and I refuse to look away first.

Nikolai clears his throat. "If that's all—"

"It is." Theo looks away from me, taking the leather folio with the contract in it. "Let me know when the arrangements are made. I look forward to our wedding day, Marika."

The last is addressed to me, and for the first time, I hear my name in his accent. It rolls over his tongue, pronounced a little differently than anyone else ever has, and I feel my stomach twist at the same moment that my heart leaps, my pulse beating faster in my throat.

Fuck.

Nikolai motions for me to follow him, and I do. My legs feel stiff, my heartbeat unnatural. Even Adrik hasn't made me feel like *this* when he kisses me—and he's kissed me far more intimately than Theo did. I don't understand what's happening...why I feel the attraction to him that I do. I shouldn't want him.

If I want him, it complicates everything. And everything is complicated enough already.

“You need to be careful,” Nikolai says it again, once we’re in the car, and I look sharply at him. For a moment, I’m afraid he’s talking about Adrik—that he really does know. But this time, he looks at me, and all I see is worry etched on his face.

“I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” he continues. “But I saw the way you kissed him back. Remember what this is, Marika.”

“I know,” I tell him stiffly, feeling my face heat up. I’m suddenly grateful for how dark the car is. “‘Til death do us part,” I say ironically, hoping to see a little of the humor my brother and I used to share, but as I look at him, there’s nothing.

“There are things you don’t know,” Nikolai says quietly. “And you probably should.”

The knot in my stomach turns to ice. His voice is low and serious, and I can sense a rising tension behind his words. “What do you mean?” I ask, and he lets out a slow breath.

“I’ve never told you exactly how our mother died,” he says softly. “I know what you were told.”

“She was killed in a car accident.” I press my lips together, feeling that sick, cold feeling spread. “When I was little. That’s what *papa* always said—”

“He had her killed.” Nikolai’s voice is flat and hard. “Because she was unfaithful.”

“What?” I stare at my brother, my hands suddenly clenched so hard in my lap that I can feel my nails biting into my palms. “What do you mean? That can’t be true. And even if it was—”

How is that fair? I know my father wasn’t faithful to her. I have no proof of that, but I know the kind of man my father was, and how the men of the Bratva are. If my brother is faithful to Lilliana—and I believe he is—he’s the exception to them all. “So she was killed for what all the men around her do with impunity? That’s—” The horror of it stops my tongue. I can’t think of what to say, what could possibly be said that could ever make any of it any better. The entire idea is so awful it doesn’t bear talking about, but Nikolai is saying it out loud, and to hear him tell it, he’s known it for a long time.

“How could you not tell me? How could he—”

“The cruel reality of the world we live in,” Nikolai says, in that same blank tone, almost as if I hadn’t spoken. I know then with a deadly finality that Theo can never, ever find out about Adrik. If I have to open an artery to bleed enough on our wedding night, he can’t suspect that I’m not a virgin. Suddenly, the little trick Adrik pulled tonight seems less erotic, and more terrifying.

“What does any of that have to do with my betrothal to Theo?” I ask quietly, my voice trembling. I suddenly feel very sure that Nikolai knows. Why else would he—

“Theo was the man that she was unfaithful with. According to our father,” Nikolai adds, but I hardly hear that last part, because the blood is roaring in my ears. I feel dizzy, like I might be sick.

“That can’t be true,” I whisper again, but Nikolai is still talking.

“Plots to take him down have been in motion, shared with me, long before our father died. They’ve changed, altered, and none of them have been good enough. But he’s always wanted him deposed and dead, and now is our chance. I’ve seen—” he hesitates. “Proof. Diary entries that match our mother’s handwriting. Proof that they were together.” He looks at me, his expression grave. “I believe it, Marika.”

“Our mother—” I hesitate, trying to think of a kinder way to say it. “She wasn’t in the...best of health, mentally. She was never the most stable—” It’s an understatement. I remember days when our mother would be in her room, unable to come out because of the same migraines I claim to have now sometimes, but even I knew back then there was something else going on. She would have days where she could barely stir out of bed, and others where she went around the house like a dervish, planning, organizing, and moving furniture until the staff despaired of ever getting her to stop. She hadn’t been well, I know that. And I can’t imagine—

“Who are you going to believe? Her, or this man?” Nikolai looks at me sharply. “You need to know what you’re walking into, Marika.”

“Then why would you give me to him?” I exclaim, the words bursting out of

me with all the emotion I've tried to hold back. "Why the fuck—what are you thinking, Nikolai? Why would you do this?"

Nikolai lets out a slow breath. "If Theo really loved our mother—or even just wanted her—then you are the perfect setup to get him to be vulnerable to you...to *us*, and what we're trying to accomplish. You need to make him *think* you want him, Marika. Make him believe that you're falling for him despite yourself. But don't *actually* fall for him. Be careful of riding that line."

Easy thing to say, when you're sending me into the lion's den to ride him, I almost say, but I don't. It's an inappropriate thing to say to my brother—I almost do it just for that reason, to shock him. His sweet little sister, spitting out something like that.

"I can't believe you're doing this," I whisper, my heart beating in my throat. "You're becoming our father, Nikolai. This kind of plotting—using me like this without even telling me—"

It was the wrong thing to say. His face hardens in an instant. "How dare you," he growls, his eyes narrowing at me. "Our *father* wouldn't have even given you the benefit of a choice. He wouldn't have given you time to think about it. He would have marched you straight into matrimony with Theo and expected you to fucking *thank* him for it. He wouldn't have told you his plans or anything about what he was doing. He wouldn't have *worked* with you; he would have ordered you!" Nikolai is breathing hard, his face tight with anger. "We're doing this together, Marika. And when it's over, you will have exactly what I've promised you. I won't marry you off to some other mafia don or Bratva *pakhan* who would be fine with marrying a widow as long as she came with money and status. You'll have the deed to our family home, in your own name, your inheritance, and the freedom to do whatever and be with whoever you choose. So, how *dare* you imply that I'm handling this the way our father would?"

By the time he's finished, the car is nearly at my door. I look at him for a long moment, feeling suddenly tired in a way that I'm not sure I ever have before. What he's telling me is outrageous. I'm having a hard time believing it's true—but now I have to consider that it might be. I want out of this—but it's too late now. "That's fine if you want to think that," I say quietly. "But *be*

careful, Nikolai.” I mimic the way he’d said it to me, and it doesn’t get past him. “It’s a thin line you’re riding.”

I open the door, not bothering to wait for the driver to do it. I hear Nikolai’s voice behind me, as I slide out of the car.

“I’m doing this for the good of our family, Marika.”

I don’t answer him. I shut the door behind me, carefully, and I don’t look back as I walk up to the front door of the mansion.

Very soon, this won’t be my home any longer.

But hopefully, one day, it will be again.

Marika



The next morning, when the maid brings my breakfast up, there's a thick, cream-colored envelope on the tray. It's even sealed with wax, which seems a little over-the-top, and I look at the seal curiously. It's a deep emerald green, two crossed arrows over a crown, and I know it must be from Theo before I even open it. I don't know if I'm impressed by the ostentation or annoyed by it, but I crack open the seal, slipping the note out. It's on equally thick card stock, written in a flowing hand, and I can't help but roll my eyes a little. It seems like far too much effort to put into simply sending a note.

He could have called. Or asked Nikolai for my number and texted me. But there's a certain old-world charm to it that I find a little touching, even as I roll my eyes while I start to read.

Marika,

I know it's not strictly necessary, but I would like a little time to get to know my bride-to-be before our wedding. I have a dinner reservation tonight, and a box at the theatre, if you would be so kind as to accompany me. There will be a package sent to your home later today. Of course, you are under no obligation to accept, and if you don't wish to come or have other plans, please feel free to keep the gifts. I will send a driver around this evening for you at six, if you accept.

Yours,

Theo McNeil

I re-read the note three times before setting it down on the tray, my appetite fled. *What the fuck is he doing?* The marriage is arranged, the contract signed in ink and in blood, even blessed by a priest. There's no need for anything else before we're wed. And yet—

He's asking me out on a date.

It feels absolutely preposterous—and I'm suspicious of it, too. I can't help thinking of what Nikolai told me—that there was something between Theo and my mother. *What if he really is just trying to rekindle that all over again? What if that's the reason he wants you?*

That thought makes my skin crawl. But it feels so insane that I can hardly believe it. I'd never heard the slightest hint of it until Nikolai said it last night.

But it wouldn't be unlike my father to keep something like that from me.

If it's true, how can I marry this man? How can I even let him touch me, thinking—

Would I still have wanted him last night, if I'd known any of this?

I know I need to accept. If I don't, it will seem insulting, and I can't *not* accept the gifts that he says he's sending, either. That would also be an insult, and Nikolai would be furious with me. But if I accept the gifts and don't go out with him, then it will look as if I only want him for his wealth.

Technically, that would be fine. There are plenty of women who would marry a man like Theo only for his money and status. But *I'm* not one of those women—I never have been—and I don't want him to think that I am.

I let out a sigh. I don't really have a way out of it.

And maybe—maybe I don't want one. Maybe I can pick up some clues about whether or not Nikolai is right about Theo and my mother, if I spend a little more time with him.

Either way, I need to go.

Since he insists on being old-fashioned about it—and I don't have his number—I send him a reply the same way, accepting the date. I text Lilliana, telling her what's happening, and ask her to come over and help me get ready. At four p.m., just as Lilliana is arriving, I open the door to see not only her but a large gold-wrapped box on the doorstep.

"I assume this is from Theo?" Lilliana says dryly, and I nod. I don't need to look at any note attached to it to know. I pick it up, motion her inside, and head up to my room with her before I can run into Adrik. I think he's off the security rotation for this week, and I'm glad of it—except that if Nikolai was the one who took him off, it might mean he suspects something.

That would be bad.

I set the box on my bed, looking at it. "He sent this for me to wear tonight," I tell Lilliana, and I'm unsure how I feel about it. On the one hand, it's high-handed and a little arrogant, deciding for me what he wants me in for our date. On the other hand, it's a little romantic—and could even be construed as thoughtful, if I wanted to cast Theo in that light.

Be careful. I hear Nikolai's voice in my head again, warning me, and I choose to look at it as arrogant.

But still, I'm going to wear it—not least of which because I can't risk angering him by not.

I lift the lid off of the box and stifle a gasp.

One of the most beautiful dresses I've ever seen is lying nestled on silvery-white tissue paper. It's made of a slinky gold silk that looks as if it were woven with actual gold threads, sparkling in the overhead light in a way that looks luxurious and expensive, not gaudy. It's form-fitted, with straps two-fingers wide that turn into a bodice that plunges below my cleavage, almost to my navel, and a skirt that will cling to my hips and legs. It's low in the back, too, the fabric draping at the base of my spine, and I can already see the hair and makeup that will go with it—thick curls and a red lip, old Hollywood glamour.

"Shit." Lilliana peers into the box. "There's more in there, too."

"Oh!" I'm not really surprised that he sent more than just a dress, but I *am*

surprised how much to my taste it all is. The dress is stunning, and so are the shoes that I lift out of the box, a pair of gold Louboutin sandals to match. There's a small jewelry box next to it, and I open it, gasping a little when I see what's inside.

There's a fine gold chain with a string of small diamonds hanging from it, ending in a pearl teardrop, with a bracelet and earrings to match. The bracelet is pearls and diamonds strung together on a fine chain, and the earrings are a string of small diamonds hanging in a line, ending with a pearl teardrop, matching the necklace. It's all delicate and beautiful, and perfect for me.

"Well, he can't be accused of lacking taste," Lilliana remarks, looking at it spread out. "You think he picked this all out himself?"

"Probably not," I murmur. I know how men like him are—he has a personal assistant, and he likely sent her to do it, maybe with a few notes on what he thought he would like her to get. But I doubt this is all hand-picked. If it were

—

I push the thought out of my head. It won't do for me to start thinking kindly about Theo McNeil. I need to make him *think* I want him, that I'm falling for him, but anything beyond that is dangerous. *Real* feelings are dangerous.

And how could I ever have any real feelings for a man like that, anyway?

Lilliana waits for me while I get in the shower, washing my hair and blow-drying it. She ends up sitting on the bed, distracting me with small talk while I curl my hair and do my makeup, making the red lip I'd planned the focal point of it. She hands me the dress when I'm finished, and I slip into it as I look in the full-length mirror next to my closet. It fits me perfectly, and I have to admit, I look stunning in it. The gold is the perfect shade against my pale skin and white-blond hair, brightening me instead of washing me out. The sandals fit perfectly, too, and the jewelry is gorgeous, the necklace falling in the exact right spot in my slight cleavage, drawing the eye.

"I'm surprised he'd dress you up like this," Lilliana says, looking at me speculatively. "There's not a man in Chicago that isn't going to stare if he sees you like this. I wouldn't think a man like Theo would want so many eyes on you."

“Maybe he likes showing off his trophy.” There’s a hint of bitterness that I can’t keep out of my voice. “The Bratva princess that he’s managed to make his fiancée.”

“Maybe.” Lilliana looks me over again. “You look gorgeous, though.”

I smile faintly at her, reaching for the clutch I’d found that matches the dress. My lipstick and a few other small items are in it, and I pick it up just in time, as I see a black car making its way down the driveway from my vantage point.

I’d wondered if Theo would be in the car, but he’s not. A uniformed driver opens the door for me, and I slip inside to an empty backseat, sliding over cool, expensive leather as I sit there uncertainly. A flutter of nervousness goes through me—I could be being taken anywhere—but I can’t see what reason Theo would have to harm me. As far as he knows, he benefits more from having me as his wife.

There’s no actual reason to be nervous, of course. The car pulls up in front of a restaurant I recognize, a Michelin-starred steakhouse that I haven’t been to before, but know the name of. The door is opened for me again, and I step out, walking through the black and gilded doors to the hostess stand.

“I’m here to meet Mr. Theo McNeil,” I tell the girl at the stand, dressed in an impeccable black fitted dress with her hair up, speared with a filigreed hairpin, her makeup done in a way that looks almost professional.

“Of course,” she says smoothly. “Right this way.”

I’m taken to a private booth at the back of the restaurant, away from most of the general patrons, with a chandelier hanging over the dark wood table and illuminating the black leather of the seats. There’s red wine already decanted on the table, and I see Theo sitting there, dressed in a bespoke charcoal suit, sipping at it as he looks around the restaurant.

The moment he sees me, he stands, and I’m struck all over again by how surprisingly handsome he is. He doesn’t look the way I imagine a man in his early forties would look. He smiles pleasantly at me, and when his gaze drifts over me from my forehead to my toes, it still doesn’t have the lewd implications that I would expect. Rather than looking as if he’s imagining

what it would be like to strip the dress off and fuck me—or fuck me in it—he looks as if he’s admiring a work of art. Like he’s standing in a gallery and saw something he fancied.

It’s a strange feeling—and not one I’ve ever experienced before. I like it more than I should—being admired rather than lusted after. It makes me soften towards him, and I try to force the feeling back, so I don’t let my guard down too soon.

Or at all, really.

“Ms. Vasilev.” He nods to the hostess and takes my hand, leading me to the booth. “I’m so pleased you accepted my invitation.”

There’s something stiff and formal about his words, and I wonder if he’s always going to be like this—if he’s going to stand on ceremony with me even after we’re married. I wonder how I feel about that. It would make it easier not to fall for him, not to slip into intimacy, that’s for sure.

“Why did you invite me?” I ask bluntly as I sit down, and he pours me a glass of wine. “All this isn’t necessary. You can do and have whatever you want—you have a signed contract, which means you get me. So why pretend?”

Theo raises an eyebrow, sitting back with his own glass of wine. “Why not?” That pleasant smile is still on his face. “There’s nothing wrong with having proper manners, Marika. In fact, I think it’s a necessity of the life we lead. It’s so often brutal and bloody, isn’t it? What’s wrong with tempering it with a bit of sophistication and elegance?”

“Nothing, I suppose.” I frown at him, taking a sip of my wine. It’s delicious—he has as good of taste in wine as he does in clothes...assuming he chose the dress, of course.

“You, for instance, are elegant.” He motions casually to me with one long-fingered hand, and I feel a small leap in my chest at the way he gestures. I’ve always found men’s hands attractive—Adrik’s are broad and heavy, making me feel even more small and delicate when he grasps me. Theo’s, though—

They look nimble, dexterous. Artist’s hands on a brutal man, although everything about his exterior seems designed to invoke an air of charm and genteel charisma. Whatever brutality he harbors, it’s beneath the surface.

I can imagine his hands touching me, and the idea sends a flutter of desire through me that I know it shouldn't.

"You're a well-educated Bratva princess," Theo continues. "You should be treated with the courtesy that you deserve."

I stare at him briefly, taking another sip of wine to hide my shock. Once again, I hear that thread of sincerity in his voice that surprises me. I don't know what to make of it. I want to think that he's a liar, that he's faking all of this to draw me in, to make me believe that he's something he's not. But why? He already has the contract that will ensure I'm his bride. The only explanation is that he's so full of himself that he needs my genuine affection as well—but that's not the feeling I get from him.

He's either an exceptional liar—which is terrifying—or he means what he's saying. And that's terrifying, too, because it doesn't make sense.

"Let's enjoy the meal." He smiles at me. "Have you been here before?"

I shake my head, seeing a waiter coming towards us with a tray. "I took the liberty of ordering the first course," he says, motioning towards the waiter. "I hope you like seafood."

"I do," I manage, watching as the waiter sets down a series of plates—foie gras on delicate crostini, bowls of what looks to be a lobster bisque, a plate of escargot. The food is all exceptional, right down to the squid ink and shrimp pasta I order, while Theo enjoys a steak.

"Why have you waited so long to get married?" I venture, in between the first course disappearing and our main course being brought to us. "I would have guessed you'd be widowed. I was surprised to find out—"

"That you'll be my first wife?" Theo chuckles. "I know you might find this hard to believe, Marika, but marriage means something to me. If I only want pleasure and someone to warm my bed, that's easy enough to find."

Something about the way he says it so bluntly makes my cheeks heat up. "I'm not surprised to hear that," I tell him coolly, realizing too late that it sounds like a compliment—and from the way he smirks, he takes it as one.

"I want companionship in a wife," he says calmly. "Not only a bedmate or

someone to bear me children, but someone whose company I enjoy. So if you're wondering why you're here tonight, Marika, besides simple courtesy, it's because I want to find out if we enjoy each other's company."

"But why?" I look at him confusedly. "We're already getting married. The contract can't be broken, even if we find out we hate each other."

Theo shrugs. "You're right, of course. The contract is binding. I agreed to this marriage because, at my age, I've found I have less of a taste for bloodshed than I had before. If I can avoid a war with the Vasilevs and still profit enough to maintain the approval of the other Kings, then I would prefer that. And marriage to you achieves two things—that, and gives me a wife to provide me an heir, which the Kings are pressuring me to do."

I blink at him, a little startled. I hadn't imagined that he also felt pressured to marry. "I thought being forced into marriage was only something that happened to women in this world," I quip, and Theo laughs. That, too, softens his face, making him even more handsome.

"Well, I can't imagine it's the same," he says. "But there is a precedent for even the man who commands the Kings to be forced out, if he is found to not be keeping with the traditions and ways that keep us strong. So yes, there has been pressure on me to marry and provide an heir. Our marriage was not something I thought was avoidable, even if you and I did not please each other. But—" he shrugs. "I thought I would like to find out, before the wedding. I thought you might as well. Then, at least, we could go into it with some idea of what to expect."

I notice, as he speaks, that his accent is lighter. There's a cultured, careful way that he speaks at times like this, when he's in public, and I think he wants to seem more sophisticated. I suspect, listening to him, that it's something he's worked on over many years.

I also realize that I like his natural accent more. It makes me wonder what would make it thicken, what would make him lose that carefully cultivated elegance that he seems to rely on.

What he said earlier comes back to me—that marriage means something to him. That he's put it off because he wants companionship. And it makes me wonder how that matches up with what Nikolai has told me.

Would a man who values marriage step into someone else's? It doesn't add up.

When dinner is finished, Theo pays the bill, and gets up, offering me his arm. "I think there's an opera playing tonight at the theatre," he says. "I don't know if you enjoy that, but I've found it's a pleasant way to spend the evening."

I wait for him to make some move in the car, once we're inside and the driver pulls into traffic. To run his hand up my leg, or slip his fingers into the plunging neckline of my dress. Something to show his ownership of me, how even now, when we're not yet officially wed, I still belong to him.

But he doesn't. He's a perfect gentleman, all the way to the theater, where he opens the door for me himself instead of waiting for the driver to do it. He gives me his arm again, walking up the stairs and up to the box, where there's champagne waiting for us.

Still, I expect him to touch me in some way, as the night goes on. But he doesn't—not so much as a hand on my knee, even though we're sitting very close, side by side. I wonder, at first, if he doesn't find me attractive. If there's something about me that he doesn't find pleasing—that I'm too young or too thin, or if he simply doesn't like me. But here and there, as I reach for the champagne, I catch his eyes on me. There's a hunger in them that suggests that he *does* want me—and the fact that he's not touching me only makes the tension in the room slowly grow and thicken as the night goes on.

It makes me wonder if he's doing it on purpose. Every time he reaches for his glass, I wonder if he's going to touch my hand or my knee, but he doesn't. Every time he looks at me, I wonder if he's going to abandon watching the opera below us to pull me in for a kiss, but he doesn't. Our box is private, well out of sight of anyone else—he could do whatever he likes. But he's content to sit there, sipping champagne and looking at me as if enjoying the sight of some priceless thing that's his to look at. As the night goes on, I can feel desire settling into my blood in a way that I've never felt it before.

With Adrik—and I feel guilty, even thinking of Adrik as I'm sitting there next to Theo—it always burns hot and fast. The desire is sharp, making certain that whatever foreplay there is feels rushed and urgent, both of us in a

hurry to get to the moment when he's inside of me, chasing pleasure that neither of us is certain will last forever. It feels like every moment has to be snatched and stolen rather than savored.

But with this—

I can feel a sort of heady anticipation settling over me, wondering when he finally *will* touch me, if it's going to be all the way until our wedding night. If *this* is what he likes, drawing it out, making me squirm with delayed need until he finally gives me what I want. If he knows right now what he's making me think about, the shivery heat in my veins, and if that's why he's doing it.

If he'd grabbed me, groped me, touched me with the sort of brash possessiveness that I'd expected, I would have steeled myself against it. I would have rolled my eyes and said, *Of course, that's how he is; that's how all these men are.* I had anticipated him taking.

I hadn't anticipated him *waiting*.

And it sends a thrill of fear through me, too, along with the desire, because it tells me more about what kind of man he is.

A man willing to wait for what he wants, to build anticipation instead of taking immediately, a man with patience...

That is a very, very dangerous man, indeed.

Marika



By the end of the night, as we go back to the car, he still hasn't touched me other than to offer me his arm. He hasn't tried to kiss me. And by the time we get back to the mansion, I almost *want* him to.

Theo raises an eyebrow as the car pulls up in front of the steps. "As I remember," he says slowly. "There's a rather nice garden out back."

I look at him confusedly, wondering if this is when he's going to try to suggest that we don't need to wait until our wedding night. The thought sends a confused twist of desire and fear through me—fear because I'm not prepared to fake my virginity tonight, and a desire that I don't understand and didn't anticipate. I'm not supposed to *actually* want him. It's meant to all be a show. But the thought of his hands slowly stripping away the dress he'd bought me, uncovering everything underneath...

"There is," I manage, hoping my voice doesn't sound as strangled as I'm afraid it might. "My mother was a huge fan of gardening, I'm told—or at least designing gardens for others to create. My father paid staff to keep it up, after her death."

I watch Theo's face as I say it, waiting for his reaction. There's none, only a slight sympathy in his eyes and the twist of his mouth. "I remember when your mother passed," is all he says. "I'm very sorry. That must have been difficult."

If he did know her better, or feel anything for her, he's hiding it well. It

makes the doubts that I'm harboring about whether or not the story is true deepen—and it frightens me, too. If he is lying—

A man who can lie that well is one who I'll never be able to tell what he's really thinking.

"I don't really remember her." The car is still idling in front of the steps, but of course, it doesn't matter. The driver will sit there for as long as Theo wants him to. "Why are you asking about the garden?"

"I'd like to go for a walk with you there, if you're alright with it."

Once again, I'm caught entirely off guard. But I can't find any reason to deny him. A walk in the garden is intimate, but not inappropriate. And I find myself wanting to know *why*. Why does he want to continue to spend more time with me, when he's barely touched me? Why is he stretching out his night, filling his hours with nothing more than my company, when he could be enjoying some other woman in bed right now?

We are a business arrangement, nothing more. But he's treating this like the beginning of a relationship.

I want to know *why*.

"Alright," I say finally. "I don't see a reason why not. And it's a nice night."

Theo smiles, opening the door, and once again, it seems more genuine than it should.

It is a nice night, surprisingly so, for early spring. I slip on the fur wrap I'd taken with me, looping it around my arms, and lead Theo around the house to the iron gate that leads into the garden. We can't entirely avoid my security—they're everywhere around the house, but I don't see Adrik, which is a relief. I can only imagine the confrontation we'd have if he saw me here with Theo, going on what can only be construed as a romantic and entirely unnecessary walk in the garden.

"I don't really know what the landscapers do to keep this going," I confess as we start to walk down the stone path, towards the center where the fountain is. "It doesn't look as good right now—it's just starting to bloom. If we get another cold snap, I imagine it will take longer for it to look the way it does

in late spring and summer. But it's stunning then."

"We'll have to come back so you can show me." Theo laughs lightly. "I have a garden on my estate as well—I think it's a requirement of owning a mansion, actually. But I don't know what to do with it either. I pay gardeners, and they seem to do a good enough job."

"Exactly." I laugh, unbidden, and it startles me. I realize, with a flush of uncertainty, that I *like* talking to him. There hasn't been a moment tonight when I've really wanted the conversation to end. He's easy to talk to, with a sense of humor I hadn't expected, and nothing about him seems particularly objectionable or cruel. He's been more of a gentleman than anyone I've known in a long time.

It doesn't fit the man that I've been led to believe he is, either by my own family, or through public opinion.

We walk all the way through the garden, to the large fountain in the center of it. Theo turns to me, a thoughtful look on his face as he reaches into his jacket pocket and hands me what I realize is a small black velvet box.

I don't expect to open it up and find a ring. He didn't go down on one knee, or do anything else that would indicate he planned to give me one—I never expected any of that, anyway. Families like ours don't do engagements that way. We sign contracts, offer up blood, but there's no asking, no proposals, no romantic offerings of jewelry. That's for other people to enjoy.

"This is for me?" I look at him confusedly.

Theo nods. "If you'll accept it. Open it, Marika. Please."

The *please* startles me. He doesn't have to ask me to do anything—he could command anything he wanted. I could fight his requests, buck against them, but in the end, I'm almost certainly going to have to acquiesce, if he wants something badly enough.

And this costs me nothing to agree. So I open the box—and I suck in a startled breath.

There *is* a ring in it, glittering faintly in the moonlight and the light from the lamps along the garden path. It's a round emerald on a filigreed gold band,

with a smaller round diamond on either side. What startles me the most is that it's not large. It's beautiful—but it's a small ring, something that someone would buy if they didn't have much money, but loved the person they were proposing to very much.

It doesn't fit Theo and me at all.

I think he sees the confusion on my face when I look up at him. "I don't understand," I say softly, and there's a myriad of questions in those words.

"It's a family heirloom." There's something in his face that I can't quite read as he gestures to it. "I know these days, there's no asking involved. But that ring—"

He reaches for my left hand, taking the box out of my other. "When my great-grandmother was given this ring," Theo says quietly, "my family—the McNeils—we were no one. The ring was given to her out of love, not duty. I know there's no love between us, Marika. But I would like you to wear it, as a symbol of the happiness I hope we might be able to find within the confines of our duty."

I stare at him, absolutely speechless for a moment. I truly don't know what to say. What he's saying isn't anything I ever expected to hear. It's not anything that makes sense to me. And it all sounds so sincere, so...*sweet*, even, that I don't know how I can say no.

But something in me feels strongly that I need to. That letting him put that ring on my finger is the first step towards getting trapped in my own game. Mine, and Nikolai's.

"I can't." I pull my hand away from him. "Theo, that's not what this is. You know it's not—you said as much. It would be an insult to your great-grandmother's memory to wear her ring."

"I don't agree." He doesn't take my hand again, but he's still holding the ring. "My family came from nothing, Marika. They worked hard to make the empire that the McNeils are today. I'm marrying you out of duty, it's true—because I need heirs to make certain that empire remains and continues to grow. This ring isn't a symbol of love between us—but it is one of partnership. I want our marriage to be a good one, Marika. And I—" He takes

a deep breath, reaching for my hand once more. “I intend to keep my vows. To be faithful to you and be a good husband. Giving you this ring, to me, is a sign of that commitment—something that the contract we signed makes no mention of.”

“We’ll have to say it in our vows. Isn’t that enough?” I feel a twist in my stomach, looking at the ring. It means something to him; that much is clear. I don’t believe he’s lying about this. And if I take it, it makes my betrayal of him so much worse.

Faithful. Once again, I feel those creeping doubts. He’s said, over and over again, what marriage means to him—outside of what’s required by the world we live in. Does he only care about his own fidelity, within his own marriage? Would cuckolding another man mean nothing to him, as long as he was single?

I find myself angry at Nikolai all over again, for putting me in this situation at all.

“Many men take those vows, with no intention of keeping them.” Theo holds out the ring. “I won’t force you to wear it, Marika. But I hoped you would. I’ve never offered it to any other woman.”

Something about the way he says it tugs at my heartstrings—heartstrings that are supposed to be off-limits to him, no matter what. I’m not supposed to feel anything for him, not desire, or tenderness, or sympathy, or caring. I don’t know what it is that I feel for him at that moment, exactly. But it’s enough to make me hold out my left hand and let him slip the gold ring onto it.

It fits. “You have delicate hands,” he says, my left hand still in his. “I always heard she did, too.”

“It makes sense.” My thumb brushes against his fingers. “You have artistic hands.”

The words come out before I can stop them. It’s the first personal comment I’ve made to him—the first thing I’ve said that indicates I’ve noticed anything about him at all. And for the first time, I see a flicker of surprise cross *his* face.

He says nothing. But the hand holding mine pulls me closer, his other hand

on my waist, and his mouth lowers to mine.

It's the first time I've kissed him, beyond the kiss at the altar when Father O'Halloran blessed our betrothal. It's the first time I've kissed him *alone*—and there's no one to see, no one to stop us.

No one to tell me afterward to *be careful*.

I'd be better off if there was. Because Theo's mouth feels far too good. He's a good kisser, his lips soft and warm against mine, teasing gently at my mouth until I *want* to part my lips for him, his tongue lightly grazing against the curve of my lower lip. He pulls me closer still, close enough that my body is brushing against his, the heat of him sinking through the thin gold silk of my dress. His hand slides around my waist to the small of my back, holding me there as his tongue slips into my mouth, and I'm lost.

The kiss is somehow urgent without being demanding, passionate without being insistent. His hand slides no lower than the small of my back, his other hand wrapped around mine, his lips slanting over my mouth as he deepens the kiss. When he pulls me close, I can feel the hard press of his cock against my thigh, but he doesn't grind against me, doesn't push for more. And the way he's kissing me, the restraint and desire in it all at once, sends a flood of desire through me that I wasn't expecting.

I have the thought that if he were to try to take me upstairs, I'm not so certain that it would be easy for me to say no. And that terrifies me.

Theo is getting under my skin already. Making me want him. And it occurs to me, as his mouth presses against mine, making me gasp softly, that maybe that's what all of this is.

A carefully calculated night to make me want him. To make me fall under *his* spell, just as my brother expects me to make Theo fall under mine.

You don't know that he's not a liar. And a good one, if so.

I pull away, breaking the kiss. "I'm tired," I say abruptly, pulling my hand out of his. "I should go inside. I can go with you, if you need help finding your way out—"

"No, I think I can manage." His stiff bearing returns and he takes a step back.

It's all I can do not to let my gaze flick downwards, where I know he's still hard from the kiss.

A few weeks, and you'll be in bed with him. You'll know exactly what he looks like. What he feels like—

I repress the shudder that runs through me, a shiver of desire that I neither want nor need. "There's security everywhere," I tell him coolly. "I'll make sure to let them know when I go in not to bother you. I assume your driver is still out front."

"Of course." Theo smiles politely at me. "I'll see you on our wedding day, Marika."

The way he says it makes me catch my breath, a sort of calm self-assuredness to the words that reminds me that in only a few short weeks, I'll be his wife. But more than that, it tells me that whatever tonight was meant to make him make up his mind about, or whatever he was hoping he would find out, it was enough for him. He doesn't plan to see me again, before our wedding day.

I shouldn't feel the sharp pang of disappointment that I do. I should be glad that I won't see him again until the wedding.

But a part of me wants another night like this.

I watch him leave, walking down the path and out of sight. There's no reason for me to stand there until I hear the creak of the garden gate, but I do, and only then do I turn to head up to the back door of the mansion, to let the security guards there know to leave Theo be, that it was alright that he was here. It's entirely possible that Nikolai will find out he was here, but Nikolai won't care. Lilliana will have told him that Theo took me out tonight—about the invitation—and if anything, he'll be glad that it went well enough that Theo came back to the mansion with me.

I don't even know that he'd care if Theo had taken me to bed. The contract is signed—there's no backing out of it, whether Theo waits until our wedding night or not to claim my supposed virginity. All that would mean is that he desires me so much that he couldn't wait, which plays into Nikolai's plans perfectly.

"Marika."

The voice behind me stops me in my tracks, and makes my heart sink, because it's Adrik—and I have no idea what he might have seen. I didn't even know he was here tonight.

“Adrik?” I turn slowly, and I feel my heart wrench in my chest at the expression on his face. He's standing at the foot of the stairs, a little below me, and I know he must have seen Theo and me out in the garden.

“What was he doing here?” He takes the steps two at a time, until he's standing in front of me, nearly pressing me up against the railing. “You already had the meeting to sign the betrothal. The wedding hasn't happened yet. So what—”

“He took me out to dinner.” My heartbeat is speeding up, and I know I need to be careful what I say. I don't want Adrik to be so desperate that he confesses to Nikolai purely because he doesn't believe he'll ever be able to have me. “Adrik—we talked about this—”

“Not about this.” He reaches for my hand, and I wince as the ring presses into his palm. I feel him flinch when it touches his skin, and he draws my hand upwards, holding it up to the light as he looks at the emerald.

“This is all he could give you?” Adrik scoffs, looking at the small gem. “*This* is all he thinks you're worth? I'm nothing but a bodyguard, and I'd try to do better than this for you.”

I'm torn, in that instant, between feeling touched that Adrik has even considered what sort of ring he'd ask me to marry him with—that he sees that kind of a future with me—and a protectiveness towards Theo that startles me. “It's a family heirloom,” I tell Adrik, pulling my hand away. “It's been in his family since before they were rich.”

Adrik blinks at me. “And that should matter to you? Marika, do you *hear* yourself?”

I can't even be upset at him, because he's right. It shouldn't matter to me what history there is behind the ring Theo gave me, or the sentiment. I shouldn't have accepted it for any reason other than to mollify Theo, to pull him deeper into the plan Nikolai came up with.

“It was just an explanation. Adrik—I'm tired.” The last is said with absolute

sincerity, because I *am*. I'm not sure I've ever felt so tired before, except for maybe after I was kidnapped. "I just want to go to bed."

There's a flicker of disappointment across his face, and I can tell he was hoping for something else. "Adrik—this—" I gesture between us. "It has to stop, until things are finished with Theo. I've signed a betrothal contract. If *anyone* were to find out about us, rat us out to either Nikolai or Theo—" It's hard for me to finish the sentence. I want the comfort that being with Adrik right now could bring me. I want that forgetfulness, the way he makes everything else disappear when he's with me, even if it's only a temporary forgetfulness.

"I'd get you somewhere safe. I'd get us both safe. And then, at least, we could be together—"

"Now *you* listen to yourself." I look up at him, pleading for him to understand. "My brother would kill you, or Theo would. Who knows what would happen to me? It wouldn't be good, whatever it was. You know that."

"It would mean you wouldn't have to be in his bed." Adrik's hand rests on my waist, where Theo's was just a little while ago. "Whether you want to be or not."

"I don't—"

"I saw you." There's something rough, a little savage in his voice. "I saw you kiss him. I saw the way you kissed him—"

There it is—the jealousy I'd feared. And something else flares in me, too—a sudden anger that he was watching me. That nothing is private for me, ever. Even Adrik, the only person I've ever had anything private with at all, can't give me the space to figure out how to handle this on my own. "This is a game, Adrik." I blow out a sharp, frustrated breath. "You've worked with the Bratva long enough to know how these things go. I have to make Theo think that I want him. That's part of it."

"And you can't let me know what the point of this little game is?" He looks down at me, his face creased into frustrated lines. "Why you're marrying this man, but will somehow get out of it in time to be with me? Why you're wearing that shitty ring he gave you, or kissing him like you want to climb

him like a fucking tree?” His eyes narrow. “I know desire, Marika. I know how you kiss *me*. And unless you’re a damn good actress—”

“Maybe I am!” I snap. I can feel the heat building between us—even when we’re fighting, the attraction is there, and it’s intense. The simmering desire that Theo left in my blood is still there, and Adrik is only intensifying the ache, making it hard to remember why I’m going straight to bed, why I said we can’t touch each other again until my marriage to Theo is finished, why we can’t have at least one more night. He’s so close, and I know how good that hard, muscled body feels against mine, how good he could make me feel, how he could make me forget all of the complicated feelings tangled up inside of me right now.

It could be something just for me, when I’ve given up so much for others, for my family. The temptation is strong, tugging at me, and I have to break away from Adrik, pushing at his chest so I can put some distance between us.

“When this is over,” I tell him, as calmly as I can, “then we can figure this out—if that’s still what you want. But I can’t be distracted like this. And we can’t take the risk—”

“What if I don’t?” Adrik’s voice is challenging, but I can see the pain etched in his face, the way he’s leaning towards me. If I let myself look downward, I know I’d see that he’s hard. I know how much he wants me.

“Then I would understand,” I say softly. “As much as it would hurt, I can’t expect you to just wait, Adrik.”

“You’re killing me, Marika,” he says. “This—what you expect me to watch —”

“You won’t have to watch. You won’t even be there. You’re *not* going to be any part of any security detail to Theo’s—if Nikolai even sends such a thing. He’ll have his own security; he won’t want any part of mine. And don’t argue with me,” I add, putting a rare inflection of the Bratva imperiousness I’ve learned into my voice. “That’s a powder keg waiting to explode, Adrik. Just—if you care about me, don’t make this harder. Please.”

I don’t know if he relents so much as he realizes that I’m not going to be swayed. His shoulders sag a little, and he nods. “Fine, Marika,” he says

hoarsely. “I guess you can find out if I’m still here or not, when this is all over.”

The way he says it tears at my heart. I don’t want to hurt him. It hurts *me*, to see the look on his face, knowing how it must have made him feel to see me with Theo. But I don’t have a choice in the matter. The marriage is necessary—for reasons I can’t explain to him and that I’m not sure he’d understand or agree with even if I could.

Do I hope he’s still here, after? Do I hope he still wants me? I don’t know the answer to that question, as I walk up to my room. I feel more confused than I ever have in my life, and a small part of me wishes I hadn’t said yes to Adrik on the couch that day, because it would all be much simpler, much less dangerous, much less complicated if I hadn’t.

But then I would be giving Theo my virginity. It wouldn’t have been my choice. And when I think back over all the nights I’ve spent with Adrik—

A small shiver goes through me, my stomach tightening at the memories. I want him, there’s no denying that. I care about him. And as far as love—

I could fall in love with him, I think. Love takes time, I know that. It takes space to discover more about each other than we’ve been able to, as little time as we’ve had and as much of it as we’ve spent wrapped around each other instead of talking. I know Adrik wants me, and cares for me in return. But it’s not enough to know for sure.

And unless I do, I can’t risk everything.

I slip out of the dress, laying it over the back of the chair by my vanity, carefully taking the jewelry off and putting it in the cedarwood box I keep everything else in. I know I should take off my makeup, but exhaustion overwhelms me, and I fall into bed still naked, my hair tangled in thick curls around my face.

As tired as I am, I lay there for long minutes, staring up at the ceiling. I can still feel the pulse that Theo and Adrik left behind humming through my blood, and one hand slides idly down, grazing over the soft skin of my flat stomach, down between my thighs.

I try to think of Adrik as I slip my fingers between my outer folds, feeling the

hot, slick wetness there. My clit is swollen with arousal, and I gasp as I slide a finger over it, my hips arching up into my hand. I try to pretend it's Adrik's thick fingers instead of mine, his rough hand sliding over my sensitive flesh, circling my clit the way he does before pushing two of those fingers into me and making me gasp with pleasure.

But instead, Theo's long-fingered hand comes to mind, slender and artistic, the way the sight of them had surprised me. Before I can stop myself, I imagine him nimbly strumming a finger over my stiff, swollen clit, rubbing it back and forth, that Irish burr coming through.

Look how wet you are for me, lass.

But I'm not, I want to protest out loud to the room. I know it's not true, though. It's not just Adrik pinning me up against the staircase that has me wet and throbbing, my hips pushing upwards against my hand in a desperate bid for more friction, faster touches, for the orgasm that I'm aching for now. I try to picture Adrik's mouth between my legs, the way his smooth, clean-shaven face feels against my thighs, but instead, I get a glimpse of Theo, that reddish stubble scratching against my skin, those long fingers pushing inside of me as his tongue circles the swollen, pulsing spot that I'm now frantically rubbing my fingers against, desperate for more pleasure.

Will he eat me out, on our wedding night? I could never have imagined anything like that would feel so good, before Adrik did it to me, the very first time we'd slept together. He made sure I was ready for him, teasing me with tongue and fingers, making me come twice until I was drenched and begging for his cock. I'd never known there was any kind of pleasure that could have felt so good. It was beyond anything I'd ever done with my fingers.

I can't imagine Theo will. I'm not his lover, and after our wedding, I'll be his wife, bought and paid for with a contract that ensures my family's safety. He has no need to pay attention to my pleasure, to make me come with his tongue, to do anything other than fuck me and take his own pleasure from me. I can't imagine my wedding night being anything like what I've experienced before—

Except I *am* imagining it. I can't stop, even as I try to push Theo out of my head and picture Adrik—which is still inappropriate, but somehow doesn't

feel as damning. All I can see in my head are those long-fingered hands pushing up my wedding dress, lifting my skirt above my hips, those fingers tangled in lace as his mouth slides up my inner thigh, his tongue finding the aching, pulsing spot where I need it so badly. I would be wet for him, so fucking wet, and that would just be more wet heat, so much of it, until—

I gasp, my fingers rolling over my clit, the muscles in my thighs tensing as I cry out, clapping my other hand over my mouth before someone hears. I try, desperately, to replace the image of Theo in my mind as I come, but I can't. All I can see are those fern-green eyes looking up at me with satisfaction as he makes me come with his tongue, licking up my arousal, those fingers sliding in and out of me as I tighten on them. The orgasm lasts longer than any I've ever given myself before, until I roll onto my side, my hand still working between my thighs as I curl in on myself from the force of the pleasure.

I should feel embarrassed. I *am* embarrassed. But I also feel loose-limbed and sleepy, relaxed at last, lost in the aftermath of the pleasure that imagining Theo gave me, and some of the embarrassment slips away.

It was just a fantasy, I tell myself as I close my eyes. Your wedding night will be nothing like that. And once he disappoints you, you won't have to stop yourself from fantasizing about him any longer.

It's a strange thing to stake hope on. But I do, nonetheless.

Theo



I go back to my own home, anticipating my wedding more than I thought I would.

Marika is young, that's true. I hadn't asked her exact age—it seemed insensitive—but I think my guess of twenty is likely close. Despite that, she's self-possessed, well-educated, poised, and intelligent, and I think she'll make a good wife. She's also sweeter than I expected, which startled me.

She was beautiful, too—I desired her more than I thought I would.

I know it was a foolish, romantic gesture, giving her the ring—one that she likely didn't understand entirely, which is probably for the best. I question several times on the ride home if it was the wrong choice. But I'd enjoyed her company—the thing I'd been afraid to hope for—and I had thought that she might understand the sentiment behind it, at least somewhat. That while I don't expect for there to be love between us, I think there can be something else—a commitment to trying to give each other some happiness, in a sort of arrangement that so rarely bears that fruit.

She didn't strike me as materialistic or greedy, traits I'd hoped to avoid in a wife. She wasn't cold or snappish. She seemed confused, if anything, that I'd taken even a night to get to know her before our wedding, which had saddened me. It had been nothing, to extend that courtesy to her, but it had still surprised her.

If she was expecting coldness or cruelty in our marriage, I don't intend to

give her either.

I'm forty-three, and not a fool. I don't expect a love story between Marika and me, or a romance of any kind. But what I had hoped for was a companion—and tonight made me feel that hope might not be entirely lost.

I want to try to be a good husband to her—to be faithful and kind, to find common ground with her that we can meet on and enjoy one another's company. I want to raise children with her, not get her pregnant, and then ignore both her and them. I want, quite simply, a family that I find some enjoyment in.

God knows I find less and less enjoyment in my work as the years go on.

I'd loved the power, when I was younger, the wealth, and everything that came along with it. It had been a heady thing, to stand at the forefront of a table in front of men from my age to my late father's age, and have them defer to me. It had been thrilling to hold the power of life and death over others. It had been pleasurable to spend money however I pleased and have a bevy of women willing to do whatever I asked of them. There's no sexual experience I haven't had dozens of times over by now—except for one.

I've never fucked someone I actually *liked*. I've never woken up with a woman still in my bed because I wanted her to stay there.

I'm hoping Marika will be the first.

And I hope that this is the beginning of peace between our families.

As I go up to my bedroom, shrugging off my jacket and undoing my tie, I think of the old rumors—the ones that have fed the enmity between our families for so many years. Nikolai's father refused to believe they were lies, that his wife was covering up for something else, or merely out of her mind. A great many men, his and mine, died over it. It could have erupted into full-scale war, if he'd thought he could win, and if I had wanted to destroy him and his family. I'm not always entirely certain why I didn't.

All I know is that I was at Irina's funeral, and I saw her children. Something in me hesitated to destroy their lives over a lie. And now, with Marika as my future bride, I'm glad that I didn't.

Nikolai must know now there's no truth to it, I think as I pour myself a glass of whiskey, unbuttoning my shirt with my other hand. If he thought there was truth to the rumors and lies about myself and Irina, he would never have allowed Marika to marry me. I can't believe that anything else would be true.

Whatever he discovered after his father's death must have led him to the truth. And I'm glad of that, because it means all that messy business can be put to bed, without any further discussion or violence over it.

And speaking of bed—

My cock throbs, remembering Marika's lips under mine. It was the second time I'd kissed her—and the second time she'd kissed me back. I'd been startled at the church. I hadn't expected her mouth to yield like that under mine, to feel her sway into my hands. I'd expected her to be stiff and cold, angry that I kissed her at all, for all that it was part of the ceremony. But she'd softened to me, in a way that I could only think was unexpected desire on her part.

I had been curious to find out if it would happen again.

I had wanted to touch her so many times tonight. I groan, my cock swelling along my thigh at the memory of her in that dress. I could have sent my assistant shopping for me, but I'd picked it out myself, unable to deny myself the pleasure of choosing something personally. It had been everything I'd imagined, seeing it on her. I'd wanted to run my hands all over her in the car, to kiss her, to find out how her breasts fit in my hands, to slip my fingers between my thighs and find out what she was wearing beneath it. I hadn't so much as touched her hand or her knee at the theatre, because I wasn't sure I could stop myself from going further if I did.

I can't remember wanting a woman so much in a very long time. And there had been a certain pleasure in drawing it out, in denying myself what I can have so easily from anyone else. In making myself wait, as well as her.

I'd felt her desire. It had felt like a living thing, in the air between us, building with the hours that had passed without me touching her in the way that I'm sure she had expected I would. I'd known she wanted me, then. I'd been curious to find out what would happen if I kissed her.

I almost hadn't, in the garden. I hadn't been sure that I wouldn't try to take her upstairs if I did, the house that she lived in all but alone so close. I was surprised that Nikolai let her live there alone, with just security and staff—that he didn't keep her close by at his new estate. I might have asked her about it, if I hadn't been so distracted.

The contract couldn't be reneged upon, and there was nothing in it specifically stating that I had to wait until the wedding night to claim my bride—but more than anything else, I hadn't wanted to risk Marika's regret. Even if I'd taken her virginity tonight, and Nikolai had been angry, there likely wouldn't have been any recourse for him that didn't end in a war between our families after all—and his sister ruined. But what had stopped me was the idea that *she* might have been upset that we hadn't waited, after.

I couldn't keep myself from kissing her, though. The lure of finding out if she would kiss me back again had been too great. And she had.

It makes me wonder how our wedding night will go. I'd braced myself for cold apathy or, worse still, tears and resistance, but I hadn't expected desire on her part. At best, I'd allowed myself to hope that she would tolerate it, and I'd hoped that whatever she felt, she wouldn't pretend. I'm not sure I could bear a wife who moaned faux pleasure into my ear, for the sake of hoping I would reward her for it.

But Marika's desire in that kiss had been real.

I settle back against the pillows of my bed, glass of whiskey still in hand as I rub one hand over the front of my trousers, my shirt fallen open. The lure of imagining Marika in my bed is too great—picturing her opening my shirt with her small, delicate fingers, kissing her way down my chest until her hands reach the buckle of my belt. I thumb it open myself, imagining that it's her hands there, drawing down my zipper and slipping her hand inside to touch the rigid length of my cock through my boxers.

What will she be like on our wedding night? Hesitant and unsure? Eager? From the way she kissed me in the garden, it's hard to know. A part of me likes the idea of teaching her, of her coming to my bed entirely unknowing, showing her every part of what it's like to experience pleasure in bed. The idea of those wide blue eyes looking up at me as she touches my cock,

wondering what to do, how to please me, makes me throb and twitch in a way that feels wholly unexpected.

God, I can't wait to teach her how to suck my cock. Just the thought has me rock-hard, my hand reaching to slip myself free of my boxers, wrapping my hand around the pulsing shaft. The thought of her lips, pink and bow-shaped, pressed against the tip as she licks up my pre-cum, tasting it for the first time in her life, has me on the edge far too quickly.

I'll have to have better control of myself if I'm going to please *her*.

That thought only inflames my desire, the idea of spreading her thighs wide, showing her for the first time what it feels like to have a tongue stroke *her* most intimate places, finding exactly where she likes to be touched, licked, the pressure and rhythms that will make her moan and beg and plead for me to make her come.

I've always enjoyed eating pussy. And I'll enjoy teaching Marika what it's like to have hers eaten until she comes again and again.

My hand flexes around my cock, sliding up and down in slow strokes, my imagination altering between images of her lips naively sliding along my shaft, tongue teasing the veins and exploring the new territory I've given her, and imaginings of her soft and pink and spread open for me, her delicate body squirming beneath my hands as I teach her all the ways that pleasure can be received as well as given.

Mine. Mine to teach, and pleasure, and possess.

The thought startles me. I've never been a possessive man, when it comes to women. I've never met one who made me feel that way. I never found myself caring where the women in my bed went after I'd finished a night with them, or to whom. I expected they had a string of numbers in their phones to call on a lonely night, same as I did, and if I hoped with a few that I might be at the top of the list, I never cared enough to ask.

But Marika—

One night spent with her, and I already find myself thinking of her as *mine*. Which, of course, she is—in the most technical sense. The betrothal contract is signed, the wedding date is set, and there's no going back on it. Marika *will*

be my wife—but I find I want more than that.

I find myself wanting to make her mine in every sense of the word. To have not only her body, but her affection, her loyalty, her *soul*. To have her give herself over to me not because a contract demands it, but because she wants to—because she simply can't help herself.

It's a foolish, romantic notion. But it's what fills my head as I lean back against my pillows, setting my glass aside and giving myself over to the sensation of my hand stroking my cock as I imagine all the ways I might pleasure my new bride—what she might do to me.

It's not nearly enough. I want her mouth, the tight heat of her body, and the slick, grasping stroke of my hand isn't enough to replicate that pleasure. But it's enough to make me come, and as I picture Marika's full, soft lips sliding to the base of my cock, her damp blue eyes looking at me as she takes me down her throat for the first time, I erupt with a groan that shudders all the way down to my toes as my hot cum spills over my hand.

“*Fuck—*” I groan, my hand spasming around my cock, squeezing pulse after pulse of cum out of my aching shaft as I imagine it going down her throat, over her tongue, spilling out between her lips when she can't quite swallow it all. It's not nearly as pleasurable as the real thing would be. However, the fantasy still makes it better than any other time I've jerked off in recent memory.

I lay there for a long moment as the haze of lust clears, my softening cock still in my fist and cum cooling over my skin. I look down, feeling a sort of tired irony at the whole thing—any other night, I would have had a woman here in bed with me instead of fucking my own hand like a teenager. But tonight, I only wanted Marika.

Once we say our vows, it *will* only be her. I have no intention of being an unfaithful husband. And I hope that we'll both enjoy each other enough that it won't be a hardship.

Right now, as far as I'm concerned, our wedding night can't come fast enough.

Marika



The morning of our wedding is dreary and drizzling, which seems fitting for my mood. “It’s bad luck for it to rain on your wedding day, right?” I ask Lilliana as she gets my dress out of the closet, and she gives me a small, tight smile.

“Just an old superstition,” she tells me reassuringly, but I see her glance out of the window, too, at the thickening drizzle and fog hanging over the mansion grounds.

She sits down at my vanity, reaching for a piece of fruit from the breakfast tray that was brought up. The ceremony is at one, and I’ve already slept until ten, which doesn’t give us all that much time to get ready, considering. “I miss mimosas,” she says with a laugh, as she makes one and pushes it towards me. “I haven’t really minded being pregnant, but I can’t wait to have a drink again once this baby gets here.”

I manage a small smile, but the mention of a baby gets my stomach twisting to the point that I can’t muscle down any of the food. I’m on the birth control Nikolai insisted on my arranging, for long enough now that there shouldn’t be any issues with it—but I know well enough that there’s always a chance that it fails. And if Theo gets me pregnant—

That won’t happen, I tell myself as I force down a bit of toast, not wanting Lilliana to see how worried I am. I’m pretty sure that the only way I’m going to get through this is to pretend that it’s alright until it’s all over. If I let

myself think about the reality of it all, I might faint halfway down the aisle.

There's a knock at the door, and Lilliana frowns, glancing at it. I start to get up, and then I hear a voice coming from the other side.

"Marika? Can I talk to you?"

It's Adrik. My stomach clenches instantly, and I look at Lilliana. *Thank fuck she already knows*, I think, a small burst of panic igniting inside of me. If she didn't, I would have had a hell of a time explaining why he was outside.

Which is exactly why I'm glad that he'll be staying here, while I go to Theo's. I can't trust Adrik to set his emotions aside, and see the necessity of him pretending like we don't have a connection for now.

I get up, tying my silk robe a little tighter around me. "I'll handle it," I tell Lilliana, who presses her lips thinly together with concern.

"Are you sure, Marika? I can tell him that you're busy—"

"It's better if I talk to him," I tell her quickly. She doesn't look entirely convinced, but she nods.

I walk quickly to the door, stepping outside, and closing it behind me. I see the way Adrik's gaze instantly flicks over me, taking in the thin robe, and I suddenly feel underdressed. It would be too easy for us to duck into another room, and his hands to be under it, for him to—

I shake off the thought. "Adrik, you can't be up here today," I tell him in a hushed voice. "I have a wedding to get ready for. And I know how you feel —"

"Do you?" he asks, his voice sharp. "Do you have any idea how hard this is, Marika, thinking about you going to that church—about you saying vows to him, that you'll be in his bed tonight—"

"I'm the one who has to do it!" I stare up at him, frustration welling up in my voice. "I have to go make promises I have no intention of keeping, Adrik. I have to go fuck a man whose bed I don't want to be in. I have to be his wife until this is all over. Do you think *any* of that is easier than standing by and knowing it's happening? Because if you do—"

“Do you know how helpless *I* feel?” His voice sounds ragged. “I could get us out of this, Marika, and you won’t let me—”

“It’s not worth the risk—”

“It is to me!” His voice rises, and I reach up, putting a hand over his mouth as I look worriedly down the hall. I’m almost certain Lilliana must have heard, but that’s the least of my worries. “You’re worth it to me,” he says when I pull my hand away, his voice lower now.

“Adrik—” The words send a pang through me, my chest tightening. “You can’t fix everything on your own. *I* am choosing to do this. You have to leave me alone while I play my part in this. We could try to run—but don’t you understand what that means? I love my brother. I would never be able to see him again, or Lilliana, or their child, if we did that. Making it so that you’re all I have isn’t a way to start a relationship—”

“In time, he’d see—”

“No.” I shake my head. “And if you really think that, you don’t know my brother as well as you think you do. We’d have to disappear forever, because if Nikolai ever found out, he’d punish you—so much more than he would me. I’d be cut off from everything else I loved, forever. Or I can do this, and have a chance to have both, when it’s done.”

“You really think—”

“Yes.” I feel a little guilty, cutting him off again, but I’m running out of time, and I can tell that he’s not going to let this go easily. “We’ll have *time* then, Adrik. Time to figure out what this is between us, without having to scorch the earth behind us while we do.”

“I don’t need time to know how I feel about you,” he says sharply, and I let out a sigh.

“I *do*, Adrik. And whatever that makes you feel, I need you to understand—you know what happened to me in that compound. You know what those guards did to me, what Ivan Narokov did to me. I have scars from it, inwardly and out. You picked my body up off of the floor after he beat me half to death, Adrik! You know what that did to me. You can’t expect that I’ve healed so quickly that I can know exactly how I feel and what I want in a

month—”

“I love you, Marika.” He says it quick and firm, as if it’s been hovering on the tip of his tongue for a long time, and he’s been holding it back. “I know. I love you, and I would do anything to keep you from marrying this man, from having to know that he’s—”

“Don’t say it again. Please.” I look up at him, suddenly so tired all over again. *Is a relationship always supposed to make you so tired?* “I know you don’t want to think of me with another man. I don’t want to *be* with him. But this is the best choice, Adrik. And if you love me—then you’ll trust me.”

“You can’t even say it back?” His blue eyes look dark and sad, making my chest ache all over again to see it. “You’re going off to marry this Irishman, and you can’t even tell me you love me before you go?”

I take a deep, slow breath, reminding myself that this is because Adrik cares for me. If he’s lashing out, he’s doing so out of emotion, and because he is a man used to protecting me, to taking care of problems like Theo for my family and me, and in this instance, he can’t do so.

I reach up slowly, touching the side of Adrik’s face gently. “If I say it to you, Adrik, I don’t want it to be like this. So, no, I’m not going to say it right now. I don’t want it to be rushed, or forced, or desperate. I want it to be when I’ve chosen to, because I’m very certain that I want you to know. I’ve never told any man that I love him, and I don’t ever want to do so hastily.”

“Don’t say it to him.” His hands touch the side of my face, tilting it upwards, his gaze hot and full of emotion. “Don’t ever say it to him, Marika.”

“I won’t.” It feels like an easy promise to make. “This isn’t that kind of marriage, Adrik. And he knows it. He won’t expect it.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise,” I whisper, and then Adrik bends his head, and kisses me.

I’m glad I haven’t done my makeup yet. The kiss is hard and hot and deep, his mouth devouring mine, the kiss of a man who knows he has to let me go into the hands of another and is fighting it with everything within himself. His mouth slants over mine, his tongue pushing possessively into my mouth,

kissing me as if he wants to leave the imprint of my lips on his and his on mine, and when he pulls away, we're both breathing hard.

"I love you, Marika," he repeats. "And I'll be here when this is done."

"I know," I whisper, and I do. And I hate myself for what I have to say next. "We can't see each other again until it is done, Adrik. Not another moment after this one. You have to go."

He hesitates for one second, and I think that he's going to argue with me about it again. And then he turns sharply away, as if he's afraid he won't be able to go unless he does now, and stalks down the hall, leaving me there.

I press one hand to my chest, trying to catch my breath before I go back into the room. The moment I open the door and step inside, Lilliana takes one look at my flushed chest and reddened mouth and narrows her eyes.

"Is he going to be a problem, Marika?" she asks, and I can hear layers beneath those words, consequences depending on what I say. Not for me, but for Adrik.

"No," I say softly, and I hope to god that it's true. "No, he won't be."

Lilliana looks at me for a long moment, as if she's determining whether she believes me or not, and then she nods, getting up slowly from the vanity. "I brought back your mother's pearls," she says finally. "So you could wear them today."

"Thank you." I look up at her, managing a smile. "I'm glad I'll have them."

The time flies by after that, while I get ready. I curl my hair and brush it out into long, silvery-blond waves, doing my makeup with a light hand. After a moment's hesitation, I decide to add a red lip, telling myself that it's because it suits me, not because I want to remind Theo of the night he took me out.

Lilliana helps me into my dress, buttoning it up the back as I stand in front of the full-length mirror, trying to find some small happiness in it all. The dress is beautiful, fitted perfectly, the lace skimming over my curves and making me look like the perfect bride, especially as Lilliana slips the comb into my hair, holding the lace veil, and arranges it around me. But I feel like a little girl playing dress-up, especially as she clasps the strand of pearls around my

neck that belonged to my mother, to match the small pearl teardrop earrings I'd slipped into my ears and the strand on my wrist.

"You look stunning," she tells me as I slip my feet into the nude Louboutin heels I'd bought to go with the dress, smoothing my hands over the soft lace as I look in the mirror once more. "I don't think there's ever been a more beautiful bride."

"That can't be true—you married my brother," I tell her, but even the compliment feels stiff on my lips. For a moment, I don't know how I'm going to manage to get through this.

I feel numb, all the way to the church. I can feel the minutes ticking by, all the way to the moment when I stand at the altar and say my vows to Theo. It almost feels like I'm outside of myself as I walk up the steps, as I stand in the nave and let Lilliana arrange the veil over my face and hand me the bouquet I'd chosen, a spray of daisies and lilies and peonies in white and cream and pink. It occurs to me that my father should be here, that I should be holding onto his arm as I start down the aisle, and I don't know what to feel. It's another layer of complicated emotion on top of so much more—knowing that if my father were still alive, I might not be marrying Theo at all, that if he were, I might be marrying someone else more permanently, and at the same time wanting the man who, despite all his faults, *was* my father.

Don't think about it, I tell myself as I start to walk behind Lilliana, the music filling the church as I take one step at a time toward the altar, where Theo is waiting.

I don't look at him until the last possible moment. But as I stop in front of him, turning to face the man I'm going to marry, I feel a wave of sudden dizziness.

"Easy there," Theo murmurs, his hands wrapping around mine, and I blink at him, startled that he'd picked up on my unsettledness.

"I'm alright," I whisper, although I'm not entirely sure that I am. *Don't pass out at your own wedding!* I tell myself harshly, and I focus on the sensation of Theo's hands wrapped around mine, strong and sure, the scent of incense and flowers filling my nose, and I look at him, startled all over again by how handsome he is.

He's wearing a dark grey suit, tailored perfectly as always. There's a spray of flowers pinned to his jacket, matching my bouquet, and his dark auburn hair is brushed back and to one side, accentuating the sharp lines of his face. He'd shaved for the occasion, his strong jaw smooth, and I have a sudden wild urge to reach up and touch his face.

Father O'Halloran clears his throat, and we both look at him. "Are you ready to start?" he asks, not unkindly, and I nod, swallowing hard.

I feel like I'm in a fog the entire time we're saying our vows. All I can do is repeat, my voice faintly echoing what Father O'Halloran says, because I can't think too much about what I'm saying. It's lies, all of it—everything that comes off of my tongue, and I'm not sure why I feel badly about that. Theo isn't a good man—if what Nikolai has said is true, he hurt my family beyond bearing. He's ruled Chicago with an iron fist to rival my father's. He's my family's enemy—but as I stand there, thinking of how he'd helped steady me with a touch and gentle words, how every interaction that I've had with him has been so far, I know that if I think too hard about what I'm pretending to promise, I'll fall apart.

There's the cool touch of metal on my finger, sliding down it, and I realize that we've gotten all the way to the exchange of rings. I manage to repeat the words I'm meant to, slipping Theo's ring onto his finger, and then I hear *you may kiss your bride* in the moment before Theo lifts my veil, and I see his face clearly.

He gives me just a moment before he kisses me. He slides the veil back over my hair, those fern-green eyes meeting mine as he looks down at me, and I see the anticipation in his. It's not lust, not hunger—but an eagerness that seems somehow more innocent than either of those things. It's almost as if—

As if he's *happy* to be married to me.

And then one of his hands is on my waist, the other touching my cheek, and his lips are on mine.

For the third time, I feel myself kissing him back, and fear washes over me. *This is supposed to be pretend*, I think frantically, as my mouth softens under his, my body leaning into his touch. *You're not supposed to really want it*. But the way he kisses me—

It's gentle and hungry all at once, his mouth grazing over mine in a way that's somehow both entirely appropriate for church and, at the same time, so full of desire that it makes my skin tingle with unwanted arousal. I shouldn't be getting wet in *church*, and yet I can feel a sudden clinging dampness between my thighs as Theo's fingers press against my waist, his mouth gentle and yet urgent against mine.

He breaks the kiss, pulling away, and I feel as if I can't breathe for a moment as his fingers linger on my cheek, those green eyes on mine.

"Let's go, wife," he says, and something about the way he says it makes my stomach tighten in a way that isn't entirely unpleasant as his fingers lace through mine, and we start to make our way back down the aisle.

—

The reception is lovely.

Lilliana and I did most of the planning together, and it came out beautifully. There are lilies and peonies everywhere, the caterer we chose made a fantastic meal, and the wine selections are perfect. The cake is exactly what I wanted, a towering confection with sugar seed pearls trailing over it and frosting flowers to match the decorations, and I see a bemused smile on Theo's face as we walk over to it to cut it, the first of the motions that I'm going to have to go through tonight.

"Was this your choice?" he asks as I reach for the knife, and I nod, wondering why he even cares. He's made a point of complimenting the choices I and Lilliana made throughout the night, and it's confusing to me. I'd expected him to get through the pomp and circumstance of the reception mutely, or to leave me to go and talk to the other men here, but he seems dead set on enjoying his own wedding. It's the last thing that I'd thought would happen.

"It was," I tell him, sliding the knife through the layers of chocolate and coconut—also my choice—and taking out a small piece to feed him. I raise my fingers to his lips, intending to make it quick, but his eyes catch mine as he makes a point of brushing them against my fingertips as he takes the bite of cake, and another burst of warmth blossoms through me.

What is he doing? What sort of game is he playing at?

I let him do the same, wondering if he's going to smear my makeup with it or feed it to me nicely. I almost hope for the former, just so I have a reason to be angry with him. Instead, he gently takes a small piece and slips it into my mouth, and as I taste the sugar bursting over my tongue, he presses his fingertips lightly against my lower lip. There's heat in his eyes, a promise of desire for later, and I suddenly wish that our first dance wasn't coming up next.

Being in his arms is going to prove to be more of a challenge than I thought.

There's cheering as we finish feeding each other the cake, and I hear the first strains of the music that Lilliana chose for our first dance start. I hadn't known what to pick—there's nothing meaningful for an arranged marriage—and so she'd chosen some classical piece, something pretty and empty of any real significance. If Theo has any thoughts about it, he doesn't say them as he leads me out onto the gleaming wooden dance floor, his hand on my waist as the music swells.

I'm all too aware of how close he is to me, how hard and lean his body feels brushing against mine, how, in only a few hours, those layers of fabric will be stripped away, and I'll know exactly what lies beneath them.

I don't hate the thought of that as much as I should.

His hand is warm, even through the lace of my dress. "You look beautiful," he murmurs, those green eyes still on mine. It's as if he enjoys looking at me, as if he likes the sight of me in his arms. "I can't imagine that there's ever been a more beautiful bride."

"Lilliana said the same thing this morning," I murmur, and he laughs.

"She's a smart woman, then. I've never had much of an occasion to meet her before this."

"She's good for my brother. They hated each other when they got married. But eventually—"

"She came around?" His lips twitch, and mine thin, catching his implication.

“They both did,” I say shortly, looking away as he turns me in a circle.

“Sometimes arrangements can work out better than expected,” Theo says quietly. “If both parties want to make it work.”

That knot of anxiety in my belly tightens. *What am I going to do?* I wonder, trying to ignore the way I can feel the heat of his touch still burning through my dress, sending flutters of sensation through me. Everything Nikolai has told me and everything I’ve ever heard about Theo suggests that he’s a cruel man and a liar, but everything Theo has shown me suggests that he’s sincere, and that he wants to make this marriage work as much as he’s able. And if that’s true—

If that’s true, then there are other things that I don’t know how I can believe are true, either. I can’t reconcile the man Theo is showing me with the sort of man who would fuck my mother and then let her be killed, who would put a woman he cared about in that kind of danger—

Isn’t Adrik putting you in that kind of danger? He knew what he was doing, too. He’s arrogant enough or just in love enough to think the two of you won’t be hurt or that it doesn’t matter. Theo could have been the same.

But I can’t make it make sense in my head. And I can’t think about it too long, or I won’t be able to go through with tonight.

If I don’t think about it, though—

I find myself slipping into desires that can only get me into trouble.

It doesn’t matter, I tell myself firmly, as Theo turns me around again, spinning me before bringing me back into the circle of his arms. *Either way, you’re doing this for your family and for your own freedom. You don’t want to be this man’s wife, and you never would have.*

I list all the reasons I *don’t* want him in my head as we dance. He’s twice my age. He’s my family’s enemy. He’s just another mob boss, the kind of man I was always supposed to marry and would have preferred not to. He’s never going to love me—at best, we might be companionable with each other, but nothing more. And I don’t believe that he’s really going to be faithful to me.

The last strains of the music drift away, and we go back to our table. I pour

myself another glass of wine, trying to settle my nerves as I watch the guests drift out to the dance floor. I see Nikolai and Lilliana dancing, the way she looks at him—an expression on her face that I could never have imagined seeing there just a few short months ago.

So much changed, so quickly. *What if it changes for me?*

But that's not possible. This is different. Nikolai had cared for Lilliana from the start, despite what she'd thought—he'd always wanted to protect her, to take care of her. They'd been at odds, but their marriage had been based on a desire to protect. My marriage to Theo is a business arrangement, and one based on revenge.

It will never be the same—and we'll never fall in love.

As the reception winds down, he glances over at me. "I planned on taking you back to the mansion tonight," he says quietly. "I could have gotten us a hotel, I suppose—but I liked the idea of having our wedding night in our own bed. I hope you don't mind."

I feel that odd pang again, that confusion about what he really wants from me. It feels like a sentimental thing to do, just like the ring. It doesn't feel like the cold, detached arrangement I'd expected.

It makes me wonder what he'd say, if I said I *did* mind. If I told him that I preferred to have our wedding night in a hotel somewhere, something more impersonal. But the truth is, I hadn't thought about it either way. And it feels wrong, somehow, to test him when it really doesn't matter to me.

"That's fine," I tell him, and I can't read the expression on his face. But I think, when he reaches for my hand, it made him happy.

I've never known a more confusing man.

Marika



Theo is quiet on the drive back to his mansion, sitting in the backseat with me, my lace skirt tucked around my legs. I'm curious about what he's thinking, but I don't dare ask.

It's probably just what he's going to do to you when he gets you in bed, I tell myself, but I don't think it's that. He's mulling over something, and I'm not entirely sure I want to know what it is.

The mansion itself is beautiful, a good bit outside of the city, on what appears to be acres of rolling green lawn, dark stone rising up out of it at the end of a long, winding driveway flanked by iron lampposts. There's a certain old-world beauty to it that I can appreciate. As Theo lets me in the front door, telling me he gave the staff the night off, I see that carries over into the interior. The floors are dark hardwood, the walls a deep green, and it has a close, cozy feel that I hadn't expected from a mansion. It's certainly nothing like the one I've occupied all my life.

"We—" he clears his throat. "We could have a drink first, if you like."

He seems almost awkward, and it startles me. *You're twenty-some years older than me, I want to say. Why are you acting like you're sixteen and trying to seduce a girl for the first time?*

I don't know what to say in response. To tell him I'd rather just get it over with sounds rude, but I don't see the purpose in having a drink and drawing it out. I remember what he told me, that he had hoped for companionship in a

wife, and I know that having a drink with him is only leading him into a false sense of what this is—what we might be together.

But I also know that's what I'm meant to be doing. The more I can lure Theo into thinking that I want him—even that I care about him, the easier it will be to do what Nikolai needs me to do.

I have no reason to feel guilty about it. From what I've been told, Theo has deeply hurt our family. But—

Don't think about it, I tell myself, realizing he's still waiting for me to give him an answer.

"A drink would be nice," I tell him. "Champagne, maybe? Something for a celebration."

"I was thinking whiskey, for myself," he says with a laugh, leading me down the hall and towards a large room with a huge fireplace at one end, plush velvet and leather couches in deep green and dark browns arranged in front of it. "But I think I can find a bottle of champagne to open for you."

"I'd take wine, if you don't want to open an entire bottle." I sit down gingerly on the edge of one of the couches, feeling very conspicuous, still in my wedding dress. Theo shrugs off his jacket, laying it over the back of one of the nail-studded barstools in front of the gilded mahogany bar at the far end of the room, and loosens his tie.

Something about the motion, the quick way he tugs at it, and the way those long fingers nimbly undo the first two buttons of his shirt as he drops ice into a glass with an audible *clink* sends a small flush of heat through me. *Calm down*, I tell myself, but I see the touch of dark auburn hair at the edge of his shirt. I have a sudden vision of myself undoing the rest of the buttons, my fingers sliding down his chest until I see all of what's underneath the shirt.

He pours me a glass of wine, carrying both it and the whiskey over as he comes to sit next to me. "Here you are," he says, handing me the glass, and I take it gingerly.

Theo hesitates, as if he's trying to decide what to say. "To companionship," he says finally, tilting his glass towards mine, and I feel another of those confusing pangs in my chest as I tap the edge of my glass against his.

“Companionship,” I say softly, and I know it’s the first real lie I’ve told him.

I have no intention of being his companion. I have no intention of being anything other than his unwilling wife until the day comes when Nikolai has what he needs to put an end to Theo and his empire—then, I will go on with my life and become whoever I will be without him.

There is no future where we are anything other than enemies, and that ends with anything other than Theo deposed and dead.

The wine is good. If nothing else, it softens a little of what’s left of my nerves, and I find myself wondering what tonight would have been like if I were actually a virgin. If Theo really was going to be my first, instead of me pretending that he will be. Would I be more nervous? Less? Angry or sad?

There’s no point in thinking about it, because you don’t know, and you never will, I tell myself. What I need to do is focus on what’s happening now, so I can get through the night without Theo realizing that this isn’t my first time.

He reaches for my hand as I finish the wine, helping me up from the couch, and my heart slams into my chest in a way that it shouldn’t—not with him. *I’m nervous because of how tonight needs to go,* I tell myself, as he leads me toward the stairs. *Not because I’m looking forward to going to bed with him.*

I keep telling myself that, all the way up the mahogany staircase, up to the third floor, where Theo leads me to the broad double doors that lead into his room. *Our* room, after tonight, and I feel my heart beat hard in my chest again.

I want to run. Far away from here, far away from all of this, because I feel terrified suddenly. Terrified that he’ll know, that he’ll realize this isn’t my first time, that he’s been duped, and also for a reason I can’t fully express and that I’m afraid to look too closely at. I’m terrified that I’ll want him, and terrified that I won’t be able to pretend to want him enough.

I’m afraid that everything I’ve been told about him is true—and so very scared that it’s all wrong, and that Theo McNeil is a very different man than I’ve been led to believe.

He lets me go into the room first, flicking on the light as he steps in behind me. The huge bedroom is suddenly flooded with light from an iron and

crystal chandelier overhead, a strange mixture of roughness and delicacy that I find oddly appealing. The rest of the room follows a similar theme—the floor is heavy dark wood, but there are thick rugs scattered over it—a fur one in front of the fireplace and by the bed, and another textured, woven one near a huge window with an oversized chair almost big enough for two people sitting by it. I can picture myself curled up in that chair, and I flinch, realizing how quickly I was able to place myself in this room, in this house. How quickly my mind made itself at home.

A coping mechanism, nothing more.

“It’s chilly.” Theo gives me a tight, almost nervous smile, walking to the fireplace and beginning to go about what he needs to do in order to light it. “The house has central heating, of course, but it’s so large that I swear it can’t keep up.”

I stare at him, feeling a little as if I’m watching him outside of myself. I’m standing here in my wedding dress, on our wedding night, and it feels like Theo is intentionally putting off the moment when he takes me to bed. Like he’s delaying it out of—

I can’t even imagine what would make a man like Theo nervous about fucking a woman. He could have already had me twice in the time I’ve been in this house. I can’t for the life of me understand why he’s dragging it out.

Slowly, I walk to the edge of the bed and sink down on it, watching him build the fire. I kick off my shoes, digging my toes into the thick fur rug, and I don’t know how I feel about all of this. A part of me appreciates that he’s taking his time. That he didn’t just push me down on the bed and fuck me. That maybe he’s even trying to decide how to go about it in a way that doesn’t make me feel—

Feel what, exactly? Violated? Used? Forced? None of those things have to apply, necessarily, but they’re all true in a way—this marriage is arranged, against my will. I might have walked into the church under my own power, said my vows, and agreed to everything, but I didn’t *want* it. And Theo—

I remember his admission in the restaurant. How he’d said that in his own way, he’d been pushed into this too. I’d shrugged it off at the time, annoyed that he would compare his men urging him to marry with the future that I’d

faced all my life—being told who I would marry and when, who would have the pleasure of my body without expecting any of my own.

What if he has reservations of his own tonight?

I have to force myself not to think about what other reservations there could be—what other reasons he might have for looking at me and struggling with the idea of our wedding night. But then he stands up, slowly, as the fire starts to crackle to life—as he turns to face me, I see such raw desire in his face that it makes my breath catch in my throat.

I sit there, my hands knotted together in my lap, waiting for him to cross the room to me. I think that maybe I should get up and go to him, that maybe that's what he expects—but I can't move. My heart is suddenly hammering in my chest, and it feels hard to breathe.

“Marika.” He walks towards me, one slow step at a time, until he's standing right in front of me. I force myself to keep looking up at him, at that naked need in those green eyes, and I can feel my pulse beating in my throat. He reaches out, his fingers gently brushing along my jawline. “Marika, I—”

“What?” I whisper softly. I don't understand. I don't understand any of it—not his hesitation or his need or what's going on inside of his head.

“I want you so badly,” he says, his voice low and husky. “I want to be gentle with you. And I'm worried—”

It hits me then, in a wave of realization that just as quickly turns into guilt. He wants me—has even been fantasizing about this, probably, and now he's worried he'll be too rough with me. He thinks I'm a virgin, and he's afraid he'll hurt me.

The danger of the game I'm playing feels very immediate, and very real. And I feel horrible, because I know I need to play into this game.

I need to play into his fears, not reassure him of them. Because if they're *too* well-salved, then he might suspect the truth.

I nod slowly, biting my lip. “We could go slowly?” I suggest, standing up, smoothing my hands over the lace of my skirt. “Just—you could kiss me, first.”

Theo takes a slow breath, and I try to steel myself against the touch of his lips. I know what they feel like, how *good* they feel. Before, we were supposed to stop—but now it's the exact opposite. We're meant to end up in bed, at the ultimate culmination of the kiss he's about to give me, and I should be reeling away from it, dreading it.

But he steps closer, close enough to put his hand on the small of my back, the way he did when we were dancing. He draws me closer, so that we're just barely touching, and he reaches up, pushing a trailing lock of my blonde hair out of my face.

"I want to make it good for you," he says, his voice low and husky. "I know it isn't always—the first time. I've never had a virgin before. I don't know —"

God, the guilt cuts deeper than I ever thought it could. *You never will*, I think wildly, and I have to sink my teeth hard into my lower lip to stop from collapsing into a kind of hysterical laughter that could destroy everything in an instant. I wasn't cut out for this. I'm not a cold-hearted person, and I'm not the kind of woman who can stand in front of a man looking at her with so much desire, who is trying to be kind and careful when he could have been anything but and suffered no repercussions, a man who is worried that he'll hurt his bride in ways that are impossible, and lie to his face.

But I *have* to be, or I'm as good as dead. My *family* is as good as dead.

No matter how gentle Theo is being now, I don't think he would take the deception well.

"It's alright." I reach up slowly, touching him of my own volition for the first time. I touch his face the way he's touching mine, and it's too sweet, too romantic for what's really happening here. I feel like I'm in some twisted fairytale, some horrible dream that I'll wake up from.

I feel him lean into my touch a little, my fingers skimming over the slight stubble on his jaw, and I feel my own pulse leap in response. I hadn't expected it to be this slow—I've never experienced it like this before, slow and gentle, and it's throwing me off in ways that I hadn't prepared for.

He draws me in, his hand on the small of my back, the hand on my cheek

slipping down to my chin, tipping my mouth up to his. When his lips touch mine, it's a slow, soft kiss.

It's as if he's determined to do things differently with me, his wife, than he has with any other woman, and it makes my head spin.

Not just the way he's touching me, the soft pressure of his mouth that deepens a little as he leans into the kiss, but the *idea* of it all. Theo McNeil is a brutal man, a man steeped in blood and violence, like my father and my brother and all the men I've ever known. But this—what's happening tonight, isn't any of that.

He kisses me like a man who wants to make love to his wife, and it doesn't make any sense at all to me. It feels like a shock, that gentle touch, learning that everything I thought I knew so well could be so different from what I experienced before. It makes me wonder what else Theo could show me, that I didn't know.

And it also feels so fucking good.

His tongue slides over my lower lip, teasing, urging my mouth open. His hands drop to my waist, both of them, pulling me against him a little more urgently. I *hear* my soft intake of breath as his hips press against mine, and I feel the thick ridge of his cock against me through the soft wool of his suit trousers and the lace of my skirt. I feel his hands tighten against my waist, hear his low groan as his tongue sweeps into my mouth, and I forget that I'm not supposed to want this.

What I can't forget is that I'm not supposed to know what I'm doing.

It's not hard when it comes to the kissing. I've only kissed one man, and Theo is much different from Adrik. Adrik kisses me possessively, hungrily, and Theo is kissing me as if he wants to taste every bit of my mouth, his lips brushing over and sucking lightly at mine, his tongue sliding over my lower lip and into my mouth, the scrape of his light stubble against my chin different from the smoothness of Adrik's face. There's a restrained heat in the way Theo kisses me, as if he knows he might devour me if he let himself loose, and there's something darkly exciting about that. It makes me wonder what he would be like if he *did* let loose, if he released the control that I can feel him hanging onto, and fucked me exactly the way I can feel that he

wants to.

His hands slide up my back, fingers brushing over the row of buttons, and I let my hands drop to the open space at the top of his shirt, my fingertips touching the dark auburn hair there. That, too, is new. I find myself suddenly curious to see more, to see what's underneath the crisp button-down, and I start to slip the buttons free, revealing inch by inch the muscled chest beneath it.

Theo groans, breaking the kiss as his lips graze over my jaw, and I feel a flush of sensation over my skin. His mouth slides upwards, lips trailing over the shell of my ear, to the soft spot between my ear and my jaw, and I let out a sudden gasp as I feel a jolt of pleasure.

“Ah,” he chuckles lightly, brushing his lips there again. “That’s a spot you like then, aye?”

I hear that burr of an accent, and it sends another shiver of pleasure through me. I’d liked it when I first heard him speak, but hearing it laced with desire is something else altogether. I swallow hard as I feel his cock twitch against my thigh, through the layers of clothing.

My own arousal is rising too quickly, too fast. I suck in a breath as his lips brush against my neck, and take a step back, breaking the contact between our bodies as I undo the last button of his shirt and pull it out of his trousers.

“I—” I try to catch my breath, hoping I can play it off as virginal nervousness instead of what it is—fear of how much I’m starting to *want*. I can feel the pulsing ache beginning to spread through me, that heated need to be touched and kissed and *filled*, but it feels so different with Theo. Adrik would have already been inside of me by now, and the delayed gratification is so good, building the need in a way that I’ve never experienced—and that threatens to pull me under like a tide.

“I want to see you,” I whisper in a trembling voice, and Theo’s mouth quirks up a little at the corners.

“Can’t deny my wife that,” he says, a hint of amusement in his voice. He shrugs the shirt off of his shoulders, letting me watch as it slides off of him, revealing a leanly muscled chest dusted with that dark auburn hair, and tautly

muscled shoulders leading into arms that are the same. He's fitter than I would have expected—his arms are lean, but look as if he could lift me without effort. His stomach is flat and taut, bisected by a line of definition that leads into the waist of his trousers in a way that suddenly makes me want to run my tongue over his skin.

I see the thick ridge straining against his fly twitch again, pressing against the fabric, and I know he's enjoying my eyes on him as much as I'm enjoying looking. I don't know if it's an optical illusion, but he looks *huge*. Long and thick and possibly bigger than what I've had before.

Before the night is over, I'll know what that feels like inside of me. The thought tightens something low in my belly, and I feel horribly torn between wanting to draw it out as long as possible, and wanting him to get it over with, so I can stop wrestling with this awful desire. I think I could probably push him to the point of being unable to stop himself from simply fucking me the way he wants to—but if I do that, I risk him realizing that I'm not as innocent as he believes.

Theo tosses the shirt to the floor, stepping towards me again, and his hands on my waist turn me slowly so that my back is to him. "My turn, lass," he says in that low, thick voice, and it sends another shiver down my spine as I feel him reach up, brushing my hair away from my neck.

His lips press against the nape of my neck, and I let out a small, involuntary gasp.

I hear the soft vibration of his amusement against my skin as he does it again, his fingers nimbly undoing the first button of my dress. He begins to undress me as slowly as he's done everything else, his fingers sliding down my spine as each button comes free, until the dress is undone down to my waist.

His hands slide against my skin, under the dress against my waist, and my head tips back as I let out a shuddering breath that ends on a moan as his hands slide upwards, over the taut skin of my stomach and up my ribs, his fingers caressing the small curves of my breasts.

He's barely touched me, and I can already feel that my panties are soaked. The silk fabric is clinging between my thighs, and I know when he finally does slip a hand between my legs, he'll find me dripping wet for him. I can't

imagine what it will feel like when he actually does start to touch me in earnest.

“You could just take it off,” I whisper, my voice still trembling, and Theo goes still behind me, his hands still splayed over my skin, below my breasts. Slowly, he slips his hands free of my dress, turning me again to face him, the dress still clinging loosely to my shoulders.

“I could,” he agrees, his fingers sliding up my arms, leaving prickles of gooseflesh in their wake with every touch. “But you were meant to be savored, Marika. *Enjoyed.*” He draws in a slow breath, pulling me closer once again, his hand lifting to tip my chin up so that I’m looking directly into those fern-green eyes. “I want nothing more right now than to lay you back on that bed, drag your dress up above your thighs and fuck you hard and fast.” His mouth is close to mine, his breath warm against my lower lip, whiskey and the musk of warm male skin filling the air around me. It’s enough to make me tremble with a kind of desire that I’ve never felt before. “I want to sink my cock into you and fuck you like an animal claiming its mate—but you deserve better than that, tonight of all nights. You deserve gentleness.” His thumb presses against my lip, his gaze heavy on mine. “You are the closest thing our world has to a princess, Marika. You are a treasure, and I refuse to take it lightly that you have been given to me.”

His hand slides into my hair, and I feel the few pins in it loosen as he steps closer. “There will be time for me to do the things I’ve thought about, to touch you in the ways I crave. But not tonight.”

And then his mouth comes down on mine, and it’s all I can do to remember the role that I have to play.

My hands press against his chest, fingers curling against the soft hair there, the muscled flesh, and I moan into the kiss. His hands grip the lace at my shoulders, drawing it down slowly so it falls over my arms, the bodice of my wedding gown clinging to the tops of my small breasts for a moment before it falls away, leaving me bare against him from the waist up, flesh to flesh. I arch into him, gasping as he kisses me harder than before, giving me a taste of that carefully leashed desire. I can feel my pulse throbbing through my veins, my skin tight and sensitive as his fingers slide over the curves of my breasts again.

“Marika—” he groans my name against my lips, his hands pushing the dress down over my hips and letting it puddle to the floor, leaving me in nothing but the white silk panties that I’d had on beneath it. “I want to taste you,” he whispers against my mouth, and then he’s backing me towards the bed, lifting me onto it, so that I’m in the middle of the cloud-soft mattress with my head sinking back into the mountain of pillows.

He’s still half dressed, and his cock looks as if it’s about to burst through his fly, he’s so hard. He joins me on the bed, looking down at me like a starving man observing a feast. He leans over me, gently nudging my legs apart so that he can kneel between them as he bends to kiss me again.

There’s no hesitation in me this time. He kisses like he’s perfecting an art, his mouth teasing and nipping and sucking lightly at mine. I can’t stop myself from touching him in return, letting my fingers slide over the ridges and valleys of muscle along his chest, his stomach, his arms. *I’m going to be in his bed one way or another*, I tell myself as I feel myself melting into the kisses, my body hot and alive with a rapidly building desire for *more*. *Is it so wrong to get at least a little pleasure out of it?*

His mouth feels hot as a brand as it slides over my jaw and down my throat, his hands finally moving higher than the curves beneath my breasts. I hadn’t realized just how tightly he had me wound until his fingers slide over my nipples, and I gasp against his mouth, my hips jerking at the sudden sensation blooming over my skin.

Theo pulls back, his eyes darkening with lust as he looks at me. “Feels good, lass?” he murmurs, strumming his fingers over my stiff nipples again, and I moan as he lightly pinches them, sending bursts of pleasure through me. It feels as if there’s a direct line to my clit, which feels swollen and sensitive, aching to be touched. He hasn’t even come close yet, and I’m starting to feel a little desperate.

I nod breathlessly, glad that I can’t speak. My shock at how good everything he’s doing feels, and my surprise at the way he’s going about all of it can reasonably translate into innocence about how all of this works, but I still don’t trust myself entirely. I’m afraid at every moment that something I do or say will betray the fact that this isn’t my first time.

“What about this?” he murmurs, and then he bends his mouth to my breast, his palm molding it against his lips as his tongue flicks out, trailing a heated circle around the stiffened peak. “Or this?”

His teeth settle against my skin, not hard—a light nip, nothing more. But it sends another jolt through me, and I gasp, arching upwards so that more of me is pressed against his lips, wanting more sensation, more pleasure. I feel that vibration against my skin again as he laughs, a low, deep sound, and I can tell he’s enjoying this. He’s enjoying discovering what turns me on.

He could have tossed you onto the bed and fucked you until he came and then rolled over and gone to sleep, but instead, he’s exploring you like you’re something for him to claim. Nothing about tonight is going the way I’d imagined it would, and my control is unraveling quickly—long before his does, it seems.

Theo licks a slow path between my breasts, repeating the same touches on the other side, until I’m starting to squirm beneath him. He squeezes me lightly once more, clearly enjoying the feeling of me in his hands, before his mouth starts to slide down between my ribs, and I know where he’s going next.

My entire body tightens in anticipation. I hadn’t known if he would do this or not. *I’d* expected to be the one touching *him*, pleasuring him with hands and mouth, and pretending to be hopelessly ignorant about it all. Instead, his hands are on my waist, my hips, holding me down on the bed as his mouth traces a slow, hot line down between my hipbones, his lips grazing over me there before his hands finally go lower, pressing against my inner thighs as he opens me up for him.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he murmurs, his hands spreading me, kneeling as he looks down at the wet pink flesh between my thighs. “So fucking perfect.”

I’ve never seen any man look at my naked body the way he is—like he wants to devour me and savor me all at once, like I’m something to be ravished and cherished at the same time. I never expected it, and I don’t know how to deal with it now that it’s happening. I don’t know what to make of any of it, but the way his gaze settles between my thighs sends a fresh rush of arousal through me, and I can *feel* how wet I am. The insides of my thighs are damp with it, and I can feel myself dripping, so wet that no matter how big he is, I

don't know if it will be a struggle for him to get inside of me.

That thought sends a pang of fear through me. Adrik was no small man either. *Will he be able to tell?* I wonder frantically as Theo leans down between my legs, turning his head to kiss the inside of my thigh lightly. I've heard men can't always tell, but I don't know enough about my own body to be sure. I didn't exactly have anyone to teach me how it all works. What I knew of my own pleasure before Adrik, I learned through nights exploring, seeking out what was making me ache and throb for something I couldn't understand, and finding the ways to ease it.

"You taste good, lass. Even just this," he murmurs as his lips slide over the soft flesh of my inner thigh, his tongue tracing a slow pattern upwards. His mouth presses lightly against my outer folds, a brush of lips against my most intimate flesh before he pulls back slightly, his fingers gently spreading me open. I gasp as he touches me, and when his first finger finally slides over my clit, ever so gently, I let out a sound that is very much like a strangled moan.

"Have you ever touched yourself here?" he asks, his voice low and gravelly, and I feel a sense of sudden shame that flushes my skin from the roots of my hair all the way down my chest. It feels even worse because I know he'll interpret it as virginal embarrassment, and I *need* him to, but what I'm ashamed of is the fact that he clearly believes I'm as innocent as he's been told—even more so.

I nod helplessly, so far beyond speaking that I don't think I could even if I wanted to. I see the heat in his eyes as he taps his finger against my clit again, and my hips lift into his touch in a shuddering movement.

"I want to watch you do that," he says huskily. "Not tonight—but..."

His voice trails off, his fingers picking up a slow rhythm as he strokes them over my swollen flesh, and my body feels like my blood has turned molten, like every part of me is on fire.

Not tonight, but...

I knew it would be more than one night. Theo married me for an heir, and those are rarely gotten in one night of pleasure. My stomach tightens again, remembering the contraceptive I made Adrik buy for me, the way I'd felt

when I took it the next morning. I didn't want a baby with Adrik—not now. I have no idea if that is ever what our relationship will be. And with Theo—

There's no possibility of it. Not unless I make a mistake with my birth control, and I have every intention about being meticulously careful with that. Which means month after month will pass, until this is over, with Theo trying increasingly hard to get me pregnant with no result. He'll fuck me more and more, filling me up with his cum in an effort to—

A moan slips out of my mouth, both from the steadily growing pressure of his fingers and that thought, and I don't know what's gotten into me. The thought of Theo desperately fucking me, hard and deep, murmuring in my ear how he's going to drive his cum inside of me as deeply as he can, leave it there until it takes root—it has my entire body trembling on the verge of an orgasm, my clit throbbing beneath his fingertips, and I feel the muscles in my thighs suddenly seize as I grip the sheets, arching up into his touch as an unexpected climax sweeps over me with a force that leaves me gasping and crying out.

Is that—something that turns me on?

Even with Adrik, who I never should have allowed to touch me and was forbidden from the start, I've never felt desire and guilt so tightly tangled together. *I'm not just going to be lying to Theo and making him think he's failing to get me pregnant; I'm going to be getting off on him trying now?* The thought makes me flush all over again, and I have another moment's fear that I came too easily, that it will tip Theo off—but when I look down at him, there's nothing on his face but lust.

“That's right, lass,” he murmurs, his lips pressing against my thigh again as his fingers lightly stroke my still-fluttering clit. “You came so sweetly for me. I want to make you come again, before I give you my cock.”

God, how am I going to get through this? Everything he says only makes me want him more, desire tightening through me as he finally—*oh god, finally*—bends his mouth to my pussy again and spreads me open for him, his tongue flicking out to taste my swollen flesh.

When his tongue slides over my clit, the moan I let out is a sound I've never made before. My hand goes down to grab his hair without thinking, fingers

tangling through the silky, dark, auburn strands, my hips jerking up against his mouth as I let out a cry of pleasure. “Oh god!” I gasp out, writhing beneath him as his tongue makes slow patterns against my almost too-sensitive clit, and I can’t lie still. I buck and squirm as he licks me slowly, keeping the same strokes as I gasp another moan, and I feel his hands tighten on my thighs.

“You taste so fucking good,” he groans, and I can hear his control loosening, the growing lust in his voice. “God, Marika, I could eat you all fucking night —”

I’d let you, I almost say, and I’m glad I can’t speak. I couldn’t say a word if I wanted to, my throat tight with building desire and a strange emotion that I can’t put a name to, my entire body wound tight, and the wet heat of his mouth is better than anything I’ve ever felt or imagined.

When he sucks my clit into his mouth, I nearly scream. My entire body tenses, bucking against his face hard enough that I’m almost afraid I might hurt him, and I try to gasp out that I’m going to come, but I *can’t*. I can’t say anything, the only sound I make is those near-pained moans of pleasure as he sucks my flesh into his mouth and rolls his tongue over my clit, sucking and licking until I think I’m going to lose my mind if I don’t come again, and then it *bursts* over me in a wave that makes me forget everything except the incredible, blinding pleasure.

I feel the gush of my arousal over his tongue, and I feel that hot burn of embarrassment before, because I’ve never come like *that*. I’m wetter than I’ve ever been in my life, drenched with arousal and turned on beyond belief. I’ve never felt anything like it or ever imagined that I could. This is—beyond what I knew pleasure could be.

The slow burn to this—and he hasn’t even gone inside of me yet.

Theo leans back as I start to come down from the orgasm, kneeling between my spread thighs as I lie there flushed and panting, looking up at him glassy-eyed. I’m not sure any longer how to play at innocence, my mind too foggy to think, and I hope that my stunned pleasure will be enough to convince him.

His lips are glistening from my arousal, his stubble damp with it, and the look on his face is so hungry that it makes me tighten with need all over again. He

reaches down for his belt, his voice thick with a lust like I've never heard before as he looks down at me.

"I need to be inside you, lass," he murmurs as he undoes the buckle. "I can't wait any longer. Can you take it?"

I nod slowly, feeling that throbbing heat again mingled with cold guilt. Theo thinks he's taking my virginity and is doing *everything* in his power to make it good for me, to be gentle and careful, and this is far from my first time. I find myself wishing, nonsensically, that I could tell him the truth.

But what the hell would I say? *I'm sorry my brother lied to you and talked me into this, but I've been fucking my bodyguard for a month, and he's railed me harder than I'd imagined anyone could, so this isn't the first time I've had a cock in me.*

Even as gentle as Theo has been, I don't think I'd see the sunrise if I said even a fraction of that. Adrik wouldn't see another day. And my brother and Lilliana—

I close my eyes, shutting out the thought of what could happen if I fail. If Theo realizes what we've done. But in a way—

In a way, so much of tonight *has* felt like the first time, because it's never been like this before. I cling to that as the only way to salve any of my guilt, as I hear Theo's low, rumbling voice again.

"Open your eyes, lass," he says, gently but firmly. "I want to see your eyes on me when I'm inside you for the first time."

His belt is off, and I see him thumb open the button at the top of his trousers, his fingers drawing down the zipper. I feel my breath catch in my throat as he starts to push them down, past his hips, and I see the short dark hair at the base of his cock in the moment before he slips his pants off, and his cock springs free.

I let out a small gasp that brings a wry smile to Theo's lips—and a hint of concern in his eyes, too.

He's *huge*. I don't have much experience with the male anatomy, but he's bigger than I'd realized, even from the sight of him hard behind layers of

fabric. His cockhead brushes his navel, the thick shaft pressed against his abdomen, and I wonder dazedly if I could get my hand around him as he reaches for his shaft, angling himself downwards as he gives the thick length one slow stroke, his jaw tightening with pleasure as he does.

“*Fuck*, I need you,” he groans, his thumb brushing over the swollen tip. He’s been dripping pre-cum—it’s pearling constantly from the tip, his shaft wet and glistening, and I realize just how aroused he’s been the whole time, how much he’s been holding back. “I’ll go slowly,” he promises me, his other hand gently pressing my thigh so that my legs open wider as his hips lean forward. “The way you’re looking at my cock, lass—I want to see it slide into you—”

I have another moment’s fear that he’ll know somehow that I’m not the first as his thick cockhead presses against my entrance—but I didn’t need to worry. He’s so large that even as wet as I am, even though I’ve done this before, he’s not going to slip inside easily.

Theo lets go of his shaft, his hands on my inner thighs, holding me spread open for him as he pushes forward. For a moment, I wonder if he really won’t fit—and then suddenly, his cockhead is inside of me, stretching me. I let out a mingled cry of pleasure and startled pain that’s not unlike the first time. I hadn’t expected it, but it feels similar—and it also feels *good*.

He goes very still for a moment, letting me adjust, and then, with another small motion of his hips, slides a little deeper. Another inch, and another, and I moan, feeling the burning stretch of his cock that eases into an incredible pleasure as he goes deeper inside of me.

“Are you alright?” Theo’s voice sounds almost strangled, his gaze locked onto the sight of his cock spreading my pussy open before he finally manages to look up at my face. I can’t speak still, my throat tight with desire and fear and guilt and surprise—and other emotions I can’t begin to put a name to. But as he pushes a little deeper, he leans forward, letting go of my thighs so he can press one hand to my cheek—and his mouth against mine.

The kiss startles me as much as the pleasure of him inside of me. I kiss him back without thinking, winding my arms around his neck, and as his tongue slides into my mouth in a mimicry of his cock still thrusting slowly into me, I

lose myself in how good it feels. He thrusts a little more, those last inches burying in me, and I moan into the kiss as Theo goes still again, giving me a chance to accommodate.

He feels so fucking good. I've never been filled so completely, almost past what my body can take, his hard body against mine, the heat of his skin and mouth, the feeling of his hands on my face and in my hair—I can't fight it. The pleasure is building, tightening me around him, and I can't pretend that this doesn't feel better than anything else I've ever had, that this isn't something new, something I'm going to want again.

He'd drawn it out for so long, and it was all worth it for this.

"I don't know how long I can last, lass," he murmurs against my lips, his hips finally moving, thrusting in long, slow strokes that leave me gasping with every one. "You're so tight—*god*, so fucking good—"

I suck in another breath as he kisses me, his hips moving a little faster. "Can you come again for me?" he asks softly, sinking into me all the way, rolling his hips against me so that he suddenly rubs against a spot deep inside of me that I hadn't even known was there.

"Yes," I breathe without thinking, my fingers clutching at his shoulders as the pleasure builds, the idea of him coming inside of me turning me on until I'm sure that I couldn't stop myself from coming again if I wanted to—and why would I want to? It feels so good—so fucking good, just like he said, and each hard thrust brings me closer and closer—

"Oh *fuck*, lass—Marika—"

Theo groans my name aloud, his hips snapping forwards as his hands dig into the pillows by my head, his body shuddering as I feel the sudden, hot flood of him coming inside of me, filling me up, and my own pleasure bursts across my skin, my orgasm joining his as I cry out and arch tightly against him. We're tangled together, pressed as tightly against one another as two people can be, and nothing has ever felt so good, I'm certain of it.

He stays there for a long moment, breathing as heavily as I am, his chest heaving against mine. I don't feel anything for a moment other than the elation of how good it was, the heady adrenaline of my climax still throbbing

in my veins, and then slowly, the world around me comes back into focus, and I remember where I am, and who I'm with—and why.

I shift under Theo, hinting at him to roll off of me, a sick knot in my stomach replacing the pleasure of a moment before. *You're going to have to make sure to bleed on the sheet*, I remind myself, the guilt sinking in a little deeper, and I find myself hoping that he'll get up and go to the bathroom so I have a moment's privacy.

He takes the hint, rolling off of me onto his back, one hand against his chest as he catches his breath. He's looking up at the ceiling, and I can't read his facial expression. I'm reminded with a start that we're in his bedroom—*our* bedroom, now—in his...*our* home. I suddenly find myself wishing that we had gone to a hotel for our wedding night after all. The intimacy of it feels almost crushing, in the current circumstances—he's fallen asleep in this bed for god only knows how many nights, and he'll do the same tonight, falling asleep in comfortable familiarity while I lay here and twist in the anxious discomfort of it all.

This isn't my home, and it's not ever going to feel like my home. I know he wanted our first time to be here for sentimental reasons—and that somehow makes it all feel worse.

“Should you leave the fire going?” I ask suddenly, looking sideways at him. “If we're going to fall asleep.”

Theo glances at me. “It's safe, lass,” he says. “But if you're more comfortable, I can put it out. I think we've heated the room up sufficiently.”

He gives me a crooked smile, and god help me, I want to smile back. It's the kind of thing a new husband *should* say to his wife, almost as if he's picking it from a list of things he ought to say, but I can't help feeling that he means it. That everything Theo says is genuine, and I'm the one who is the liar.

Like right now. I don't really care if the fire is going; it's a pleasant thing to fall asleep to, and though I've never had one in a bedroom before, I believe him if he says it's safe to leave it burning low. I don't think he has any vested interest in burning his own mansion down. But I need a moment to bleed on the sheets when he's not paying attention, and it's as good a chance as any.

“It is a little warm in here,” I say as teasingly as I can manage. “And it does make me a little nervous, having a fire going while we’re asleep.”

Theo shrugs. “I’ll put it out then.” He leans over, brushing his lips unexpectedly over my cheek, and gets up to walk to the fireplace, still naked.

I have to pull my gaze away from him and focus on what I’m supposed to be doing. He’s handsomely muscled all over, lean and fit, with an ass meant for grabbing as he thrusts. I find myself enjoying the sight of him crossing the room, walking to the fireplace as I fumble for one of my earrings.

This morning, I sharpened the point of the hook on one of them, enough to drive it into my finger and make a small prick. I slip it out, knowing if Theo notices, I can just say I’m taking my jewelry off before bed, and before I can think twice about it or he can look back and see what I’m doing, I drive it into the index finger of my right hand.

The pain is sharp and immediate, and I bite my lower lip to keep from making a sound as I set the earring aside, reaching for the other one as I press my fingertip to make it bleed.

It’s not much, but Lilliana said a few drops would be enough. As I set my other earring aside, I reach down between my legs, pressing my finger against the sheet and wincing at how damp it is. Theo came hard in me—but I know for a fact it’s not all him, and I feel embarrassed all over again at how much he made me want him.

He puts out the fire, the room darkening without the glow of it, only the moonlight outside illuminating the room now. When he comes back to bed, a dark shadow, I feel my body tightening all over again despite myself.

I hope he’s going to go to sleep. But he slips beneath the blankets, reaching for me, and I feel dread and anticipation mingle together as he reaches to run his fingers through my now-tangled hair.

If he wants me again, I should say no. I should beg off, say I’m too tired, too sore.

But the problem is—I’m not sure if I want to.

Theo



My new bride is far more intoxicating than she should be.

I could see how afraid she was from the moment she joined me at the altar. It wasn't what I wanted for her—fear. I could understand why—my family worked hard over the years to build a reputation that would incite the fear of anyone who knew about us. It was what my grandfather and father believed, the best way to hang on to what they'd built—no, *carved* out of blood and sweat...their own, and others.

But I don't want my wife to be afraid of me. I never intend to give her any reason to be.

I'd done everything I could to reassure Marika throughout our wedding and reception. I wanted to be gentle with her, slow, to show her that I intended to treat her with the respect and care she's owed by virtue of who she is, even if there's no love between us. My brutality is reserved for those who deserve it, and Marika does not.

It was hard to take things slowly once I had her in my bedroom.

It had meant something to me, to bring her back here to my home instead of a hotel room—to start our marriage here in the bed that we will now share, to begin things as I hope that they'll go on in the future. The fact that Marika hadn't been off-put by it, or felt that I was cheating her of something by not taking her to a luxury hotel, made me feel markedly better about it all.

But *god*, once I had her in here, so close to being able to be inside her—

It had been so hard not to fuck her the way I'd craved. If she hadn't been a virgin...

I would never have hurt her. But even now, as I run my fingers through her hair in the darkness, knowing that if I want her again, I will need to go slowly and carefully, that she must be sore—I still want to ravage her. Something about her rouses a strange possessiveness in me that makes me ache in ways I'm not familiar with, and if I'm being honest...it unsettles me.

I've never felt this way about any woman. That's not to say I haven't enjoyed rough, hard sex in the past—but I've never felt this clawing, possessive need to fuck a woman in a way that feels as if I'm claiming her, making her mine, hard enough for her to feel the imprint of my cock in her body if it were possible.

It doesn't even entirely make sense, because Marika couldn't *be* any more mine. I'm her first—and I will be her only. My cock, the pleasure I give her, will be all she ever knows.

That, too, is something that I didn't expect to be as aroused by as I am.

I draw her closer, wanting to kiss her again. If she's not ready for more, I tell myself, that will be fine. I want to feel her soft mouth, and my cock throbs as I think of when I'll finally get to feel it on my cock—those soft, full lips tight around my aching length—

Marika lets out a soft gasp as she feels me brush against her lower belly. I'm hard already just from thinking about the possibility of fucking her again, the idea of her mouth around me, and her hand comes up to touch my chest as I draw her in for a kiss.

I wonder if she's going to try to push me away. I have no intention of forcing her—in time, if she's not willing often enough for me to get an heir, we'll have to discuss it. But I'm not going to fuck her unwillingly.

But *god*, I hope she's fucking willing.

My hand presses lightly against the back of her head as I kiss her, my tongue urging her to part her lips, and she resists for only a second before she makes

a low, soft sound in the back of her throat, her mouth opening for mine. I wonder if it's innocent shyness, if she's been taught that she's not meant to enjoy her husband's touch—or what she's been taught at all. I'm aware that her mother died when she was young—too young to have learned much about what her future would be in a marriage. I can't imagine that her father taught her much more.

But the world we live in rarely values a wife's pleasure in a marriage, and I can imagine Marika might have picked up some ideas about that along the way.

“Can you take me again, lass?” I ask her, sliding my thumb over her cheekbone. My cock throbs against her belly as I say it, underscoring my desire, and I hear that soft intake of breath from her again.

She swallows hard, and I can tell she's thinking of saying no—out of shyness or soreness, I don't know. But a moment passes, and then she nods, her fingers curling against my chest.

“Yes,” she whispers, and a jolt of arousal goes through me, so strong it's almost painful.

“I'll be gentle,” I tell her, murmuring against her mouth as I kiss her again. My hand slides between her thighs, wanting her to be aroused again as well—but it's hard to tell if she is or not, to be honest. She's a slick mess of her desire from earlier and my cum. The feeling of her wetness against my fingers has me aching, my cock dripping pre-cum against the soft flesh of her stomach as my hips arch against her and I deepen the kiss.

She makes me feel fucking insatiable.

My fingers slide over her clit, and I feel the way her hips twitch against me when I find it, circling in that slow rhythm that she seemed to like earlier. I don't touch her directly at first, sliding my fingertips around the hood in slow circles until finally I brush my index finger directly over her clit, pressing down as I rub, and each time she gasps, her hips arching into mine. It's a way to build her to a slow, hard orgasm, but right now, I'm not sure I can wait that long.

I slide my fingers lower, gently slipping two of them into her, and I groan at

how wet she feels. She's still full of my cum, her thighs damp with it, and as I press my thumb into her clit I feel her tighten around me, her hips starting to roll steadily into my hand as she deepens the kiss.

She's a quick learner. It makes me feel good to think that I please her enough that she's able to set aside whatever reservations she might have, whatever fears, and let herself feel how good it can be. That she'll *let* me please her.

"I want you to come for me before I'm in you again, lass," I murmur against her mouth, nipping lightly at her lower lip as I slowly thrust my fingers inside of her. "I want you good and wet for me."

"I feel like I am." She lets out a nervous laugh that ends on a moan as I curl my fingers inside of her. "Oh—"

"Does that feel good?"

Marika nods, her nose brushing against mine as she gasps again, and I close my eyes, willing my self-control to hold. My cock feels like it's on the verge of bursting again, my balls tight and painful, and I want to be inside of her wet heat more than I want to breathe. I *need* to fuck her—but I want to make sure that it's good for her, too.

"Can you come for me again?" I kiss her again, dragging my mouth slowly over hers, and then I lean to kiss her neck, gently brushing my lips over what seemed earlier to be her most sensitive spots. "I want you to come for me, Marika—"

"I don't know—*oh*—" she moans again, her breasts pressing against my chest as her hand grips my arm, and her pussy tightens around my fingers. "Oh god, Theo, that—"

My cock throbs at the sound of her moaning my name, more of my own arousal coating my shaft and her skin as I keep up the same rhythm, the shallow, curled thrusts of my fingers as I roll my thumb over her clit, and I can feel that she's on the edge, her body tensing as the pleasure heightens. "That's it, lass," I murmur against her ear, lightly dragging my tongue over her earlobe, down to the soft spot just beneath. "Come on my fingers. I want your cum all over my hand, pretty *cailín*—"

Marika gasps, and I realize with a start that the endearment, spoken in a

rougher Irish burr and in Gaelic, sent her over the edge. Her entire body tenses, her moan lost in the pillow as she turns her head and arches against me hard. I feel her pussy flutter and throb around my fingers as she cries out, her nails digging into my arm. It's hard enough to hurt, but *god*, I don't fucking care, because it feels so good to have her come on my hand like this. Her hips thrust down, as if she can't stop herself from fucking my fingers, her entire body twisting and arching as she comes for me, and I let it go on for as long as I can stand before I roll her suddenly onto her back, angling my cock against her entrance, desperate to feel the last ripples of her orgasm around my cock.

"That's it," I groan as I slip my cockhead into her, the exquisite pleasure of it almost too much as she squeezes around me, still pulsing from her orgasm. "Take me, *cailín*. That's a good girl, *fuck*—"

She feels incredible. I've never known a woman who felt this good before, hot and wet and tight. I grip her thigh with one hand as I slide into her, seeing her watch me as I lift the fingers of my other hand to her lips, not caring that my cum is on them, too. I want to taste her too badly to give a shit about anything else.

"Oh *god*," she groans as she watches me lick her arousal off my fingers. "Theo—"

"You taste so fucking sweet, lass," I murmur, leaning over her as I grip the pillow next to her head. "And you take my cock so fucking well."

I thrust into her another inch, and she gasps. "Are you alright?" I ask her softly, hoping to god that she says yes, because I don't know how I'd manage to pull out of her right now if she said it was too much. The hot velvet grip of her pussy feels like fucking heaven, and it's a struggle to hold back my own orgasm long enough to enjoy her as much as I want to.

Marika nods. "Yes," she breathes, her voice a little strangled. "You're so big —"

Fuck. I laugh, a low sound in the back of my throat as I push a little deeper, feeling her give and tighten around me. "Just what every man wants to hear," I murmur against her mouth, giving her another inch, fighting against what feels like a soul-deep urge to thrust into her as hard as I can and take her fast

and deep. “But I don’t want to hurt you.”

“It—it hurts a little,” she admits breathily. “But it feels good, too.”

As if to echo what she just said, I feel her spasm around me again, her pussy clenching as if to draw me deeper, and I groan against her lips. I can *feel* how much pleasure she’s getting out of it, and fuck, it turns me on to make her feel good.

I’m not sure I’ll be able to make her come again—I’ve already managed more than I thought she’d be able to on her first night—but feeling her clench around my cock, I want to feel her come with me. I keep up the slow, steady strokes that have her writhing and gasping beneath me, my hips rocking into hers and grinding against her clit with every stroke, and I reach down, my hands wrapping around hers as I lift them over her head, stretching her out beneath me and holding her there as I thrust into her again and again, until I feel as if I’m going to lose my mind from the pleasure.

“Come for me, *cailín*,” I groan against her mouth, when I know I can’t take it any longer. “Come for me while I fill you up.”

Marika moans, gasping against my lips, and I feel her move with me, her legs tangled around mine as she arches and writhes. “Theo—” she moans my name, and that’s all I can take.

“Oh god, I’m going to fucking come in you, lass—” I thrust once more, harder than before, feeling my cock stiffen and throb as I start to come inside of her for the second time tonight. It feels so fucking good, my hips grinding into hers, trying to push as deeply inside of her as I can as she cries out with pleasure—and as I feel her start to shudder around me, I realize that she’s coming again, too.

Fuck—knowing that makes me almost feel as if I’m coming all over again, cum jolting from me again and again as I throb inside of her. I feel her tighten and ripple as she arches tightly against me, moaning helplessly against my mouth as we come together.

I’d fuck her all goddamn night if I could.

I slip out of her after a moment, feeling the flood of my cum as I pull free, and roll onto my back next to her. I feel her go very still, as if she’s not sure

what to do now, and I reach for her, pulling her closer. “You can lay here with me, lass,” I tell her, a little gruffly, because I *want* the warmth of her body still pressed against mine. I’ve always been one to want a foot of space between me and the woman I just fucked, if I didn’t send them away immediately. “Or you can have your space, if you like.”

Marika says nothing. But she stays there in the circle of my arm, and after a long moment, I feel her breathing even out.

For the first time, I pass the night with a woman that I want to stay the night in my bed.

—

I’d told the staff to make sure there was breakfast brought up for us in the morning, and they do exactly as I asked. There’s a rap on the wooden door at nine a.m., exactly when I’d requested it. I open my eyes blearily, unable to remember the last time that I slept in this late—or this well, to be honest.

Next to me, Marika rolled over on her side sometime during the night, her blonde hair tangled around her face as she sleeps curled in a ball. I watch her for a moment, enjoying the sight of her relaxed and sleeping, before I throw the covers back and reach for a pair of joggers to slip on and fetch our breakfast.

The sound of the door opening and the breakfast cart rolling in must have woken her, because when I turn around, I see her slowly sitting up, holding the sheet to her chest as she pushes her hair out of her face. “Breakfast in bed?” she asks curiously, and I give her a smile, walking to her side to kiss her forehead lightly.

“Only the best for my new bride,” I tell her. “Although I can’t promise this every day. Most days, I’m up and gone much earlier than this. You’ll always be able to get breakfast served to you downstairs, though. Alison—the cook—is excellent, and I have a full staff here. You’ll never want for anything.”

Marika nods slowly, as if she’s still waking up and taking it all in. She’s accustomed to all of this, I know—she’s grown up with staff and these sorts of luxuries all her life—but this isn’t her home. I want her to feel comfortable

here, to be able to begin thinking of it that way.

“Will it get cold if I shower?” she asks, glancing at the food. “I’m sorry, I’d just really like to clean up—”

A small jolt of a strange emotion goes through me at the idea that she might want to clean me off of her. “It will be fine,” I tell her firmly. “Go take a shower first, if that’s what you like.” I walk to the huge closet, opening the double doors, and finding a robe inside. “Here.” I hold it out to her, in case she doesn’t want to walk to the bathroom entirely bare.

Marika gives me a small, grateful smile as she reaches for the robe, wrapping it around herself as she pushes the blankets back. As much as I would have liked to see my new bride naked in the daylight, I can understand her modesty. This is all new to her—and I don’t want to frighten her.

“The bathroom is through there.” I motion to the doors at the other side of our bedroom suite. “There’s toiletries in there already. After today, you’ll have a card with access to funds, so you can get anything specific that you might need or want. There’s no limit to the funds,” I add, and Marika swallows, giving me another small smile.

“I’m not here to spend all your money, Theo,” she says, in an odd sort of voice that makes me think she’s almost irritated by the idea. “But I don’t have access to the card my brother gave me anymore, of course, so I appreciate it.”

It occurs to me, then, where the irritation might have come from, as she walks away. I’ve had money of my own all my life, accounts signed over to me after my father’s death, and my inheritance before that when I turned eighteen. I’ve never had to rely on funds that I was only allowed to access at someone else’s pleasure. But for Marika, that’s been her whole life, I realize. Her only money would have come from what her father allowed her, then her brother, and now me—funds that could be cut off at any time, if she displeased the person allowing it.

It makes me feel vaguely uncomfortable, realizing that for the first time. It’s the way our world is—it’s never bothered me before. It’s truly never occurred to me that that’s how *all* of these women live, beholden financially to men who may or may not have their best interests at heart.

I like to think that I have Marika's interests in mind. And I want her to be happy with me. I want her to feel like my *wife*, not like a possession. And if I can trust her—

Give it time, I tell myself. I'm starting to feel like a besotted teenager who got laid for the first time, not a forty-three-year-old man with a list of sexual conquests longer than I am tall.

But I've never found myself caring about a woman before.

When Marika comes out, still wrapped in the robe with her blonde hair lying damply over one shoulder, I feel a throb of desire all over again. There's no reason why I couldn't take her to bed again right now—except that she needs to eat, and we have things to talk about that can't be discussed with my cock buried inside of her.

It might be worth trying, though, I think wryly as she bends down to scoop some food onto a plate, and I see the neckline of the robe fall open a little, giving me a glimpse of the curve of one breast.

She sits down at the desk on the other side of the room, the china plate and a glass of orange juice in front of her. The staff sent champagne up with breakfast, but I noticed she didn't touch it.

"So," she says quietly. "I suppose you'll be sending the sheets to Nikolai this morning."

I hadn't even thought to check them. I glance at the bed, seeing the telltale stains of red on the white fabric. The thought of sending the blood-and-cum stained sheets to her brother makes me feel faintly ill, even if it is tradition.

"There's no need," I tell her crisply, and I see her face soften in surprise. "I'm sure your brother trusts you, as I do. I dislike that particular tradition—I see no reason to carry it forward with my marriage."

Her eyes widen at that, and she nods after a moment, biting her lower lip. The sight makes me want to kiss her, just so I can feel that soft, full lip against my mouth again. "Thank you," she says finally. "I dislike that tradition, too."

"Well then." I smile at her. "See? We're already in agreement on something. A good start to a marriage."

I was hoping for humor, and I see her mouth twitch a little, though I don't get a laugh. I finish my own food, setting the plate back on the cart, and glance over at her. "I can have your things brought here today, if you like. Or—"

"I'd like to go home and get them," she interrupts. "And possibly go and see my brother and Lilliana, if that's alright. I'd feel—better."

"That's perfectly fine," I assure her. "I'll have a driver take you. Especially since I'm taking you on a trip—it may be a little while before you're able to visit again, and I'm told you're used to seeing your brother and sister-in-law at least weekly."

Her mouth opens a little, her eyes rounding again in surprise. "A trip?" she asks finally, her voice a little tremulous, and I wonder why the idea of that worries her so much.

"I have to visit the Kings in Dublin on business," I tell her calmly, hoping to assuage whatever worries she has. "I don't particularly want to be away from my new bride so soon, and I thought it would be an opportunity for us to have a mini honeymoon."

Marika swallows, but she nods. "When are we going?" she asks finally.

"You should get your things as soon as you're done with breakfast," I tell her. "We're leaving tonight."

Marika



I t takes everything in me to hide the panic I'm feeling.

Leaving *tonight*? And going out of the country—to *Dublin*?

Under different circumstances, I might have been excited. I've never been out of Chicago before, let alone to a different country. It will be cold and rainy, not warm and sunny the way Lilliana's honeymoon was, but I've heard Ireland is beautiful. Still—under *these* circumstances, I feel like it takes everything in me not to fall apart.

I hadn't expected to be leaving the country with him—he'd let on nothing about it, not to my brother or me, not during the signing of the contract or our date or yesterday during our wedding. It makes me wonder if he actually knows what Nikolai and I have planned, what Nikolai's plot is, and is taking me far enough away that he can dispose of me without interference from my family. The thought terrifies me—he's seemed so sincere and gentle...but I know how good of liars men can be.

Men like Theo and my brother and my father have built empires on lies and deception, on manipulating others and exacting vengeance on anyone who catches them at it. This entire world is one high-stakes chess match, with blood as the gamble and lives as the payment for losing.

I'm reminded that regardless of how our wedding and the night that followed went, regardless of how kind Theo was to me or how confusing that was—he's a man I should be cautious about trusting. He's a man I should be careful

to keep a distance from—now more than ever. And he is a man who could very well be laying a trap for me.

It's hard to eat my breakfast, but I manage. It's not as if I'm not more used to upheaval now—my life has been in flux for what feels like a long time now, between my father's death and my kidnapping, and recovering from all of that. Adjusting to a new home and a confusing husband isn't the worst of it, that's for sure.

Still, I'm glad that I'll get a little space from it all while I go to collect my things and see Nikolai—especially since I now know that I'll be away from home for a period of time that Theo hasn't bothered to specify. I have no idea how long I'll actually be gone for.

I get dressed after breakfast in the outfit I'd packed for the morning after our wedding—carefully hanging my wedding dress up in the back of Theo's huge walk-in closet—a pair of dark jeans and a red sleeveless shirt. I can feel his eyes on me as I slip a pair of ruby studs into my ears and brush my hair into a ponytail. I feel certain that I know what he's thinking—that if I didn't have somewhere to be, he'd take me back to bed right now.

It unsettles me for two reasons. The first is that if he wants that, I don't know why he doesn't just do it. I've never known a man in this world to not simply take what he wants, whether that is money, territory, possessions, or a woman. It's not that I'm upset at his restraint—I just don't understand it, or what it means for me...or us.

And the second is that I don't hate the idea of him taking me back to bed as much as I should.

Thankfully, I don't have to make a decision about it. The driver Theo has called for is waiting downstairs for me, and he doesn't try to kiss me goodbye as I walk to the bedroom door. "Be back by five," is all he says, sitting at the desk, and I nod as I step out into the hall, closing the door behind me.

As I do, I let out a long breath.

I've survived one day. Now, I just have to make it through one more at a time.

I text Nikolai as I slip into the backseat of the waiting car, letting him know

that I'm picking up my things at the mansion and that I want to see him after that. *I'm working from my office at home*, he texts back a few minutes later, and I quickly type out a short message letting him know that I'll be there within a couple of hours.

Once back at the mansion, I slip inside quickly, praying I won't see Adrik. I don't know what I would possibly say to him—he'll know I'm married by now, and if somehow he missed that particular memo, then he'll see the wedding band. He'll know what I was doing last night, and I don't know how to deal with his jealousy on top of my already tangled and complicated emotions.

I think, at first, that I'm going to be lucky. I spend an hour in my room, sorting through my clothes and possessions and deciding what I actually want to take to Theo's and to Ireland—it's not as if I can't come back later, once we're home, if I find out I've left things here I still want. *You're going to come back*, I tell myself, ignoring the flutter of nervousness that spreads through me every time I think of the trip. But the thought of leaving the country with a man I barely know makes me feel as if I'm one step away from a panic attack, every time I remember it.

I pack up what I want to take with me—clothes and jewelry and shoes mostly, some books and a few other possessions—and call for help taking it down. I'm following the last box down the stairs when I see the tall blond figure at the foot of the staircase, and my stomach ties itself up in knots all over again.

“Just take it out to the car,” I say quietly to the man holding the box. “Let the driver know I'll be out shortly.”

I know from the look on Adrik's face that this is going to be an argument before he even says a word.

“Did you come back here just to shove it in my face?” he asks tightly, his gaze flicking down to my left hand, where a thin gold band has joined the ring that Theo gave me in the garden. “You could have called to have your things sent over, and you know it. You were hoping you'd run into me.”

“The opposite, actually.” I look at him tiredly, wishing more than anything that I could rewind time back to that afternoon on the vintage couch—not

because I think I would have made a different choice, but because I wish I could live it over again, before we'd gotten to this place. *Even if I make it out of this alive, even if Nikolai succeeds and Theo is gone, will Adrik and I ever be able to recover?* "I hoped I wouldn't run into you, so we wouldn't have this discussion."

"Why?" He puts out one hand to grip the staircase, moving so that most of his broad body is blocking my exit. Having him so close, looming over me like this, still makes my heart race. *How can I be so attracted to two such very different men?* There's nothing at all alike between Adrik and Theo. They're night and day—but both of them provoke a very similar reaction.

One that complicates my life no matter which man it is.

"Because I don't want to hurt you," I say softly. "None of this is about hurting you, Adrik. It's the last thing I want—"

"Did you fuck him?" His gaze rakes over me, that possessive glint in his eyes again.

I close my eyes briefly, wishing myself away from here, far away from men in general. I hadn't set out to juggle two men when I'd slept with Adrik, but here I am, and I can't undo it now.

I don't even think I *want* to undo it. The guilt that I had with Theo last night would be gone—but so would my choice. At least the way things are, I chose who my first would be. I'm not sorry that it was Adrik.

"I'm not sorry it was you," I tell him quietly, hoping that maybe that last thought is the thing he needs to hear. "I'm glad it was. You were—"

"A good first fuck?" he supplies, his voice taut and angry, and I know he's determined to pick a fight. If I had to guess, the person he really wants to fight is Theo, but he can't. So, instead, he's going to start a verbal battle with me.

"You don't have to diminish it like that—"

"Why not?" He moves a little closer, clearly heedless of whether or not anyone might come in and see us, standing this close at the foot of the stairs, clearly having an argument too volatile for an employer and her bodyguard.

“You certainly did when you fucked the Irishman last night—”

“I had no choice!” I hiss the words, glaring at him. “You *know* I had no choice, Adrik. Nikolai might have offered me the semblance of one, when he told me about the marriage offer, but it was never really a choice. This is what I was bred and born to do, and no one was ever going to protect me from it.”

“I would have tried—”

“And you would have failed.” My voice is flat and tired...so fucking tired. “You would have died because my brother and, most especially, Theo McNeil would never have let you get away with taking the Vasilev heiress away from them. And you know them and this world, well enough to know that there’s nowhere you could run to.”

“What do you want from me?” Adrik’s voice is low and sharp, his piercing blue eyes fixed on mine. “What, Marika? What you’re asking of me—”

“I haven’t asked you for anything.” I swallow hard, doing my best to hold his gaze, as angry as it is. “I *haven’t*. I told you what I had to do, and I said that I hoped you would be here, when it was all done. I didn’t ask you for anything, because I knew it wasn’t fair to—”

“I don’t give a shit about fair.” His eyes are blazing with anger, and it’s almost frightening. “I want *you*, Marika. I’ve wanted you for a long time. And now this man has taken you away from me—” His gaze rakes over me again, and he sucks in a breath. “Do you know what it was like last night? Lying awake, thinking of his hands on you, his mouth, him *inside* of you. Inside of what’s mine—”

“I don’t want to belong to anyone!” I glare at him, feeling the tight knot of fear in my stomach unraveling, turning to hot anger. It feels better to be angry than afraid or confused or any of the other emotions I’ve been grappling with since the wedding. I suspect that’s what Adrik is doing, too—channeling all his hurt and confusion into anger.

But just because I understand it doesn’t mean it’s any easier to deal with.

“I want to belong to myself.” I try to keep my voice as even as I can, to keep it from shaking. “I want to be with you because I *choose* to. That’s what this

has always been about.” I motion between the two of us with my hand. “Choosing for myself.”

“And what about my choice?” Adrik’s voice is very quiet. “It’s a hell of one you’ve given me, Marika. To stand by while another man has you as his wife and in his bed, while he fucks you when he pleases and enjoys your company, or to forget about you and still leave you with that same man. What I feel for you—”

“I know,” I whisper. “I know, Adrik—and there’s nothing I can do. Especially now. It won’t be forever—”

“Yes. You keep saying that. So I wait—or I leave.”

“I’m sorry.” I sink my teeth into my lower lip, knowing the conversation has already gone on too long, and not wanting to leave it like this despite that. “I’m sorry, Adrik—”

He’s quiet for a long moment. “You know,” he says finally, “I do believe that. And it doesn’t make it any easier.”

I wonder if he’s going to try to kiss me, and what I’m going to do if he does. It would be dangerous for so many reasons to let him, out here in the open like this, and more than that—I know if I let him, it will make everything so much harder for both of us.

I want him to try, and I don’t want him to, all at once. But in the end, it doesn’t matter, because he steps back, a sort of resigned exhaustion settling over his face.

“Go back to your husband, Marika,” he says finally. “And good luck.”

I don’t know what that means—if this is it for us, if he won’t be here when this is all over, and I’m afraid to ask. The idea of that feels as if it’s tearing my heart out at the roots, and I hate all of it, all of the decisions that have gotten us here, the fact that I was born into this life at all, where my happiness can be destroyed in a moment at the whims of others.

“Adrik,” I whisper, but he’s already turning away, as my eyes fill with tears.

I want to sink onto the step and bury my face in my arms, cry as hard as I

possibly can until everything tangled up inside of me is let out—but I can't. The car is waiting outside, and my brother is no doubt looking at the clock, expecting me any minute. I have a conversation to have with him, and then I have to pack for fucking *Ireland*, so I can be ready to go by five o'clock, the way Theo said. He hasn't given me any reason to think that he'll be overly angry with me if I'm running behind, but at the same time, I don't want to find out if I'm wrong about that.

Right before I leave the country with him probably isn't the time to test the good mood of a man I barely know.

The car is waiting by the steps when I come out, all of the emotions Adrik brought up tamped down and bottled up, so I don't fall apart at the seams. It's hardly the healthiest way to deal with it all—but what else am I going to do?

I sit in silence as I'm driven to Nikolai's estate, my heart heavy and my body tense, as if I'm poised in constant fight or flight mode, waiting for something to go wrong. I wonder what Nikolai's response will be to Theo's plans, and I don't have long to find out.

"He's taking me to Ireland," I tell Nikolai without preamble as I walk into his home office, closing the door behind me. "Tonight."

Nikolai looks up from the files in front of him, pursing his lips. "*Ireland*? On a honeymoon, I suppose? It's not the strangest thing—"

"A business trip, mostly. He says he has a meeting with the Kings there." I don't fully understand what that means, but I expect Nikolai will, and from the way he rubs his hand over his mouth, he does.

"I see." Nikolai closes the file in front of him, considering. "Well, I doubt you'll have as much of an opportunity for snooping there as you would in his actual home. But perhaps he'll talk to you about some of what goes on in those meetings. Particularly if you keep him happy."

I wrinkle my nose. "Not exactly what I want to hear from my brother."

"I'm not telling you this in my capacity as your brother," Nikolai says evenly. "I'm telling you as the *pakhan* of the Vasilev Bratva. I agreed to the marriage for a specific reason, and as such, we need to talk about how to achieve those ends. However distasteful talking about your marriage bed might be with me,

it's necessary—" he pauses, frowning. "He didn't send over the sheets."

"He said he dislikes the tradition, and he assumes that you trust me. As does he," I add, hoping that will please Nikolai. From the expression on his face, it does.

"Well, that's a start. I agree; it's a barbaric tradition. Not one I intend on continuing with my own family." Nikolai pauses, considering. "So he's taking you to Ireland. Dublin, I assume?"

I nod, going to sit in one of the leather chairs on the other side of his desk.

"For how long?"

"I don't know," I admit. "He didn't say. Just that we'd be gone for a little while."

Nikolai frowns. "I can't say I love the idea that he's taking you out of the country with no itinerary. But he's your husband—there's nothing I can say about it."

The fear twists deep in my stomach again. "Do you think there's a reason you should?"

Nikolai rubs his hand over his mouth. "I don't think so. I think it's likely exactly what he's saying—a business trip, combined with a chance to take his new bride on a pseudo-honeymoon. Killing two birds with one stone, which is exactly the sort of efficient thing I would expect from a man like Theo. I wouldn't worry, Marika," he says, and I can hear from the way he says it that he's trying to be reassuring.

I nod, swallowing hard, and Nikolai gives me another long look. "I'll send some of my own security with you," he says finally. "To ease your mind."

My eyes widen as I look at him, startled. "But—won't Theo see that as an insult? You all but saying you don't trust him to keep me safe?"

Nikolai gives me a wry smile. "Well, he won't like it, that's for sure. But if he says no, that will be an insult too—him all but saying that he won't allow me to ensure my sister's safety, and it makes him look suspicious, even if he's doing nothing wrong. So he and I will be at an impasse, and when I

insist as a measure of good faith since there's been bad blood between our families for so long, he'll agree."

I find, when I return back to Theo's home—I can't think of it as mine yet—that Nikolai is right. Mostly, at least. Theo doesn't attempt to turn them away, but I can see the tight anger on his face when the black SUVs pull into the courtyard behind the car I'm in, and he comes down the steps to meet me.

"What the hell is this?" he asks in a low voice as I step out of the car, and my heart thuds in my chest at the sound of it—for an entirely different reason this time.

"I told Nikolai about the trip." I try to sound as calm and careless about it as possible, as if it means nothing—as if it's nothing for him to be upset by. "He wanted to send along some extra security."

Theo's jaw tightens even further, and I wonder if his teeth are going to crack from grinding them together so hard. "Because he doesn't trust me." The words come out like knives, each one. "He gave you to me, but he doesn't trust me with you."

The way he says it startles me a little. It sounds less like he's angry on principle, and more like it personally hurts him that Nikolai doesn't trust him. Like it *matters* to him that he's trusted with me.

Is this man ever going to start making sense?

"Theo, it's just—"

"I'm going to speak with Nikolai." He turns sharply on his heel, and my stomach tightens. Now that I have the promise of additional security on the trip that answers to my brother and not to Theo, I don't want to lose it. I felt better the minute I knew that Nikolai was sending some of his men.

But Theo is already striding up the steps, shoving open the door as he walks quickly towards what I can only assume is his office, too quickly for me to catch up. He slams the door behind him, and when I reach for the knob, it's locked.

I've long been good at eavesdropping, though.

I lean in, pressing my ear against the door as I listen for Theo's voice—or footsteps that will tell me to get away before he catches me. It's a moment before I hear anything at all, and then I hear the low, angry burr of his voice as he starts to speak.

“The fucking hell do you think you're doing, Nikolai, sending your own security on my honeymoon—yes, it's a business trip, too. Yes, it's the Kings in Dublin. I won't let anything happen to her. She won't be a part of any of that—what the hell do you take me for? You let me marry her. If you didn't trust me not to—oh fucking hell.”

There's a long moment's silence, as if Nikolai is saying something at length on the other side of the conversation.

“This is a dirty way to handle things, Nikolai. You already knew what I would say, and you knew—” Theo lets out a long sigh. “Fine. But this is the only time. When I bring her back safe and sound, you stay the fuck out—yes. Of course.”

His tone mellows out, and I wonder what Nikolai said, to change the course of the conversation. I'm not entirely sure, either, what the resolution of it is, and that knot in my stomach tightens further. I suddenly very much don't want to go without the added protection.

There's more silence, and I'm too caught up in my own thoughts to realize before it's too late that Theo is walking to the office door.

I stumble back as he opens it, and his eyes narrow.

“He's just overprotective,” I say quickly. “My brother. He—” There's a space in the doorway, between it and where Theo is standing, and I slip inside before he can stop me, pushing the door closed so we're alone in the office. “He just worries about me,” I whisper, looking up at Theo. *Please don't send them back*, is all I can think as I look at his taut, irritated expression. “After what happened, after—”

I swallow hard, unable to say it out loud, what happened.

“I know about the kidnapping,” Theo says. His voice is still tight and hard, but I think I hear a hint of sympathy in it, the first sign of him softening. I grasp it with both hands, intent on convincing him not to send Nikolai's

security back to him.

“He’s just trying to make me feel better,” I say softly, stepping forward so I can reach out and touch Theo, my fingers trailing along the front of his shirt. “This is an adjustment—we barely know each other, and all of this is already so new. Going to a different country—”

I let my hands drift lower, fingers tapping at each button, down to the waist of his suit trousers. I don’t know if he’s picked up on what I’m doing—hell, *I’m* making it up as I go along, but I hope it’s going to work.

If not, I’m going to be a mess the entire time we’re in Ireland. And while a part of me thinks that might serve Theo right, another part of me is worried that it might make everything so much worse, if I’m not what Theo expects me to be while I’m there with him. A good, happy, eager wife.

“Marika—”

“I have a lot—left over, from what happened,” I whisper. “I get nervous. Fidgety. Anxious—Nikolai knows that. He’s just helping me adjust. Giving me a little bit of my old life while I get used to the new one.”

I think I’ve struck a chord with Theo with that. His face softens a little—and then his jaw tightens again, for a different reason this time, as I drop to my knees on the rug in front of him.

Slowly, I reach for his belt buckle, undoing it nimbly, keeping my eyes on his face the entire time. I remember what he said while we were in bed last night—*eyes on me, lass*—and I have a feeling it’s a thing he likes. To see me watching him, to see my expression when he slides inside of me, when he fucks me, when he makes me come. I think he’ll want it while I do this, too.

He doesn’t try to stop me, when I slide his zipper down. He doesn’t tell me I don’t have to, or try to convince me otherwise. I don’t know why I’d thought he might—and worse, I feel a small, warm glow of satisfaction that he didn’t. I see the heated look in his gaze, those green eyes darkening, and something about the idea that he wants my mouth on him this badly feels *good*.

Theo groans when my hand slips inside to draw his cock out into the open air, my fingers wrapping around the thick shaft. He’s so large, big enough that I don’t know how much of him I’ll be able to get in my mouth, but I

think he'll enjoy the effort regardless. And I intend to put in *quite* a bit of effort.

Particularly if you keep him happy, Nikolai said. I think I know exactly how to keep Theo happy. And the happier he is, the more he trusts me—the sooner this will all be over.

The problem is, I shouldn't enjoy it as much as I am.

I feel a throb of desire when I lean forward, flicking my tongue over the tip of his cock. I can already see his own arousal pearling there, and I have the sudden urge to taste him, lapping it up as Theo's jaw tightens and he groans. His hand slides over my hair, not pushing my mouth down on him or even gripping it, but his fingers slip through the strands, almost toying with them as I circle my tongue around the tip of his cock, teasing a little.

"God, that feels good," he groans, his hips thrusting a little, pushing his cockhead against my lips. They part around him, taking him slightly into my mouth, and he lets out another low, guttural groan.

The sound of his pleasure sends another flush of desire through me, and I can feel a faint wetness between my thighs, my own arousal answering his. I close my eyes, breathing in as I try to fight it—this reaction I always seem to have to him—but I can't. I feel the heat of him pushing into my mouth, my lips stretching around the width of his cock, and I moan a little around him, my eyes flicking down with embarrassment as I hear the sound muffled around his flesh.

Theo's fingers touch my chin, reminding me of what I know he wants. "Look at me while you suck my cock, lass," he murmurs, that accent thickening all over again, and I feel my pulse pick up at the sound of it. I look up at him, at the heated desire on his face, and my entire body tightens.

I want more of it. I struggle to take another inch, feeling him slide over my tongue, deeper into my mouth. I tighten my lips around him, sucking as I slide the tip over the ridged veins, and I hear Theo draw in a sharp breath above me, his fingers tightening in my hair.

"*God*, lass," he groans, and I remember suddenly with a shock of fear that I'm supposed to have never done this before, that I should be all teeth and

gagging on his size, not adapting to it as if I've been sucking a different man's cock for the last month—which is exactly what I've been doing. Not as large of one, but—

“Easy, there.” His hand touches my cheek, and I realize I've stopped suddenly, my eyes watering with the mingled flood of emotion that's rising up again. “If it's too much, lass—”

What *is* too much is his gentleness. I almost wish he were cruel and unkind, because that I could understand. *That* would make sense to me. This—his patience with me, his erring on the side of seeing everything I do in the best possible light...it's something I've never experienced before, not even with my brother. Nikolai has always been kind to me, a good older brother—but this is different.

I never expected this, and I don't understand it.

I shake my head, realizing with some relief that the moment I'd been lost in thought had probably been enough to make me seem inexperienced, as if I were struggling with the act itself instead of worrying about what Theo might or might not pick up on. I slide my mouth off of his cock, catching my breath, and Theo's fingers thread through my hair again.

“Give it a moment, Marika,” he murmurs. “God, your mouth feels so fucking good—”

His cock twitches, as if to underscore his words, and the sight of it so close to my mouth sends another flush of desire through me. He's thick and hard and throbbing, damp from my mouth, huge and viscerally masculine, and I feel an ache of need spreading through me. I'm tempted to ask him to fuck me, but I'd gone down on my knees for him with intent, and I'm going to see it through. I feel sure it's the best way to get what it is that I need from him.

I wrap my hand around him, feeling his pulse against my palm, and wrap my lips around his tip again. He groans, sucking in a breath through his teeth as I roll my tongue over the swollen flesh, licking up the dripping pre-cum, enjoying the salty taste of him more than I want to admit. His hand presses against the back of my head, not hard enough to push me further down, but I can feel that he's restraining himself from doing exactly that. He wants to fuck my mouth, I can feel it, and the idea of that turns me on more than I

would have ever thought. More than it should.

Slowly, I take him in my mouth again, inch by inch, sliding my tongue down the underside of his shaft as his swollen cockhead nears the back of my throat. It's a struggle to get him even that far, but I'm determined to take as much as I can. It's beginning to feel like an accomplishment, the idea of being able to suck his cock well, seeing the pleasure on his face. I feel an odd determination to be good at this—or as good as I can be, anyway, when I'm meant to be inexperienced at it.

Theo groans, his fingers still wrapped in my hair, his eyes closing briefly at the pleasure when he pushes into my throat. He groans when I choke around it, my throat muscles spasming at the intrusion.

“*Christ,*” he curses, hand flexing in my hair. “I can’t—”

I realize he's close, his cock throbbing on my tongue. I wrap my hand around the few inches of his cock that I haven't yet managed to take, stroking as I keep him at the back of my throat, thrusting shallowly as I feel his hips start to twitch. I can feel him shuddering with pleasure, and I tighten my lips around him, doing my best to make him come.

It doesn't take much. I hear a guttural sound of pleasure, feel his cock stiffen in my mouth, and suddenly it's flooded with him, filled with the salty taste as his cum coats my tongue and shoots down the back of my throat, and I struggle to swallow it all, coughing and choking as Theo realizes the difficulty I'm having and pulls his cock free, resting the tip against my mouth as his cum spurts over my lips and chin.

“*Fuck,*” he breathes, his hand wrapping around his own length as he moves his still-dripping cock over my lips. “You look fucking gorgeous with my cum on your face.”

“I'm sorry,” I manage, swallowing what's left in my mouth convulsively. “I tried—”

“Don't be sorry, *cailín álainn,*” he murmurs, his cock still resting against my lower lip. “You were a good girl, to try so well. And seeing it all over your mouth, like this—” he shudders, and I realize he's still hard. His cock hasn't softened at all.

He reaches for me, lifting me to my feet as he guides me towards his desk, his hands fumbling with the button of my jeans. “You did so well,” he murmurs again, his mouth grazing over mine as he yanks the zipper down, his teeth nipping at my lower lip. “Such a good girl. You deserve to come, too.”

I blink at him, startled. I’d expected him to fuck me, but instead, he pushes me down into the chair behind the desk—*his* chair—as he drags my jeans down my hips with his other hand, more roughly than he’s handled me before, as if he can’t quite control his desire.

“Let’s see how wet that sweet pussy is from sucking my cock.” His voice is rough and low, sending thrills of desire over my skin as, to my shock, he kneels down in front of me, grasping my thighs and pushing them apart.

I know what he’s going to find. My panties are damp, clinging to my skin, my clit throbbing. His cum is still all over my mouth, glazing my lips and chin, streaked down my throat now, and I can see the raw lust in his face as he looks up at me from between my legs.

“Ah.” His fingers trace over the damp gusset of my panties. “Such a good girl, to get so wet while sucking me off.” I’d chosen thin silk for my underwear today, and he curls his fingers around the fabric, yanking so hard that it tears as it drags down my hips. He pulls them down the rest of the way, taking both them and my jeans off and tossing them aside.

“Take your shirt off, *cailín deas*,” he murmurs, his fingers sliding up my legs, and I can’t think of anything other than to obey. I’m trembling with desire and shock, unable to quite believe what’s happening. I’d intended to get him off and then go upstairs—cognizant of the timetable he said we were on and my intent to make sure the security stayed with us, and now somehow I’m half naked in a chair, my husband’s cum dripping down to my collarbone and his lustful gaze fixed on me from where he’s kneeling between my thighs.

I pull the silk blouse over my head, tossing it aside numbly, leaving me in nothing but the lace bra I’d put on beneath it. He nods at it wordlessly, and I reach behind my back, unclasping it and letting it join my shirt. I’m naked on the leather seat, legs spread, my husband kneeling in front of me, still fully clad in his suit, down to the tie still neatly done around his neck.

“So wet.” His fingers spread my folds open, stroking along the sensitive flesh, and I shudder, gasping as he leans forwards to flick his tongue against my clit. “I’m going to make you come just like this, sweet girl. I’m going to make you drip all over that seat, so that every time I’m in here, I can imagine this moment.” He licks my clit again, slowly, rolling his tongue over me until I cry out, his fingers still holding me spread apart for him. “I’m going to fuck you on every surface in this house when we get back. There won’t be a place you can sit or stand where I won’t have eaten your pussy or fucked you until you came all over my cock.”

The moan that slips out of me at that is like no sound I’ve ever made before. I’m shivering with desire, all of me taut and aching for more, imagining him making good on his promise, listening to every filthy word that drips from his tongue with that seductive Irish burr, an accent that I never knew could turn me on so much until Theo. I’ve forgotten who he is in this moment, *what* he is, why I’m here—every reason for this except how good his hot tongue feels on my clit, licking and rolling and circling over me right where I need it the most, *how* I need it the most. I realize dimly that he’s stroking his own cock as he licks me, too aroused not to touch himself while he makes me come, and I *am* going to come, much faster than I anticipated.

“Lick your lips,” he murmurs hoarsely, pausing just long enough to make me cry out in protest. “Lick my cum off your mouth when you orgasm, *milis*. I want to be in your mouth when you come for me.”

I’m aroused beyond belief. I never knew I could be this turned on, trembling from it, aching for an orgasm, and wanting to delay it as long as possible, all at the same time, because it feels so good. His lips fasten around my clit, sucking it into his mouth as he presses his tongue beneath the stiff flesh, and I open my mouth on a scream of pleasure as I remember his instruction and lick the cum off of my lips.

Somehow, it *does* make it better. All of it coalesces—the pleasure of his mouth on my pussy, the taste of his cum, the sound of his hand stroking over his cock in a steady, hard rhythm—and I buck against his mouth, grinding against his face as I grip the arms of the chair and come hard on his tongue, feeling the climax flood through me as I moan helplessly, crying out again and again as I come harder than I think I ever have before.

Theo stands up, and I catch one glimpse of his throbbing cock clenched in his fist before he reaches for me, pulling me up by my arm and spinning me around. He didn't handle me this way last night, sure and firm, but I find that I don't care. I'm still pulsing from my own orgasm, the pleasure fluttering through me in delicious aftershocks, and I don't hesitate as he bends me over the chair, grabbing onto the arms again as I feel him line up his cockhead with my entrance and thrust it inside of me.

"Tell me—if—it's too—rough—" he manages between breaths, his hands gripping my waist as he thrusts again. He feels bigger from this angle somehow, longer and thicker, stretching me as much as I can take or more as his hips rock against me, and a guttural moan slips from his mouth. "I don't—want to hurt you."

I realize with shock that I'm going to come again. His cock is sliding over every awakened nerve ending inside of me, feeling as if he's somehow touching my clit from the inside; my body still shaking from my first climax, and yet another is already building. My knuckles are white where I'm gripping the chair as he fucks me, his hips pressed against my ass with each thrust, and I wonder if it's going to be some sign of my lack of innocence if I come from this, without him even touching my clit.

It doesn't really matter, because I can't stop it.

"It hurts a little," I whisper, and that's true. His cock is almost too big, certainly too big to slam into me the way he is, each long stroke feeling as if it goes further than his cock ought to be able to. "But please don't stop."

"Oh fucking *Christ*," Theo swears, his hips stuttering as he shudders behind me. "Oh god, I'm going to fucking come."

I feel his hips snap forward, pushing me down into the chair as he thrusts once more, so hard that I scream from pain and pleasure all at once, my body erupting into another orgasm as I clench around him. His growled moan mingles with it as I feel him flood me, his cock erupting as he comes hard, grinding into me as he gasps my name.

"Marika, oh *fuck, fuck*, Marika—"

He holds himself there for a long moment, shuddering, his hands on my waist

hard enough to bruise before he suddenly pulls out of me, lifting me up and turning me to face him.

“Are you alright?” His green eyes are full of worry as they skate down the front of my naked body, not with lust now, but concern. “It was too soon to fuck you like that. I’m sorry—”

“No.” I shake my head, that now-familiar guilt coming back in a rush and replacing the pleasant afterglow. “It felt good.”

“I hurt you—”

“A little,” I admit. “But you—it was good.”

Theo doesn’t look entirely convinced. “Wait here,” he says, gently nudging me back down into the chair. “I’ll get your clothes.”

“Aren’t we running late?” I ask, feeling suddenly very tired. My throat is a little sore from going down on him, my pussy is *very* sore from how hard he fucked me, and I wonder if there might not be a nap in my future, wherever we’re going.

Theo glances at me as he picks up my jeans and blouse, a wry smile curving his attractive mouth. “We’re taking a private jet,” he says. “We leave when *I* say. And after seeing my beautiful wife go down on her knees for me—”

He comes back around the desk, handing me my clothes. “I thought we could stand to take off a little late, after all.”

Theo



I wanted to make sure Marika knew just how much I was looking forward to taking her on this trip as a honeymoon, even if it was partially business. I'd left instructions with the staff on how to arrange the private jet, and when I lead her aboard, the look on her face makes me glad that I did.

There are flowers throughout the plane, arranged in vases along the sides, and there's champagne in an ice bucket already waiting for us at our seats. There's a cashmere throw folded on each of them as well, and the entire setup looks as cozy and romantic as I had requested.

I'm hesitant to say that I'm in love with my new bride, but the expression as she takes it all in makes me feel a rush of emotion that I hadn't known I was capable of.

It's a foolish thing to say, for one, considering how briefly I've known her. I'm old enough to laugh at the notion that love at first sight could exist, and wise enough to know that lust can feel like love, even if I've never experienced that before.

But *god*, I love making her smile already. I fucking love making her come. For the first time in my life, I have someone I want to spoil and pamper and adore, and it's a heady feeling. I have to hold some of it back so I don't frighten her. I know she wasn't expecting a husband besotted with her. Kindness all on its own seems to be enough to spook her more than a little.

Marika stands in the aisle, looking at the array, her face somewhat stunned—and I think pleased, too, although I can't quite tell.

“Do you like it?” I look at her curiously, and she nods.

“It's lovely,” she says softly. She stands there for a moment more, as if she's not entirely sure what to do, and then steps over to one of the soft leather seats, reaching for the blanket and setting it to one side. “I love roses,” she murmurs, touching the petals of one of the flowers near her seat. “I know it's not very unique, but I do.”

“You shouldn't apologize for what you love. Beauty is beauty.” I sit down across from her, reaching for the champagne to uncork it and pouring the sparkling liquid into each of our flutes. I hand one to her, and she takes it, her slim fingers wrapping around the stem. “To our honeymoon.”

“To our honeymoon,” Marika echoes lightly, tapping her glass against mine, but I can feel a tension still simmering in her. I'd hoped when I gave in to her brother's request—his demand, really—that his security accompany us, she would relax. But she still feels as if she's going to flinch at the slightest movement.

I can't blame her, exactly. Our families have been enemies for a long time, and Marika would have been raised with that knowledge. I can't expect her to change her mind about me overnight, or to instantly feel comfortable with me—a virtual stranger. But I find myself craving the time when she *will* be comfortable with me, when we can start to relax into the kind of intimacy I hoped for in a marriage.

“Is it a long flight?” Marika asks, sipping at her champagne, and I see her shifting slightly in her seat. I realize, to my surprise, that she's nervous.

“Have you never flown before?” I ask curiously, and she shakes her head.

“Never.”

“Well, a private jet is a good way to start,” I tell her wryly. “You'll barely even feel it.”

Marika nods, letting out a small and shaky breath. “I hope not.”

“It’s only seven and a half hours, also,” I add. “Not long at all.”

She gives me a tight smile, taking another sip of her champagne, as the jet starts to taxi down the runway.

After a second glass of champagne, we settle back for the flight. Marika has a book with her, and I go over some work on my laptop, but I occasionally glance over at her, enjoying the view. She wore a dress for the flight—a fitted knit sweater-dress of some kind in a shade that brings out her blue eyes and compliments her figure—I find myself regretting the cashmere throws when she tucks it over her legs, hiding any chance I might have had at getting a look up my wife’s skirt.

The thought startles me. I’ve always enjoyed the company of women, but it’s been a long time since I’ve been this continuously aroused. I’d come down her throat *and* inside of her only a few hours prior, and yet I’m looking at her from across our seats, thinking of how much I’d like to get a glimpse of what she might have on beneath the dress.

As if she can feel my eyes on her, Marika looks up suddenly, her expression curious. She pauses, as if considering something, and then she speaks. “What are you thinking about?” she asks softly, and I feel a smile at the corners of my lips.

“How beautiful you are,” I tell her honestly. “And how much I’d like to be able to see what’s underneath that dress of yours.”

Marika’s eyes widen, a small breath hitching in her throat, and I wonder if she desires me as much as I want her. It’s occurred to me that this could all be for show—how easily she’s come to bed with me, how quickly she’s acquiesced to all of my desires, her eagerness to go down on her knees for me earlier today—but what she *can’t* fake is how wet she’s been, every time. All I’ve had to do is touch my wife’s pussy, and I know that at least some of it must be real.

The thought hardens my cock instantly, and I look at her, letting her see it in my gaze. There’s a bedroom at the back of the jet, but I’m not inclined to bother with it. *If I can’t fuck my wife out in the open on my own private jet, then what’s the point, really?*

“Come sit on my lap,” I tell her quietly, and I see her eyes go round. “Now, lass,” I add, with a firmness that I haven’t used with her before, and I wonder how she’ll react to it. If she’ll be put off by it and do it anyway, if she’ll argue with me—or if she’ll enjoy it.

Marika hesitates for just a moment, and then slowly, she stands up and moves towards me.

“Someone will see,” she whispers, as I reach for her, sliding her dress up her thighs.

“That’s fine.” I pull her forward, tugging sharply at her so that she stumbles forward into my lap, facing me. “They all answer to me. This is my jet. If I want to fuck my wife like this—” I press my hands against her hips, pulling her down sharply, so she feels my hard cock between her thighs. I’m rewarded with her quick gasp, and I feel myself throb. “—then I will. That’s what it means to have power, Marika.” I reach up, pushing a lock of blonde hair out of her face, pressing my thumb against her lower lip. “I do what I like. If I ask, it is a courtesy.”

“Even with me?” she whispers, and I can hear a tremor in her voice.

“No,” I tell her softly, my hand sliding into her hair as I adjust her so she’s sitting fully across my lap, and I reach between us for the zipper of my suit trousers. “When I ask you, Marika, I mean it.”

I wait for her to protest, to tell me that in that case, she objects to being fucked out in the open like this, where anyone could walk by. Where the pilot could come out, or a flight attendant, or one of the security team, see us like this, and know I’m inside of her. Where they might hear her come for me. Where they might look at her later, and imagine that she’s still full of my cum, soaking into her panties.

That, of course, is the point.

That possessiveness that she makes me feel is still there, lingering very close to the surface. I want to fuck her where anyone could see or hear, where they’ll know that she’s *mine*. Mine to fuck, mine to please, mine to fill. Mine and only mine.

I haven’t been able to fight it, and at this point, I’m not sure that I want to.

She doesn't protest. Not when I slip my cock out of my trousers, the hard length beneath her skirt, between her legs. Not when I tug her panties sharply to one side, pulling her down onto my cock with one hand, letting out a low groan of pleasure as I feel her wet heat start to envelop my sensitive tip. She feels so fucking good, so tight, squeezing around me as I adjust her so that she's sliding down one inch at a time, and she braces her hands on my shoulders, breathing in small, quick breaths that tell me it feels as good for her as it does for me.

"If I told you no right now," she whispers suddenly, "would you stop?"

The question startles me. But I think I understand why she's asking, and I pause despite the effort of it, my cock half-buried inside of her already.

"Yes," I tell her honestly, and I mean it.

"Why?" The way she asks the question tears at something in my chest. I realize that it's not what she expected from a marriage. From *me*. And it makes me feel all the more determined to prove to her otherwise.

"Because you were given to me to protect," I tell her, the words coming out a little strangled from the effort of keeping myself still, half inside her wet, tight heat. "And that's what I will do, Marika. Even if it's difficult for me."

She swallows hard, and spreads her legs a little wider, sinking down onto my cock.

The sensation of it makes me nearly groan *too* loudly. My hands dig into her hips, her dress riding up nearly to her ass, and I slide my hands around to grip her, making sure she's covered enough that no one who walks by will get an accidental eyeful. I might like the idea of the other occupants of the plane knowing that my wife is getting fucked by me, but only *I* get to enjoy the sight of her sweet pussy.

"*Fuck*, Marika—" I squeeze her ass as she rolls her hips against me, a little inexpertly. "God, you feel so good—" She tightens around me, sliding up and down a little, and I feel my cock swell and throb inside of her, the pleasure almost *too* much.

I slip my hand between us, one hand still keeping her dress down, sliding my fingers over her clit. I feel her hips move against me, a low, shuddering

breath coming from her as her head drops down, her back arched as she grinds in my lap, seemingly forgetting where we are at the combined pleasure of my fingers on her clit and my cock buried inside of her.

“Dirty girl,” I murmur into her ear. “You like being shown off like this, don’t you? The idea that anyone could see? That they might see your face and know just how much you’re enjoying being filled up by my thick cock?” I arch my hips upwards, pushing deeper, emphasizing the words as I say them. Marika lets out a keening whimper of pleasure, writhing atop me as I rub her clit faster.

“Don’t keep quiet when you come,” I warn her. “I want to hear you moan and beg. I want to feel you squeeze my cock when you come. I want you bouncing on my fucking dick, *god*—” She shifts her hips again, sliding up and down a little more, rocking forward against me, and the sensation is so fucking good that it’s almost too much for a moment again. Everything about this is turning me on more than I could ever have imagined, and I want it to last as much as I want to come inside of her.

I hear some noise from further down the jet, but I don’t care. We could have a whole fucking audience right now, and I wouldn’t care. In fact, I think it might turn me on more. I’ve never been one to think I’d get off on being watched, but the idea sounds so fucking good right now that it’s hard to hold back my orgasm—that, and how good Marika feels tightening around me.

She’s close to coming. I can feel it in the quick, sharp jerks of her hips, the way she squirms and grinds down on me, and the small gasps that she lets out as I find the rhythm that I know she likes. I don’t need to see the expression on her face to know what it is, to know that her full, bow-shaped lips are parted on a moan, her eyes are closed, and her face taut with her pleasure. Her hands are clutching my shoulders, and with every movement of her body against me, I’m closer and closer to the edge, feeling as if I haven’t come in weeks, and not as if I came twice just a few hours ago. And what drives me even more insane, heightens the pleasure even more, is the memory playing over and over again in my head of her sliding down onto my cock herself, *wanting* me.

She’s so fucking wet that I’d have a hard time not slipping out of her, if not for the close, tight position that we’re in.

I could stay in her like this all fucking night.

I can't remember the last time I'd stayed hard after climaxing, like I had earlier after she'd made me come with her mouth. I'm too old for that shit, too old for multiple orgasms or even fucking without a decent refractory period in between. At least, that's what I told myself. That was for my twenties, not my forties.

But Marika makes me feel like a fucking teenager again, like I can not only keep going again and again, but I have to hold onto my orgasm like one, like I'm going to come too fast, too soon. I've never felt anything better than what it feels like to be inside of her.

I'm damn sure that I never will.

I feel her hips jerk and shudder, feel her clit twitch beneath my fingers, and then I can *feel* her coming, feel her pussy tightening and rippling along the rock-hard length of my cock. I think I'm going to lose my mind from the pleasure, that nothing has ever felt this good, and nothing ever will again. I thrust up into her, hard, feeling her orgasm as I hear her moan, rising in pitch until I'm sure everyone on the goddamn plane can hear her, and I hope they can. The thought makes me throb inside of her, thrusting hard as I hold her down on my cock, grinding every last bit of pleasure I can out of her before I fill her up with my own cum.

“Theo—”

Her gasping my name is my undoing. I'm beginning to find out that nothing makes me come like hearing that, her sweet voice with its faint accent moaning my name. I feel myself go harder still inside of her, my hands on her ass as I drag her down hard onto my cock.

“I'm going to come,” I groan into her ear, my teeth nipping at the lobe. “I'm going to fill you up, *cailín deas*, right here, where anyone can see; I'm going to fucking come—”

Marika moans, her back arching deeply as she thrusts herself down onto me, her nails digging into my shoulders through the fabric of my shirt, and it only makes everything feel more intense, the throbbing of my cock inside of her tight heat, the way she's still fluttering around me from her own orgasm, the

sheer pleasure of it as I fuck myself into her hard, my cock exploding as my head falls back and I feel Marika's mouth against my throat, her lips grazing over my skin, and for a moment it feels as if I'm never going to stop coming.

And at that moment, as I'm coming hard inside of my wife, I have the distinct feeling that we're being watched.

I hold onto her for a long moment, my fingers still digging into her ass, trying to relearn how to breathe. I'm still throbbing inside of her, and I can feel the wet mess that we've made of each other, doubtless something I'm going to have to clean up after this. But for her—

Carefully, I guide her off of me, pulling her panties back into place as I press my hand against her. "You're going to stay full of my cum until we land," I murmur against her mouth. "I want to sit here for the rest of the flight, thinking about my cum dripping out between your thighs, how *soaked* those panties will be. Can you do that for me?"

Marika nods wordlessly, and I stand up, helping her back to her seat as she sits down weakly, tucking the blanket back around her legs. She looks flushed, her hair loose around her face, and anyone looking at her would know that she's just been well-fucked.

I turn around to go back to my seat—and I see the man standing at the end of the aisle. I have that feeling again—that I was being watched, and I feel instinctively that it was him...that he saw all of it. There's something in his blue eyes that's sharp and curious—a little angry, too.

He's not someone I recognize. *He must be from Nikolai's security*, I think as I sit back down, ignoring him. I'm not angry that he saw—I enjoyed the idea of us being watched, even if it's less appealing now that I've come. But something about the look on his face unsettled me—the anger in it.

I can't think of any reason why seeing me with *my* wife would anger him—unless he wants her, and *that* thought sends a spiraling rage through me that burns so hot I see red. That thought fills my head again—*mine*.

Marika is mine. But if this man desires her—it doesn't matter. From everything I can tell, whether she expected to or not, she wants me as much as I want her.

The thought eases the flush of rage, and I settle back into my own seat, ignoring the man. He means nothing to either one of us—it doesn't matter if he's irritated by the sight. Now that I've calmed down a little, I can think of other reasons why it might have angered him—he might have thought it was inappropriate or disliked having to hear us, or even jealousy that has nothing to do with wanting Marika and everything to do with wanting a woman who would let me do the things I just did to Marika.

I tell myself, as I look over to where she's started to fall asleep, curled up beneath the cashmere throw blanket, that it doesn't matter. Soon, we'll be in Dublin, and I'll be on a honeymoon with my new, beautiful bride.

I'm not going to allow anything to ruin that.

—

There's a car waiting for us on the tarmac when we arrive. Our luggage is already being loaded into it, and I lead Marika down the steps of the plane and to the waiting car. It would be about three a.m. back in Chicago, which means it's nine in the morning, and the sun is up here, and Marika peers up at the sky with a jaw-cracking yawn.

"The jet lag will get to you," I tell her sympathetically. "If you can stay awake until tonight, do. It will help reset your clock. I know it's not easy, but I recommend at least trying to stay awake until the afternoon at the very least, when you might usually take a nap. Otherwise, it's going to be very difficult to get on a normal sleep schedule while we're here. And," I add, giving her a wink as I put my hand on the small of her back and guide her towards the waiting car, "I'm happy to oblige if you need something to keep you awake."

Marika looks at me, not realizing what I mean for a moment before her eyes widen, and her mouth rounds in a soft *oh*, before she blushes. I find I like the way her cheeks turn pink; it makes me want to take her face in my hands and feel the heat there, kissing her until she blushes even deeper.

I'm falling for my wife. The realization doesn't unsettle me as much as I once might have thought it would. I'd always thought of love as something to avoid if possible, as most men in my world do. Love makes you vulnerable, weak, even—susceptible to the whims of another person, and open to

someone being used against you to cause pain. Love is a distraction.

But with Marika, I can see the possibility of it being something else—a means to a future that I hadn't imagined would still be possible for me.

“Are we going to a hotel?” she asks as the car pulls away from the tarmac, and I shake my head.

“You'll see,” I tell her, reaching for her hand where it's resting on the leather seat between us. I feel her tense a little, but she doesn't pull away.

I can imagine, if she has any feelings for me, that it's as unexpected as mine are for her. I want to give her time—to not rush her. I don't want her to feel that I'm pushing her into anything.

We have time. I'm in no hurry to do anything other than enjoy her.

I'm looking forward to the expression on her face when she sees the house—I'm rewarded in spades when the car reaches the end of the driveway that winds through the green and hilly landscape, and Marika sees the house rising up at the end of the gravel drive. It's a grey stone manor, surrounded by lush green landscaping and an old fountain in the courtyard in front of it, and her mouth drops open a little as she stares out of the window.

“It's like a picture,” she says finally, her eyes round. “Like something out of a movie. It's gorgeous.”

“It's on my family's ancestral land,” I tell her as the car comes to a stop. “A long time ago, there was nothing here but a small cottage. My family that lived here never had a home like this, before they came to Chicago. I wanted to build one here as a testament to how far we've come. It was a long work in progress—it was only fully completed five or so years ago. I don't get to come as often as I'd like.” I open the door, walking around to get hers, and as I help her out, I'm pleased by the stunned expression still on her face.

“Do you like it?” I ask her as the car pulls away, and we stand there for a moment. She's said nothing else, standing there quietly as her gaze roves over the house and grounds, and I wonder for a moment if it might not be *too* rustic for her. There's a lot of old-world decor in my home in Chicago, but it's still very near the city. This is well away from Dublin proper, and has all the quiet charm of a rural country estate.

She still says nothing, her gaze taking it all in, and my hand touches the small of her back, rubbing lightly over the soft knit of her dress. “I hope we’ll spend a good bit of time here—more than I have in past years. Especially once we have children—I’d like for them to be raised here more than in the city.”

I realize, as I say it, just how important that is to me. I hadn’t thought about it in any concrete way—but Finn could run things in Chicago, when I’m not there. He’s not a King, but he has my authority...he’s handling things there now, while I’m here. There are remote meetings and flying in for anything important enough for me to handle in person. A semi-retirement, until I have a son old enough for me to enjoy the real thing.

The idea of a wife and family that I actually wanted to spend my time with hadn’t felt like a real possibility before. But now—

I look at Marika and think of having children with her—the noise and bustle and chaos of the city no longer sounds so appealing. “Not right away—but I can see it, before too long.” I glance at her wryly, hoping she takes my meaning, but her lips are pressed together, and she looks more anxious than pleased now.

A spark of worry lights inside of me. I reach for her, turning her slowly so that she’s facing me, my hand brushing against her cheek. “You do want children, don’t you?” I ask, lightly kissing her. She responds, but without her usual eagerness, and that worry grows. I need an heir—Marika getting pregnant is not negotiable. But I don’t want it to only be something that she *has* to do in order to fulfill her obligation. The taste of companionship and pleasure that I’ve gotten with her only makes me want more.

“Of course,” she says quietly, turning her head again to look at the house. “It’s my duty, Theo. I knew that when I married you.”

My gut tightens, that uneasy feeling spreading. “I want it to be more than a duty. Come with me.” I reach for her hand, my larger one wrapping around hers as I lead her towards the house, across the gravel, and up the graduated stone steps. The broad wooden door of the house with its iron lion’s-head knocker greets us, and I push it open. There’s no staff here right now—it’s only us.

“A cleaning staff comes once a week,” I tell her as the door shuts behind us. “But aside from that, it’s just you and I. I like the peace of it. There’s security, of course,” I add, before she can be alarmed. “But they stay out of sight. There are houses further back on the property, and they rotate through. With luck, you’ll never see them. The security Nikolai sent along will have space there, too.”

Marika nods, her gaze taking in the dark wood floors, the long hallway, and the house beyond. Her eyes look very far away, and I reach up, turning her face back to mine.

“I was inside you only a few hours ago,” I murmur, backing her up against the heavy door. Her back hits it with a small sound, and she sucks in a breath, but there’s no fear or resistance in her eyes. I can see a flicker of desire there, and it only spurs me on. “And in your mouth just a few hours before that. I’ve come in you three times since you were in my office last afternoon, *cailín deas*, and already I want you again.”

I reach for her hand, moving it between us and against me so she can feel how hard I am. I’ve *been* hard since the moment I started talking about the family we might have here, thinking about just how that family will come to be. The ache of need is spreading through me hot and fast. “One step inside this house, and I already need you again.”

I let go of her wrist, and she doesn’t pull her hand away. Her fingers twitch against my rigid length, and I stifle a groan from just that small bit of sensation as I brush her hair away from her face. “I don’t want it to be a duty, Marika—having children with me. I want you to *ache* for me to come to your bed and fill you up, hoping every time that it will be the one that gets you pregnant with my child.”

Her lips part, and I see her eyes soften with heat. My other hand slides up her thigh, nudging up the skirt of her dress, and I can feel her start to give in—if she ever planned on trying to resist me in the first place.

“Just the thought of it gets me hard.” I rock my hips into her hand, letting her feel it. “You’re full of my cum right now, still, and I already want to give you more.” My hand is under her dress, sliding up her inner thigh, and her small gasp spurs me on. “I want to feel it in you.”

I grip the edge of her panties, yanking them down her hips with one sharp movement, and Marika lets out a whimper. The lace slides down her thighs, falling to the wooden floor, and I slip my fingers between her legs where it was, feeling her soft, wet pussy against my fingers as I slide them between her folds.

She's still full of my cum from before. I can feel it when my fingers go inside of her, two of them curling into her wet heat, and Marika's head falls back against the door as I press my thumb to her clit, thrusting my hand against her as she gasps. "I was going to take you upstairs," I whisper, leaning in as I rock against her hand, still pressed to my cock, my lips grazing over her ear. "I couldn't wait to fuck you in our bed here. But I can't even wait that long."

I groan as I feel her clench around me, her body responding instantly as I murmur the filthy words in her ear. "I need to be inside of you sooner than that. I want to fuck you until all that cum is so deep inside of you it'll stay there, and then I'm going to give you more, until you're so fucking full of it, again and again, until—"

Marika moans, shuddering against my hand, and I realize with an almost painful surge of desire that this is turning her on as much as it is me. I'm not the only one aroused by the idea of coming inside of her, of her dripping with it, of fucking her again and again until I've come in her so many times she couldn't help but end up pregnant because of it. She's aroused by it too—and the evidence is soaking my fingers, her pussy so wet that even as tight as she is, I don't think it will be hard for me to get inside of her.

I thrust my fingers into her, reaching with my other hand to free my aching cock, wrapping her hand around it as I groan. "That's it," I murmur into her ear as I curl my fingers inside of her, stroking her to the orgasm I need her to have before I slide my cock into her. "Stroke my cock, *milis*. Fuck, everything you do feels so fucking good." There was a time not long before Marika when a woman's hand on my cock wouldn't have done as much for me any longer, but just her touch has me throbbing, thrusting against her palm like an inexperienced boy as I moan into the soft skin of her neck at the feeling of her wet heat around my fingers, desperate to feel it around my cock.

"Theo—" she pants my name, her hips rocking against my hand, and I can

feel the moment she gives in, when she forgets everything she might be worried about except how much she wants me. “Oh god, I—”

“Come for me, *cailín deas*.” I graze my teeth over her throat, and she shudders, tightening around my fingers again. “Come for me so I can fuck you.”

She cries out at that, her orgasm overtaking her, and something about the idea that I *need* to make her come before I can have my cock inside of her turns me on even more, too. I feel the pre-cum dripping from the tip, over her fingers, sliding over my taut flesh as she strokes me through her climax, her hand stuttering and squeezing over my length as I close my hand around the side of her hip to keep her from losing her balance as her knees go weak.

I shove her dress up her hips, reaching for her leg and hooking it around mine as I thrust forward, angling myself between her trembling thighs. I can still feel her spasming as I thrust into her, groaning at the feeling of how hot and wet she is, burning up inside as I kiss her hard, my other hand sinking into her hair.

“Oh god, Theo—” she moans into the kiss, her hips grinding against me, meeting every thrust as I fuck her against the door. I really *had* planned to take her upstairs, wanted our first time here to be in the huge four-poster bed in the master suite, but I meant it when I said I couldn’t wait. The thought of what could result from how many times I’ve come inside her so far only makes me want to do it more. Even as I’m thrusting inside of her as deeply as I can go, the pleasure throbbing through my veins, I’m already thinking about the next time I’ll get to be inside of her.

I feel insatiable, like I can’t get enough. And from the way Marika is gasping, moving against me as she moans, I think she’s not far behind.

“God, you feel so good.” I thrust into her again, holding myself there for a moment, and when I’m still for a second too long, she squirms against me, needing more. “So fucking—” I groan, the words lost as she spasms around me, and I pull out of her sharply, spinning her so that she’s facing the door as I shove her dress up around her waist, looking at her perfect ass as I bend her over against it.

My cock is glistening from how wet she is, streaked with her arousal and my

cum, and I thrust back into her, aching from even the moment of being outside of her tight heat. She cries out the moment I do, her face pressed to the heavy wood of the door as I find a rhythm, my fingers digging into her hips. The pleasure is almost too much, tightening every muscle in my body, better than anything I've ever felt before with anyone. I know I'm not going to last as long as I want to. I'm constantly torn between being terribly aroused by the thought of the moment I come for her and wanting to drag it out as long as I can, so I can keep feeling this.

“Oh—” she moans again, a steady stream of pleased sounds falling like music from her lips as I thrust again and again. I slide my hands up the curves of her ass, imagining a moment when I might fuck her there—but not yet. “Oh god, I'm—I'm—”

I can *feel* it when she comes again, clenching around me like a vise, pulling me deeper as she bucks against me, her soft ass grinding back against my hips as I shudder against her, knowing I'm only seconds away from my own release. My balls feel taut and almost painful, aching to let go. I give myself a moment to enjoy the sweet ecstasy of feeling her tight and rippling around me before I grab onto the side of her hip, hard, and let myself come.

God, it feels so fucking good. I pour into her, shooting hot cum into her pussy as she cries out at the sensation, gasping as I moan her name. I keep thrusting, keep fucking, wanting to drive it into her as deeply as possible as she writhes backward against me, her own aftershocks still rippling around my length as I come harder than I ever have with anyone.

Every time, with Marika, it feels like nothing else I've ever had.

She's breathless by the time I finally stop thrusting inside of her, shuddering. I slowly let myself slip out of her perfect, sweet pussy, enjoying the side of my cum against her pink flesh as it drips a little down her thighs.

Her face is flushed as she tugs her skirt down, reaching for her panties, and as she bends down to get them, eye-level with my still-throbbing cock, an idea that nearly hardens me all over again flashes through my head.

I reach down, touching her cheek. “Will you be a good girl for me,” I murmur, stroking my fingers along her jaw, “and clean my cock off for me, *mo grá?*”

She sucks in a breath, and for a brief second, I think I've upset her. That I've asked for something too much, too filthy for a beautiful, delicate Bratva princess. But then, just as I'm on the verge of tucking myself away and changing the subject, she drops to her knees, her hands on the wool of my suit trousers, sliding up my thighs.

"Like this?" she murmurs, tilting her head as she runs her tongue along the side of my cock, licking up her arousal and my cum off of my softening flesh, all the way to the tip, where there's still cum pearling.

"Oh, fucking *Christ*." The sensation is almost too much against my over-sensitive cock, her tongue lapping up the last of the cum as her lips purse around it. I thread my hand through her hair without thinking, holding her mouth against my cockhead as my toes curl. "You're going to get me hard all over again, *god*—"

As if to underscore that, my cock twitches against her lips, swelling again as she keeps licking her way up and down the shaft, her soft pink tongue licking away all of the cum there exactly the way I'd asked her to—except I hadn't believed she'd actually *do* it. Now her lips are sliding around the tip again, over her tongue, and I can't quite believe this either—that I'm getting hard again moments after coming inside of her.

But I can feel my cock throbbing, the blood rushing back in a way that leaves me light-headed after coming so hard, and I already feel that aching need to orgasm again—this time in her mouth.

"Is this good?" she whispers as she slides off of my cock for a second, still brushing her lips over the now-swollen tip, my cock bobbing stiffly in front of her face. "Is it—"

"Too much?" I ask wryly, my hand tightening in her hair. "Almost. But it feels too good. Don't stop, *cailín deas*," I murmur, gently pressing my hand against the back of her head and urging her mouth back onto my cock. "Make me come again, just like this."

It doesn't take as long as I would have thought. I think of my cum inside of her, dripping down her thighs right now, her panties still around her ankles as she kneels on the floor and sucks my cock, her hand sliding along my shaft as she wraps her lips around me, and there's nothing else in my head but her. I

know no one ever expected me to be faithful in my marriage—least of all her, but there’s no part of me that wants anyone else, or can even imagine why I would. There’s nothing I could want more than her.

When I come in her mouth again, she swallows almost all of it this time, choking a little as I twist my fingers in her hair and shoot my cum down her throat, more of it than I would have thought after how many times she’s made me come in the past twenty-four hours. And still, as she licks the cum off of her lips that dripped out, looking up at me with those wide blue eyes, I could almost fuck her again.

Instead, I help her to her feet, bending down and grabbing the panties still lying on the wooden floor, soaked through with her arousal and my cum from the flight here. “I’m keeping these,” I tell her in a gruff, lust-filled tone, tucking the black lace into the pocket of my suit trousers as I lean in and kiss her lightly on the mouth. Her lips have the faint tang of my cum, but I don’t care. “Let me show you around the house.”

Her hand slips through my arm, her other fixing the skirt of her dress, and she nods, looking up at me with those blue eyes that make me want to give her anything she could ever ask for and more.

I am, without question, falling for my wife.

Marika



My heart is pounding as Theo starts to give me a tour of the huge mansion.

I have trouble focusing as he tells me the details of the art it's filled with and notable details about it. It's clear that he put a lot of work into designing it, wanting to style the house after the kind of architecture and decor that it would have had, if his family had been able to live in such a place when they originally were here. He's proud of it—and rightfully so—he designed it himself, and even if he didn't physically build it, he clearly had a hand in every part that wasn't hewing the stone himself. I know it means a great deal to him—this land is where his great-grandparents and generations before them toiled away in homes much smaller and simpler than this.

The thought of children sticks with me, as he leads me through the first floor and towards the back of the manor. I *know* that's what he's hoping for, from what he told me when we arrived, and the guilt that has settled in me since our wedding night only feels worse, after seeing the look in his face. I'm supposed to be the one to give him those children—but the plans Nikolai has set in motion with me at the center make that impossible. That should be the thing primarily on my mind right now—not so much that Theo wants children, which is a given, or that he wants to raise them here more than in Chicago, but that I'm going to have to continue to pretend that I want the same, all while making it utterly impossible that we can do so. But all I can think about is what I saw on the flight here.

I don't know how I managed to keep a neutral expression when I saw Adrik. Thank *god* I didn't see him until after Theo and I were finished, although I

don't know how long he was standing there, watching us.

I've never felt that way, seeing him before. Like a jolt of cold went down my spine, and my blood turned to ice, because of the look on his face. He was so angry. I've seen that look in his eyes before, but never turned on me.

And he's not supposed to be here.

I don't know if Nikolai selected him, thinking he might be one of the men who would make me feel even safer, being from the mansion's staff, or if Adrik asked to be sent on the job, but either way, it's bad. If it's the former, he should have tried to come up with a reason to beg off. And if it's the latter —

I'm afraid to think about that, because all of the possibilities are so much worse. That he's here to try to seduce me away from Theo. To convince me to leave with him. To hurt Theo in some way. None of those options have a good ending.

Would it really be so bad, if something happened to Theo sooner rather than later?

The way my stomach clenches at that thought worries me, because as much as I don't want to admit it, it's not entirely only because that would upend Nikolai's plans and possibly make things worse. Adrik taking out Theo would mean that Theo's death would look far too suspicious—him meeting an unlikely end not long after our marriage and put Nikolai under a spotlight...me as well, possibly. Theo's Kings might not be quick to buy whatever excuse Nikolai would have to come up with, and as far as Adrik—

I know this world well enough to know that if there needs to be a scapegoat or a sacrifice, Adrik would quickly be offered up. Nikolai would not protect him for acting outside of his orders—*especially* if it came out *why* he'd done so. Nikolai would not be gentle in questioning him, either.

Adrik can't be that stupid, I think frantically as Theo shows me the gardens, wrapping my arms around myself against the chill, both inside and out. *He can't honestly think that he can fix this for me. It must have been Nikolai, choosing him—*

But then why didn't he try to get out of it?

The only hope I can cling to is that Adrik *did* try to beg off the assignment, and Nikolai insisted. My brother isn't a man whom many would dare to make ask for something twice, and Adrik wouldn't have continued protesting if Nikolai told him again.

I tell myself that's the most likely reason, not anything else. But I can't shake my unease at the memory of that angry look on Adrik's face.

What should he have looked like, then? After seeing you—

My face flushes at the memory, of me astride Theo's lap, his cock buried inside of me and my dress pushed up so that anyone walking by could have almost seen up it, and would have *certainly* known what we were doing. It was the closest thing to public sex that I've ever done or hopefully ever will do—and the worst part about it is that I *liked* it.

I more than liked it. I got off on it, on the idea of a flight attendant or one of the security hearing us, walking out, and seeing me bouncing on Theo's cock while he gripped my hips, thrusting his hard—

My flush deepens, and I'm glad we're outside, because I can blame it on the cold if Theo notices. *He's a bad man*, I try to remind myself. *As far as you know, anyway. Just because he's been kind to you—*

But it's more than that. He's been more than kind. He's been careful with me, quick to make sure that I actually want the things we've done together, even going so far as to say he would stop if I asked him to. I don't know why I asked him about that, why I even entertained the idea—I didn't expect him to say yes. I expected him to say that he couldn't stop, that he wouldn't be able to, that I was his, his wife, and that he would fuck me when and where he pleased.

But that doesn't seem to be what turns Theo on. And what does—

Another shiver goes through me, something else I'm glad I can blame on the cold. *According to Nikolai, he's partially responsible for your mother's death*, I remind myself. *He might have even been her lover*. That should make me want nothing to do with him, I know—but I find it less and less believable with every moment I spend with him. *What does that make me?* I wonder as Theo guides me back into the house, my throat tightening.

Shouldn't I believe my family—my mother, my brother, over anyone else, especially a man I barely know? But nothing about him makes me think he had anything to do with that. He doesn't behave like a man who would have been party to destroying a woman's life, and he seems to respect the idea of marriage too much to cuckold another man and be a part of an affair. The two men—the one who has been described to me and the one I've spent days with now, don't seem to be the same person at all.

Even if he had nothing to do with that, he's a greedy, powerful man trying to ruin my family. But I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around that, too. He did have plans to encroach on my family's territory, that's true. If I hadn't agreed to marry him, I'm not sure what would have happened. That should upset me more—but wouldn't my brother do the same if he saw the opportunity? Wouldn't he take what another man had, regardless of the bloodshed, if it benefited him?

I don't like to think about it—but I've never had to before. And I can't say that he wouldn't.

Theo is getting to me, I realize as he leads me upstairs to show me the bedrooms. From the moment he slipped that ring onto my finger, that family heirloom that I still feel should never have belonged to me, he's been wearing away at my defenses with a patience and gentleness that doesn't fit the kind of man I've been told he is. All of this—the talk of his family's land and ancestral home and wanting to raise a family here, how *much* he wants all of it, is getting under my skin, making me feel as if the man I've married is one that I could actually *want* to be married to.

It's not just that, either. It's how much *he* clearly wants me, and not in the way that I had thought he would. I had expected demands, lust, for him to fuck me however and whenever he pleased—but Theo is much more generous in bed than I expected. Remembering his words from earlier makes me flush all over again—*I need to make you come so I can be inside of you.*

He hadn't meant literally—I'd been embarrassingly wet, between my own arousal and him coming inside of me twice earlier—he'd meant that *he* needed to make me come, so he could feel as if it were alright to fuck me. He needed to know I was enjoying it, too. It's a far cry from how I've always been taught men in this world are.

I like fucking him. I can't pretend that I don't. We walk into the master suite—a huge, gorgeous room decorated the way I imagine an old-world manor house would be, with dark walnut floors and a thick fur rug next to it, a fireplace much like the one at the home in Chicago, and a huge four-poster bed made up with what looks like some of the softest bedding and pillows I've ever seen—and the first thing I think is that Theo is going to fuck me in that bed, and the heat that washes through me is startling.

I think I might like him.

That's so much worse. The conflict in me is growing, and I can't imagine it's going to get better before it's over, not unless this is all some elaborate scheme that Theo is using to manipulate me into letting my guard down, to make me feel comfortable before he turns on me. It's not out of the realm of possibility—yet every time I consider it, it seems impossible with what he's shown me of himself. He has, from the moment we met, seemed genuine.

Men in this world lie, Marika. It's what they do.

I yawn, another jaw-cracking one, and Theo looks at me with a hint of amusement in his face. "You're not going to make it to afternoon, are you?" he asks, and I shake my head. It's not even quite noon here yet—which means it's barely six a.m. in Chicago. I wouldn't even be awake yet there, and here I am, feeling as if I'm going to fall asleep on my feet.

"You're not boring me, I promise," I tell him with a small smile, thinking in some other part of my head how like a normal married conversation this is, how easy it is to talk to him. How easily I can fall into a rhythm with him. "I just—I need a nap."

"Alright. You can work on the jet lag tomorrow." He leans in and gives me a light kiss on the lips. "I plan to take you with me into Dublin—I have a meeting with the Kings, and I thought you could shop and explore the city while I'm busy with that. After, we can have dinner and spend the evening together."

A date with my husband. It sounds so...normal. This is nothing like what I expected, to be locked away in a mansion with a demanding jailor for a husband who would claim mastery of me and control my every move and whim. This is a husband who has business meetings and sends me off with

his credit card, who joins me for dinner afterward and enjoys my company. Who will bring me home after, to this gorgeous house that he wants to fill with our children, and make love to me in the bed inches away—

What am I thinking? In an instant, I can imagine a future without Nikolai's plan, without the plot I've been dragged into...and apparently, without Adrik.

The guilt is crushing. I entered this marriage for a reason, and I'm already losing sight of it. Not to mention—

There's no future for this, no matter what. Our marriage was started on a lie—about my virginity, about the possibility of children, when there are a few packs of pills hidden away deep in my suitcase that will make very sure that never happens—no successful marriage could ever go on like that. Theo and I don't work forever, because nothing he believes about me is true.

If this goes on for long enough, he will find out. There's no way around that.

"Take your nap." He gives me another quick kiss, clearly not drawing it out because the bed is *right there*, and he's all too likely to fall into it. "I'm going to see what we have here for dinner."

"You can cook?" I look at him curiously, remembering what he'd said about the lack of staff. "Because I certainly can't."

Theo smirks, kissing me once more, his hands resting on my waist. I feel him take a step closer, and I have the distinct impression that he's considering whether or not to join me in bed. "I can, actually." He reaches up, smoothing a little of my hair away from my face. "And I'm going to leave you here, before I keep you from taking that nap."

As he walks away, closing the door behind him, I feel a flutter in my stomach that I hadn't expected to feel with him. It feels *good* to be wanted by him. I had thought it would be frightening, something to endure—but I feel...

I don't even know how to describe it, fully. But I find myself almost disappointed that he went downstairs, instead of tumbling into bed with me yet again.

You'd be so sore you wouldn't be able to sleep if he did, I tell myself, feeling the faint ache still between my legs from earlier. I look for my suitcases,

which are propped against the far wall near the closet, and walk over to look for something I can sleep in. I'll have to unpack at some point—Theo still hasn't told me how long we're staying, but I have a feeling it's for more than a few days.

I'm asleep almost the moment I fall into bed, not even bothering to slip under the covers. I find a warm wool throw blanket instead, curling up under it in my silk pajama shorts and camisole, and the moment I sink into the downy pillows, I'm out like a light.

The sleep isn't dreamless, though. I don't remember much of it—tangled nightmares involving Theo and Adrik and the two of them, a flash of blood and smoke, a scream—I wake to the sound of heavy boots in the hall, stopping at my door.

I sit up partway, pushing my somewhat tangled hair out of my face. It's not Theo—he wears lighter shoes than that, made of expensive Italian leather. It sounds like the sort of footfalls I'm used to hearing when Adrik would come to my room—but it can't be him. He wouldn't dare—

The door, which I hadn't bothered to lock, pushes open, and I see him standing there.

It seems that he would, in fact, dare.

“Adrik.” I breathe his name, startled, pushing back the blanket and getting out of bed without thinking. It's not until his hungry gaze rakes over my body, coming back up to settle on my breasts, that I remember what I'm wearing. I cross my arms over my chest, feeling suddenly very vulnerable—and confused.

He's as gorgeous as ever, in his usual uniform of black cargo pants and fitted black t-shirt, that chiseled face and soft short blond hair exactly as I remember the last time I saw him. The sight of him standing there, filling the doorway, makes my stomach flip, and my heart clench in my chest.

I care about Adrik. Whatever I'm feeling with Theo hasn't changed that. And the desire hasn't gone away, either. There was a reason I chose him to be my first, and I can see it all over again as I look at him, shivering a little in the chill of the room.

Adrik's gaze stays on my breasts for a moment, as if he can see what's beneath the thin silk of my camisole, my stiff nipples and chilled skin. I have a moment's thought of what it would be like for his broad, warm, rough hands to slide over my skin, and my stomach flips over again.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper, and he slips into the room, shutting the door heavily behind him. My mouth drops open. "Adrik—"

"I came to see you." He crosses the room in two strides, stopping in front of me, those warm, rough hands on my upper arms. "It's been torture, waiting to come up here and speak to you—"

"What will be torture is the *actual* torture Theo and my brother will put you through if you get caught up here!" I hiss, looking at the door with something verging on panic. Theo had made a point of saying that the house was empty of staff and that the security makes themselves scarce—Adrik has no real excuse for being up here. The best he could probably come up with is that he didn't know better and came to check on me as he's accustomed to doing back at home—but what if they *did* tell him that he's not supposed to do that, and he's caught lying? Not to mention the fact that I don't know if Theo would buy the excuse in the first place—

"I don't care." His hands smooth over my arms, fingers pressing into my flesh with urgency, and I can feel the desire radiating off of him. He stares down at me with those piercing blue eyes, a mixture of anger, hurt, accusation, and lust all mixed together in that expression, making me feel terrified and a little weak at the knees all at once. "I saw you on the plane, Marika."

"I know," I whisper. There's no point in denying it; I'm almost certain that he saw me catch his eye from where he'd stood at the end of the jet's aisle. "Adrik—"

"Don't tell me you didn't want it," he murmurs harshly, gripping me a little tighter. "I saw you come." His accent thickens, the words spoken between his teeth. "I know you, Marika. I've made you come enough times. Don't tell me you faked it, either. I know what you sound like, that pretty expression on your face." One of his hands leaves my arm, his fingers brushing over my lower lip, and I draw in a breath. I can't help it. It sends a pleasurable tingle

over my skin, making me shiver in his grasp.

“You still want me.” There’s clear satisfaction in his voice. “I wondered if you did, or if that bastard had made you forget all about me. But you haven’t.”

It takes a moment for me to find my voice, to be able to speak at all. I’m still stunned that he came up here, that he had that much nerve—or was that stupid, depending on how you look at it. I know how *I* look at it. “You need to go, Adrik,” I tell him with as much authority as I can muster. I’ve tried not to behave like his employer, when we were home—but he’s putting us both in danger now. I pointedly avoid the topic of whether or not I’ve forgotten about him or want him.

It’s a pointless conversation and one that will only make things harder.

“I just got here.” His fingers trace from my lower lip to my jaw.

“If Theo finds you—”

“He won’t.” He says it with such confidence that it’s clear he knows something that I don’t. “He went out to the nearest shop to get food. I heard him calling his driver.” Adrik says the last word with distaste, as if he’s forgotten that I’m someone who’s always had a driver, too, for whom this is a normal thing. “He won’t be back for a little while.”

“You can’t put me in this position.” I try to disengage from his hands, but he’s holding me tightly. Almost *too* tightly. “Nikolai sent the security with me to keep me *safe*. Not to put me in more danger—that’s what you’re doing. Someone else could see. Someone could have seen you come up here—”

“They didn’t.” His hand winds into my hair, and I’m suddenly torn between memories of him, and how many times he’s pulled my lips to his exactly like that—and of Theo’s hand in my hair earlier, as I went to my knees and cleaned our mingled cum off of his cock. Something that I would have thought would have horrified me—and instead left me aching for him all over again.

Adrik starts to walk me backward, and I realize with a sudden clench of my stomach that he’s backing me towards the bed. “Adrik—”

“I miss you.” His hands drop to my waist, sliding up towards my breasts, and I go to push him away, but it’s like shoving a brick wall. “What I saw on the plane—” He leans down, his lips grazing over my neck. “I know you have to put on a show,” he murmurs, the kiss sliding over my earlobe. “I know you have to make him believe you want him. But did you have to *actually* come, Marika?”

The accusation is in his voice again, and I feel guilty—for both men. I’ve been put in an impossible position, one that I thought I understood, and one that, all too late, I’m realizing I didn’t have a full picture of.

Adrik backs me up to the very edge of the mattress, my thighs pressing against it, and I feel a leap in my chest that’s half fear, half desire. I cling to the fear, because it’s the only thing that will keep me from making a terrible mistake that will only complicate everything so much more. “I couldn’t help it,” I whisper. “I didn’t mean to.”

It’s a lie. Another lie, stacked up on so many more, but this one feels worse, somehow. How many more will I have to tell to get through this? To Adrik, to Theo—maybe even to my brother, in time. To myself. I can feel them multiplying, becoming a convoluted tangle that will eventually wrap me up in it, maybe to my own doom.

“Prove it.” Adrik’s voice cuts through my rapidly escalating thoughts, and I look up at him, confused.

“What do you mean?” I whisper, afraid that I know all too well what he means.

His hand drops to my inner thigh, sliding upwards, beneath the edge of my silk shorts. I’m not wearing panties beneath it. His fingers graze over the gusset, where the silk is damp, and he bites back a groan.

“You are wet for me,” he murmurs, and I don’t correct him. I don’t tell him that the dampness of the silk is from Theo’s cum still inside of me, all three times he’s filled me up with it since I came back from the mansion, that if Adrik kissed me hard enough, he might still taste Theo in my mouth.

But it wouldn’t be entirely true, anyway, because Adrik *is* turning me on. His hands, his proximity, even the demands that I know he’s about to make,

because I know him well enough at least to anticipate what he's about to say. I can feel that tightness between my legs, the building ache, and I know if there were no consequences, I might not tell him no.

A part of me wants both of them. The gentle, sophisticated, generous Irishman I married, and the rough, arrogant bodyguard who saved my life. But I can't. And the one I'm bound to in all the ways that matter in this world is the one I have to be loyal to, for now.

"Adrik, please go." I push ineffectively at his chest. "Theo will be back."

"I can gauge how long it will be before he's back." His fingers tip my chin up, so that I'm looking directly into those gorgeous blue eyes. "Sleep with me, Marika."

"What? Here?" I glance back at the huge bed, my stomach in knots. "Adrik, no—"

"Prove to me you still care for me. That you still want me. That it's not only his cock that makes you come." His fingers slide under the silk, trailing over the soft outer folds of my pussy, and I flinch, as much from my own desire as from the urge to tell him to stop. I don't even know if I *want* him to stop or not—just that I know if we get caught, for any reason, this entire house of cards that Nikolai has built with me at the center will come crumbling down. "Prove to me that mine is the only cock you want to come on."

"Adrik, *please*." I flatten my hands against his chest, and his fingers on my chin tighten.

"*Please*, what?" he taunts lightly, his fingers still stroking just beneath my shorts. "*Please fuck me, Adrik? Or please make me come the way my husband does?*" There's an edge to his voice that frightens me. "How can you do this, Marika?"

I look up at him beseechingly, not wanting to ask what he means. I *know* what he means, that he wants to know how I can be with Theo. "If you don't understand by now," I whisper softly, "I don't know how I can make you understand."

His fingers dip between my folds, rubbing back and forth, and I suck in a breath as he grazes my clit. "How can you let another man come in you,

Marika, and say you still care for me?”

“Because I *do* care for you,” I whisper. “I care enough to try to keep you from getting yourself killed, Adrik! When this is over—”

“What I saw on the plane—” His mouth bends to my ear, his teeth grazing over the shell of it. “There is no *over*, Marika. He’ll drag you under with him, and then—”

“This is *my* job, Adrik!” I try to twist out of his grasp, my body throbbing with mingled desire and fear. “I have never tried to tell you how to do yours. How to protect me or my family. But my *family* comes before anything else. If you loved me—” I take a deep breath, trying to ignore his touch, the confusion tangled up inside of me. “You’d understand. You’d realize that this is as much my duty as you think following me here is yours.”

Adrik’s lip curls, and for a moment, I think it’s me that he’s furious with. It might be—I can’t tell. “I didn’t follow you here because it was my *duty*, Marika,” he growls. “I followed you here because I can’t stand thinking of that man’s hands on you. Because I needed to know that you were still mine, not that you’d sold *all* of yourself to him, body *and* soul—”

This time, I wrench away from him so hard that I do manage to slip out of his grasp, stumbling back. I straighten, trying to calm my racing heart, to speak as clearly as I can manage. A part of me *wants* to tumble into that bed with him, to reclaim my decision to sleep with him in the first place—but the problem is that it no longer feels wholly like my choice. Just as my desire for Theo is complicated with my reasons for marrying him in the first place, my desire for Adrik is now complicated by his demands. I no longer feel like it’s entirely in my hands.

“Nothing else will happen between us until I’m finished here,” I tell Adrik as calmly as I can manage, ignoring the pulse beating through my veins, the throbbing in my clit where he touched me. “When I’m no longer married to Theo, we can figure this out *then*. But not now, and definitely not here, not in —”

“The bed you share with him?” Adrik growls, and I take another step back.

“We can work this out, one way or another, when my marriage is finished.

But until then—”

Adrik’s face contorts for a moment, the rage clearly showing for a brief second, and I feel my heart stutter in my chest. I don’t know if it’s Theo or me he’s so angry with, and I’m a little terrified to find out.

“I will kill him, when this is over,” Adrik snarls. “For ever touching you. For ever fucking you. For ever knowing the pleasure of having you come on his fingers or his tongue or his cock. I will cut it off myself, and then—”

“I will be a widow when this is over,” I tell Adrik, as coldly as I’ve ever spoken to him. And as soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret them—because I never planned to tell Adrik what my brother had designed. It’s far above him—and even if it wasn’t, and even if I thought he deserved to know, I no longer feel sure that he can be trusted with that information. “But that’s not for you to decide when that will be,” I add, doing my best to keep my voice from trembling. I’m suddenly very afraid that the decision I made to be with Adrik will have farther-reaching consequences than I could have ever imagined.

He looks at me for a long moment. “I’m not going anywhere, Marika. I will still be here, protecting you. Watching you. And when this is over—I will be here, too.”

Adrik turns then, and stalks out of the room.

It should have sounded romantic, like a promise. But the way he said it—I shiver. It sounded more like a threat. And I start to wonder if keeping my secret might not be more dangerous than telling Theo the truth.

I sink down onto the edge of the bed, wrapping my arms around myself. *I can’t*, I think miserably, rubbing my hands up and down my arms, the feeling of Adrik’s touch still clinging to me. It’s not unpleasant, remembering his hands there, and I feel so utterly, horribly confused.

My feelings for Adrik are real. They have been from the beginning. But they were also uncertain, predicated on the possibility of a future that I have no means of imagining and no real certainty of how it would work. And now—

I can’t deny that I feel something for Theo. I just don’t know what it is exactly, or what it’s predicated on, either. I don’t know if I can trust it—and

what's worse, there is *no* future for that, even if what I feel is real, and even if everything he's shown me about himself is real, too.

My brother wants him dead. Nothing will change that—only the part I play in it. And if I stonewall Nikolai—

I drop my head into my hands, feeling more lost and exhausted than I have since I was rescued from the compound.

This is beyond me. And for the first time, I think my brother might have put me in more danger than I can handle.

The problem is—it's not entirely his fault.

Marika



I hear when Theo comes home, the door closing downstairs, and I make a beeline for the ensuite bathroom, hoping it will buy me time to calm down. Adrik was right, there was *plenty* of time before Theo returned, but I've been sitting on the bed crying for all that time. I have no explanation that I can think of to make sense of it if Theo comes upstairs and has questions.

The hot water is soothing. My nerves are shot from my first flight, the jet lag, the anxious dreams during my nap, and Adrik. I feel twitchy all over, jumpy, and unsettled, and I know I need to get that under control before I see Theo.

I stand in the shower for a long time after I wash my hair, stalling for as long as I can. What makes it even worse is that I *want* to go downstairs. I found myself thinking of what I should choose to wear for the dinner Theo is planning, what he might like, even what I should wear under it—and I know I'm not supposed to be thinking like that. If I am, it should only be because I'm plotting how to better seduce him, not because I genuinely want to. But I'm looking forward to dinner with him, to seeing what he cooked, if he's as good a cook as he says. And I know all of that points to me being in deeper than I should be already.

I don't know what to do about it.

I shrug on a robe once I've gotten out of the shower and dried off, going into the bedroom to dig out my blowdryer. When I open the bathroom door, I see Theo standing next to the dresser with his back to me, and I jump in place,

covering my mouth with my hand to try to stifle my yelp of surprise.

It's not as effective as I'd hoped.

He turns instantly, his gaze sliding over me, wrapped in the cream-colored plush robe. I can see the instant thought that crosses his face, that I'm undoubtedly naked under it, and I can see him picturing my smooth, damp skin and all the ways that he wants to touch it.

I could be happy like this, if things were different.

The thought makes a lump rise in my throat, and I fight it back. I can't cry again—I might be able to pass it off as jet lag and nerves, but I don't want to give Theo any reason to think I'm unhappy. I don't want him to start looking for reasons why I might be—not when they might lead back to Adrik and make this all so much worse.

He crosses the room to me, reaching for my arms much like Adrik did, but it feels different. When he pulls me in for a kiss, it's gentler, his mouth grazing over mine. "There's wine decanting downstairs," he murmurs against my lips. "And I'll go down and start dinner soon. I wanted to see if you were still sleeping."

I force a smile. "I've been up for a little bit. I wanted a shower."

"Mm." One hand drops to my hip. "I suppose that means I'll need to get you dirty again later."

A flush of heat washes over me, one that's unexpected and not entirely unwanted. I look at Theo, and he's more handsome than I could have possibly known he would be. I reach up without thinking, grazing my fingers over the dark stubble on his jaw, looking up at his rich green eyes, the dark auburn hair above, lower to his leanly muscular body now in dark grey chinos and a long-sleeved dark green henley shirt that brings out his eyes. He's dressed more casually than I've ever seen him, and somehow, it makes him even sexier.

"We're going to be having dinner late, if you keep looking at me like that." His voice is low and husky, and his hand tightens on my hip.

"How many times can you go in a day anyway?" I tease him, but a part of me

really wonders. When I'd known I was marrying a man in his early forties, I'd expected sex every few days at the most. I'm losing track of how many times he's come in the last twenty-four hours.

"We could find out." Theo raises one dark eyebrow, turning me towards the bed, and I gasp a little, raising my hands to press against his chest, fingers grazing over the soft fabric of his shirt. It's not unlike how I touched Adrik earlier, trying to push him away from me, and that brings me back to reality.

"I'm getting a little hungry," I say softly. "I haven't eaten since the flight over here."

"Of course." He looks a little chagrined, his grip on me loosening. "I'm sorry. I didn't think—"

"No, it's okay." I know there's no use in comparing, but I can't help it—only a little while ago, I was trying to get Adrik to back off, and he kept pushing. Now Theo, who by the standards of the world we live in ought to believe he has a right to me whenever he pleases, is backing off the moment I say I'm uncomfortable. "I *am* curious about these cooking skills you claim to have, though."

"*Claim?*" Theo looks offended, though even I can tell he's only joking. "Well, now I have to go downstairs and get started. You can't just say things like that and expect me not to prove otherwise."

He reaches up, touching my cheek, and I find myself wanting to lean into the caress. *I could be happy like this*, I think again, and there's a strange ache in my chest at the realization.

"I came out here to find my blowdryer." I turn away from Theo, trying to get a grip on my emotions as I rummage through my suitcase, looking for where I put it. My hand closes around one of the packets of pills, and I instinctively shove it deeper into a stack of clothes, my heart seizing in my chest at the thought of Theo seeing.

After today, I think him finding out that I'm on birth control might be even worse than him finding out that I wasn't a virgin when we got married.

My heart seizes again when I feel Theo's hands on my shoulders, and I wonder if he saw.

“I’m going to go down and get started.” He brushes a lock of wet hair off of the back of my neck, stooping to brush his lips over my skin there, and a guilty prickle of desire washes over my skin. “Come down whenever you’re ready for a glass of that wine.”

I close my eyes as he lets go of my shoulders and stands up, listening to his footsteps receding as tears fill my eyes.

I’ve gotten myself into such a terrible situation. And I don’t think Theo deserves what is being done to him here.

With the pills hidden deep within my suitcase, I find my blowdryer and go into the bathroom to finish getting ready for the night.

—

A half-hour later, I feel presentable again. It’s clear from Theo’s clothing that he likes to be more casual here—I imagine it feels like a bit of a vacation for him, too, from Chicago, where he’s expected to be more formal and sophisticated. I put on a pair of comfortable dark jeans and a loose, light-blue knit sweater that falls off of my shoulders a little, showing off the sharp line of my collarbone. There’s a cream-colored bralette under it, the lace straps visible, and the panties beneath my jeans match. I told myself I shouldn’t care if Theo likes them or not, but even as I slipped them on, I was imagining the look on his face when he discovers them later.

With my hair blow-dried and pulled into a loose, messy bun atop my head, a few pieces artfully falling out, I swipe on a little brow gel and mascara, and leave it at that. By now, Theo will be wondering if I’ve fallen asleep again, and I need to unpack my things.

It’s been an hour by the time I finish and go downstairs. I can’t help but marvel all over again at how beautiful the house is as I go down. Everything about it has clearly been designed with a loving hand and a specific vision in mind. Theo’s home in Chicago is gorgeous—but I can see that this manor is a love letter to his family, to the people who worked hard to ensure that he can create something like this now. There are portraits of generations of his family along the walls, everything from black-and-white and sepia-toned photographs from long ago, to the more updated versions from the last

generation. I see one towards the bottom of the stairs of an auburn-haired man and a woman with vibrant red hair standing side by side, a boy who looks about eight standing stiffly in front of them, and I feel certain that this is a picture of Theo and his parents.

I look at it for a long moment, wondering what kind of man that child has really grown up to be. Chicago's underworld rumors and my own family would have me believe that he's a ruthless, greedy killer who wants nothing more than to rule *all* of Chicago, to have every family under his thumb, to have more power and wealth than anyone else. But to be honest—that sounds more like my own father than the man I've married and gotten to know over the past week, a man who told me just this morning that he wanted to leave Chicago and the rush and glamour of the city and spend most of his time in this rural country manor with me, raising the children he's been doing his level best to get me pregnant with over the past few days.

That thought sends another rush of heated desire through me.

There's space at the end of the wall for more pictures. I know who would be there, if things were different. A framed portrait of Theo and I, and our child—children, in time. Next to it, our grandchildren. And then—

An unexpected lump rises in my throat. If Theo is being honest with me, if all of this is genuine and has been since the moment he asked to take me on a date to get to know me before we were married, then what my brother and I have planned is exactly the sort of thing that Theo is being unfairly accused of. And as far as what he's rumored to have done with my mother—

I realize, at that moment, that I genuinely don't believe that. And if there's anything about this situation with Theo that I don't believe, it calls it all into question.

Swallowing hard, I walk the rest of the way down the stairs, towards the kitchen in the back, the wood floor cool under my bare feet. I can smell the scents of herbs and onions and butter, roasting meat and vegetables, and my stomach growls as I step into the squared-off doorway leading into the huge kitchen.

Theo doesn't hear me at first, and I stand there for a moment, my thumb idly rolling over the emerald engagement ring on my left hand, pushing it back

and forth. I remember Adrik telling me on the stairs, back at my own mansion, how Theo should have given me something bigger, fancier. How *he* would have bought me something better than that. But standing here in the kitchen, which manages to be elegantly rustic despite its size, seeing the type of home Theo has built here and why—I understand the meaning behind the ring even more.

Theo's past matters to him. His *family* matters to him. And I realize how much it meant that he gave me this ring, instead of one he'd purchased himself.

He's taking this marriage seriously. He clearly put off marrying for a long time, but now that he has, he's giving it his all. And I've had one foot out of the door and one hand on his grave since the moment I agreed to it.

The guilt feels like it could drown me.

Theo looks up, a smile spreading across his handsome face as he gestures to the decanter of wine on the counter, a long-stemmed wine glass sitting next to it. "Help yourself. Dinner is in the oven; it should be out soon."

There's a glass of wine by his hand, and he picks it up, tilting it in my direction as he leans against the counter, looking at me in a way that manages to seem romantic and erotic all at once. I've thought before that he looks at me the way a man might look at a piece of art he particularly enjoys. It's becoming a familiar—not unpleasant—sensation to see him look at me that way. There's nothing lewd in it—yet I can see the heat in his face that tells me he sees the lace beneath my sweater and is imagining how it will feel against the palms of his hands.

"You look beautiful," he murmurs as I pour myself a glass of wine. "But then again, I don't think I've ever seen you look anything other than stunning."

I can't help but laugh. "You've never seen me in sweatpants and a t-shirt."

"You'd look beautiful even like that. Besides, they'd be designer sweatpants." He winks at me. "Cashmere, or something I'd equally enjoy touching as I slipped them off of you."

I roll my eyes at that, but he's right, of course. I don't own anything that *isn't* designer. I don't feel guilty about it—it's one of the few pleasures of the life I

was born into that is entirely for my own pleasure, and that I can indulge in freely. “As far as I’m concerned,” I tell him archly as I take a sip of the wine—which is every bit as delicious as I expected it would be—“since the men in my life have all these expectations of who I should be and marry and what I should do, the least I can have is the ability to spend their money while I’m doing it.”

Theo laughs, crossing the space between us. His hand drops to my waist, turning me so that my back is to the countertop, and he leans into me, effectively pinning me there as his gaze lands on my mouth. “I’ll be happy to give you my unlimited credit card tomorrow,” he murmurs, leaning to brush his lips over mine, the same taste of wine on his mouth. “You can spend in Dublin to your heart’s delight while I’m in my meeting, dealing with old men and their old ways.”

“Aren’t you an old man?” I ask him teasingly, reaching up to run my fingers through his auburn hair, in a genuinely affectionate gesture that I realize too late that I’ve made. “That’s what I was told. That I was marrying an old, decrepit—”

Theo growls low in his throat, his free hand sliding around to squeeze my ass through the tight jeans. “If the duck in the oven wouldn’t burn, I’d hoist you up on that countertop and show you just how decrepit I am.”

“Not the *duck*,” I whisper innocently, and he narrows his eyes at me, stealing another kiss. This one is long and lingering, his tongue sliding over my lower lip before slipping into my mouth and tangling with mine, wine and the faint taste of herbs filling my senses as his hips lean into mine.

“Christ, woman,” he swears under his breath, nipping at my lower lip before pulling away regretfully as something near the stove chimes. He takes my hand, slipping it between us so I can feel the hard ridge of his cock through the fabric of his pants. “I don’t think anyone’s gotten me this hard, this often since—” He lets out a long breath as he pulls away, shaking his head. “Maybe never. If so, I don’t remember it.”

“See?” I smile at him. “Old man.”

Theo narrows his eyes at me, and another laugh escapes my lips before I can stop it. I don’t realize, for a moment, just how happy I am until he turns

away, and the realization settles back in.

We haven't been together long enough to know if it would last forever, if this has a *real* foundation beyond the one that we've been forced to create, but at least from what I can see, Theo and I *work*. He wants me, and I want him—I can't pretend otherwise, not unless I want to lie to myself, too, and I can't see how that's helpful. We seem to make each other laugh. He's gentle with me, careful, but in ways that make me feel valued instead of coddled. And his devotion to his family—

I press my lips together as I stand there with my glass of wine in hand, watching Theo pull a ceramic roasting pan with a crisp-looking bird out of the oven, filling the room with a scent worthy of any five-star restaurant. I'm struck all over again by the realization of what sort of man it is that I've married. What I could have, if things were different.

Theo values his family's past. He values their hard work and dedication, what it took to get him to where he is in life—and he'll show that same devotion to his own family, when it comes time. *That's* why he treats me the way he does, why he is so gentle and patient with me, why he treats me like I'm valuable—because to him, I *am*. I'm his wife, his family—who he believes will give him a family of his own, the next generation of McNeils to carry on the legacy that clearly means so much to him.

The emotion that wells up in my throat threatens to choke me, my eyes going glassy with tears. I can't hide them quickly enough before Theo sets the roasting pan on top of the stove, retrieving the vegetables, and turning to look at me. The good-natured expression on his face vanishes, replaced with concern, and he slips off the oven mitts and walks quickly to me, his fingers touching my jaw lightly as he tips my face up to his.

“What's wrong, Marika?” he asks softly, and I realize how much I enjoy the way he says my name. It sounds different in his accent, and I swallow hard, trying not to burst into tears.

I can't help feeling that everything about this, about what I'm doing, is wrong. And that leaves me torn between my brother and my husband—and my lover.

It also means I have to lie to Theo, because if I tell him the truth right now, I

have no idea what will happen. I can't make a choice like that in a moment of such strong emotion.

"No one has ever cooked for me before." It sounds silly, and I bite my lip, trying to think of how to make it make sense. "I mean—I have a staff at home, I grew up with one—but I never imagined my *husband* in a kitchen, cooking dinner for me. I never imagined any of this, honestly," I whisper, looking at him, and that's not a lie.

I didn't imagine Theo. I couldn't have—not as he is. I didn't imagine a man with a soft touch or a good heart, a man with talents that I wouldn't have thought he would have cultivated, a man who comes to me without demands or orders.

Theo is the kind of man that, had I been given a choice to find him for myself, I might have *wanted* to be with. And that feels like the cruelest trick of all.

"I'll happily make you dinner just about every night we're here, if it means that much to you," he murmurs, his thumb brushing against my lower lip. "But not if it'll make you cry." He reaches up, wiping away a tear that's started to fall from my eyelashes. "I hoped to never make you cry, Marika. I know that's not realistic, not in any marriage. But I did hope it would take a long damn time before it happened."

I swallow hard against the painful swell of emotion, forcing a smile. "It's just been a long day," I reassure him. "A lot of things I'm not used to. I've never even flown before—"

"We're going to fix that, for sure," Theo says with a smile, brushing his fingers over my cheek once more before stepping away to go back to the food. "I don't know why your family kept you locked up like a hothouse flower—I think it would have been a lot more appealing to whoever they married you to for you to have a bit of knowledge about the world. But at the end of the day," he adds, opening a drawer to slip carving tools out for the duck, "I'm almost glad they did. Means I get to show you all of the places you've never been myself, lass."

I take another sip of the wine, the change in conversation helping me get my emotions back under control. "You like to travel?"

Theo nods. “I haven’t gotten to in past years as much as I’d like.” He puts some of the roasted meat onto a china plate, adding vegetables and potatoes from a pot that I hadn’t noticed. “But I’m thinking I’ll give Finn a bit more responsibility here soon. Give us some space to travel and enjoy our time together. More time here, too, if you like this place as much as I hope you will.”

He holds out the plate. “Let’s go have dinner. The smaller dining room, I think.”

Back at the mansion I grew up in, the “smaller” dining room is still ludicrously big. But here, the one Theo designed seems intentionally meant to mimic a more ordinary dining room—with the formal dining room left for the times when he might want to impress someone. The room is relatively small, facing the back garden with huge windows and a carved wooden table that seats six. The lighting in the room is warm, looking out to the peaceful night outside, and as we step inside and Theo sets his plate and wine glass down, I feel my chest clench all over again.

I grew up eating at a table so long that it felt ridiculous, with my brother and parents, under a chandelier, with staff bringing every course of the elaborate dinners we were always served, every night of the week. But this—

I can imagine living here with Theo. I can imagine having meals that he cooked—that maybe he eventually teaches *me* to cook—at this table, looking out at the garden through the changing seasons. I can imagine a child here, and then two, or three, the room filled with laughter and conversation, a warmth that was never present in my own life growing up. There was always distance between me and my father. Wherever we were, whatever was happening, he was always the *pakhan* first and our father a distant second. But Theo—

He’s not the leader of the Irish Kings here. In this room, he’s only my husband.

And he’s trying to be a *good* one.

The lump in my throat makes it hard to eat. I sit down at the table, taking a bite of the duck as Theo digs in to his own food. “It’s delicious,” I manage, looking up at him. “I really was surprised you could cook.”

“Well, it’s not exactly a talent that I think most men in this world are encouraged to cultivate,” he says dryly. “But my grandmother insisted on trying to teach me as a boy. I loved her very much, but of course, I didn’t want to, and I complained constantly. I never really learned anything she tried to teach me, and when I was older and she passed, I felt like I owed it to her to learn. A way of carrying on her memory. I made a point of learning all the old recipes she passed down.” He gestures at our plates. “I wanted to make you something suitably elegant, for our first night here. But there’s plenty of dishes I enjoy making that are more—rustic.”

“I can’t wait to try them.” I realize, as I say the words, that I mean them. I haven’t thought once, since I came downstairs, about when we’re going back to Chicago. I feel more relaxed and at ease here than I have in a long time, even with—

My stomach tightens all over again as I remember Adrik and how he said he’d be watching. I feel that tension spread as I wonder if he’s watching us right now, if he sees me here at the dinner table, sipping wine and talking and laughing with Theo. If he’s dissecting every interaction, cataloging it, to throw in my face later or ask me to explain.

That’s no way to maintain a relationship.

I have to fight the urge to bury my face in my hands, to keep sitting there and taking small sips of wine and making small talk. My relationship with Theo is doomed no matter what happens, but I see now how foolish it was to think what I have with Adrik could survive, either. That he could sit here and watch me carry on a marriage, supposedly fake or not, with another man and not succumb to jealousy and anger.

And now I can feel how close it all is to crumbling down.

Theo clears the table when we’re finished eating. “I have dessert for us,” he tells me. “But I thought we could eat it by the fireplace, in the living room.”

“That sounds wonderful,” I tell him, and it *does*. It sounds romantic, and perfect, and all of the things that I’m beginning to realize I can anticipate from him.

The living room is similar to the dining room—there’s a more formal one for

guests, and then the one Theo takes me to, which is smaller and cozier. We sit on the soft green loveseat, Theo bringing in glasses of port and a chocolate souffle, and he builds up a fire as I sip at my drink and look outside. I see something faintly swirling in the night air, and blink. “Is it *snowing*?” I ask, not sure why I’m surprised—it’s not unusual for it to snow in early spring in Chicago, either—but for some reason, I hadn’t pictured it snowing here. I’d expected more rain.

“A little.” Theo peers out of the window. “It snows lightly this time of year, every once in a while. We just got lucky to get a bit of it. The city will be a mess tomorrow, but it’s beautiful out here.”

It *is* beautiful. I feel like we’re sequestered away from everything in this house. I’m used to there always being the footsteps of staff somewhere, or the sound of someone talking in some other room, of never being entirely alone. I know there’s security on the grounds, but it truly does feel as if Theo and I have our own private haven here.

I try not to think of Adrik, and how he might be watching us.

Theo comes back to sit next to me, taking a sip of his port as he picks up a fork. “You know,” he says conversationally, looking down at the dessert and then at me, “feeding you that cake at our wedding gave me a number of ideas. Ones that weren’t appropriate for that setting. But here—” he looks contemplatively at the dessert, and then dips the fork into it, scooping out a bite of fluffy chocolate drenched in some sort of fudge sauce. He raises it to my lips, and I part them obediently, taking a bite.

I can’t stop the moan that slips out of my mouth. It’s *incredible*. “I think you missed your calling,” I mumble as I swallow it. “Instead of a crime lord, you should have been a chef.”

Theo smirks. “I think I prefer cooking for you. That allows me to do things like this—”

He dips the tip of his finger into the divot left from the fork—in a way that makes me think it’s intentionally a little lewd—and brings it to my mouth, tracing chocolate over my lower lip before leaning forward and capturing it in his, licking away the sweetness before he nips softly at my skin.

I can't help the small whimper of pleasure I let out.

"Mm." His own mouth curves in a satisfied smile as he dips his finger in the chocolate again, tracing a line down my throat with it. I let my head tip back without thinking as he leans in, the tip of his tongue tracing the same line as he licks the chocolate away, and I moan as my skin heats, sensation prickling over me.

"You should take that sweater off," he murmurs huskily. "I wouldn't want to get anything on it. It suits you." He glances up, his gaze roving over my face in that appreciative way of his. "It matches your lovely eyes."

My first instinct is to tell him to take it off of me himself, but his fingers are sticky with chocolate, and a part of me likes the idea of stripping for him. I reach for the hem of the soft sweater, slowly raising it up as I lean back a little, letting him see my pale flesh revealed a little at a time as I lift it up to my breasts and then the rest of the way off, letting it fall on the other side of the couch.

Theo swears softly under his breath as he sees the lace bralette hugging my chest. "Every time I see you, I want you more," he murmurs. "Take that off too, lass. Or else I'm going to ruin it, getting it off you."

There's no pretending I don't want this, or him. I feel tight with desire, my body humming with it as I reach behind my back and undo the clasp, sliding it away from my breasts. Theo lets out a low growl deep in his throat as he sees my bare flesh, his hands reaching for me as he lifts me up off of the couch.

"We're going to do this all the way," he murmurs teasingly against my mouth as he pulls me to my feet. "Chocolate, a fur rug, and a fireplace."

I realize what he means as he leads me across the room, kissing me hungrily again as he pulls me down to sit next to him on the huge fur rug stretched across the wooden floor, in front of the leaping fire. "Are you trying to be a walking romance novel trope?" I ask him, nipping at his lower lip as he kisses me once more, and Theo chuckles.

"I'm trying to do something with my wife that I've never done before." His hand rests on my bare chest, pushing me back onto the fur. "I've never taken

the time to do this kind of thing. I would have probably said it was nonsense, if I'd ever thought of it. But now—" He looks at me hungrily, his fingers tracing over my breasts. "I want to take my time with you, Marika. I want to do all the foolish, romantic things I would have thought were stupid with any other woman. This *is* silly," he adds, reaching for the dessert to trace more of the warm chocolate over my nipples, and I gasp at the sensation. "But after the life I've lived, I find a little romantic foolishness means more to me than I realized it would."

When he bends his mouth to my breast, sucking my nipple into it as his teeth and tongue slide over my stiffening, sensitive flesh, I sink my hands into his hair. My back arches as I give myself up to the sensation, knowing how much more difficult I'm making this for myself, and finding that it's suddenly hard for me to care. I *want* him, and everything about this night has been perfect.

I'd thought, when he said that he was turning a business trip into a honeymoon, that it was an excuse to kill two birds with one stone. That I'd be left alone for most of it, that it would be a nominal honeymoon so Theo could keep me from complaining about not having had one—not that I would have anyway, but he couldn't have known that. But I've barely heard a word about his business here, other than him telling me that's what he'll be doing tomorrow while I explore Dublin. It seems that to Theo, the honeymoon part of this is more important than the business.

Especially right now, as he licks the sweetness away from my flesh, repeating it on the other side, before trailing his lips across the flat expanse of my stomach, all the way down to the space between my hips. His hands slide up the inside of my thighs, spreading me apart as he nips lightly at my hipbones, and up to trace his fingers over the lace of my panties. They're fancier than anything I normally wear, cream-colored lace to match the bralette with satin ribbon woven through the top, and a small velvet bow at the top.

"I like these." His voice is deep and husky. "I don't want to ruin them, but I do want to take them off of you myself—"

His hands rest on my thighs, his mouth grazing over the lace, and his teeth grip the edge of it at one hip, drawing it down my skin. I can't help the moan that escapes me, my body tensing with need, as he repeats the same motion on the other side, bringing his mouth between my thighs to brush it against

the lace.

I know exactly how wet it is, and the way he inhales, breathing in my scent, makes my entire body flush with embarrassment and arousal all at once.

“I love how fucking wet you get for me, lass,” he murmurs. “I love knowing that when I slip my fingers inside your sweet pussy, you’ll be all slick and hot for me, aching for my cock.” His teeth catch on the lace again, sliding it lower. “I find myself thinking about how good you taste. How I can’t wait to lick all that wetness up, have it on my tongue, my lips, all over my fucking face.”

“Theo—” I whimper his name, twisting on the soft rug as he inches my panties down my thighs, clearly intentionally drawing this out. “Theo, please —”

“Please, what, lass?” There’s a wicked heat on his face as he looks up from where he’s divested me of the last of my clothing. “I want you to tell me what you want.”

“Your mouth—” I whisper it, my teeth sinking into my lower lip. I can taste wine and sugar there, and I know I’m never going to look at a chocolate dessert the same way again.

“My mouth *where*?” he presses, brushing his lips against the inside of my knee. “Here?”

I know what he’s doing, and something about it is a thousand times more arousing than if he’d demanded things from me from the very first night. He’s been gentle and slow with me, not being too dominant or asking too much, and now, little by little, he’s showing me what it is that he wants. What turns him on. It’s clear that he likes being in charge, is aroused by things like seeing me on my knees or asking me to clean his cum off of his cock, and that making me ask him to eat my pussy is erotic to him. But he’s introducing me to it slowly, instead of forcing me to do all the things that he wants in bed.

It makes me *want* to please him.

“Not there,” I whisper, my head tilting back. “Theo—”

“Say it, lass.” His lips slide a bit higher, up to my inner thigh. “Let me know

where you want my mouth. What you want me to do to you.”

“I want your tongue—”

“*Where?*” His voice is thick, his accent roughening. “I’ll please you ‘til you scream, lass; just ask me for it.”

There’s a ragged need in his own words, too—his own desire to hear me say it. I give in, my body aching for his touch, my clit feeling swollen and sensitive. “I need your tongue on my pussy. On my clit. *Please, Theo, fuck —*”

The words are so filthy I didn’t think I’d ever say them. I couldn’t have imagined it. But the low growl of need that Theo lets out makes it all worth it, his hands suddenly hard on my inner thighs as he spreads me wide, pushing my knees back so that my pussy is open and vulnerable to his hungry gaze.

“I’ll eat you ‘til you scream for me, *cailín*,” he growls, and then his mouth is on my clit, and the sounds that come from me are nothing short of keening moans of pleasure.

His tongue is hot and eager, circling my clit, rubbing against it, in a perfect rhythm that has me shaking all over with sensation from the moment he touches me. His lips are pressed tightly against me, sucking and licking and lapping up every bit of the arousal dripping from me. I cry out when he slides his tongue lower, pushing it inside of me as if he needs to taste me even more deeply.

“Theo, I—”

“I want you begging for it, lass,” he pants hoarsely as he pulls away. “I want you to soak my face when you come. I want—” His voice trails off, ragged with desire as his mouth fastens over me again, devouring me as he licks and sucks at my swollen, aching flesh until I *am* begging, until I hear myself moaning *Theo, please, please make me come*. Then he gives me exactly that, his lips and tongue making me come apart for him at the seams, drenching his mouth and chin and stubble exactly the way he said he wanted it as I shudder beneath him, clutching at the fur rug.

His hand is fumbling at his zipper, and I dimly see the thick shape of his cock

as he rises over me, the swollen head pushing at my entrance. “God, lass, I love being inside of you like this,” he murmurs as he bends his head to kiss me. “Feeling you still fluttering around me like this, still coming for me—” He moans as he pushes his cock into me, and I clench around him, earning another guttural groan as his mouth presses against mine.

I don’t care that I can taste myself on his lips, his mouth still glistening with my arousal, the tang of it on my own tongue, mingling with the sweetness of before. I *want* him to kiss me, want the feeling of his lips on mine, his hot tongue tangling in my mouth as he thrusts into me as deeply as he can, faster this time than before. I can feel how much he needs it, his barely-leashed desire, his cock filling me to almost the point of being too much as he devours my mouth the way he devoured my pussy only moments before.

He drives into me, again and again, each long stroke sure and hard as he pins me to the rug, fucking me with the sort of need that makes me ache for him even as my body floods with pleasure from the feeling of his thick cock filling me up, over and over again. I *like* it when he fucks me like this, hard and raw, reminding me that there’s a rougher side to the man who is so gentle and careful with me the rest of the time. That sometimes he can’t control his desire for me, that it’s *me* who is making him like this.

Theo’s hands reach for my arms, pinning them above my head, his fingers encircling my wrists. “You feel so fucking good wrapped around my cock,” he groans against my lips, his hips shuddering against me as he sinks in all the way again. “Like you were fucking made for me.” Another thrust, harder, his hands and thighs and cock keeping me pinned to the floor beneath his heaving body, surrounded by the scent of firewood and smoke and the warmth of our skin, his cologne and my perfume, sweat and sex, and I feel my body tensing, unraveling, another climax seizing me before I even realize it’s coming. My head falls back, my mouth opening on a keening wail of pleasure, and I feel Theo’s lips dragging down my throat as he speeds up, each harsh stroke of his cock driving me to higher and higher bursts of sensation until I’m not sure if the orgasm is going to stop. I can feel his cockhead dragging over that sensitive spot inside of me, over and over, until I’m shuddering and writhing beneath him. His mouth is pressed to my shoulder, his body trembling against mine as I hear him groan out his own orgasm, his cock throbbing inside of me as I feel him fill me up with his cum.

Afterward, he rolls onto his back, pulling me against his chest. The fire is flickering next to us, and I rest my head on his shoulder, wondering if it could actually always be like this. If this is, quite literally, the honeymoon period—or if Theo would always be such a good husband, if our connection would deepen and strengthen over time, if this would become our home. A place with years full of memories, a place where we could build a life the way we want it, outside of all of the expectations back in Chicago for both of us.

And I wonder why I'm thinking of that at all, when there's no way off the path I've been set on that I can see.

"I've been here as often as I could manage," Theo says quietly, breaking the long silence as we lie there. "But I don't think I've enjoyed a night in this house as much as I've enjoyed this one." He turns his head towards me, tipping my chin up so his fern-green eyes are looking down directly into mine. "I'm glad I decided to marry you, Marika."

The kiss he presses to my mouth saves me from having to try to hide, right away, the way my eyes well up with tears. I still have to blink them back quickly, fighting the deep swell of emotion, and I know I should say the same thing back to him. It's what I *would* do, if I were still wholly focused on playing the game my brother wants me to, and not on the confusing mix of feelings that Theo has roused in me. But I find that I don't want to lie to him—which is ridiculous, considering that so much of what's between us is, and has always been, a lie.

A series of lies, before, during—and certainly after.

There won't be an after, I think, feeling his mouth move over mine. *He'll be dead*. And the pain that lances through me at that thought is stronger than it should be. *He'll be dead, and it will be my fault*.

I pull away from the kiss, wrapping my arms around myself. I try not to look as if I'm pulling away from Theo, but from the way his expression falters, I don't think I've fully succeeded in that. "I'm still really tired from the flight," I whisper, and then, as if to soften whatever he might take away from that, I force a smile onto my face. "Come to bed with me?"

"Gladly," Theo murmurs, reaching for me once more before he helps me up from the rug. As we gather up my clothes and start to head upstairs for the

first night in our bed here, I have a terrible, sinking feeling that it's not only Theo's life that is going to be at stake here.

It's going to be his heart—and mine.

Theo



I'm thankful that I set my meeting with the Kings late, the next day, because getting out of bed with Marika there is more difficult than even I had anticipated.

I hadn't expected just how good it would feel to have her here. I know she was raised as the only daughter of the Vasilev *pakhan*, and she was pampered and spoiled, and I wondered how she would feel about this house. It's far from rustic or plain—it's luxurious and well-made, fitted out with every modern convenience and anything that either of us could possibly want for comfort, but it's not the gilded mansion she's accustomed to. It's something in between, and I wondered if she would like it, if she would chafe at the lack of staff and the fact that I've planned to be the one cooking our meals here.

But she hasn't so much as flinched. If anything, from what I can tell, she seems to enjoy it as much as I do. And when I wake up next to her, the silk of the pajamas she slept in and her soft bare skin brushing against me, I want her as much as I have every other moment that we've spent together so far.

I can't help but wonder if it will wear off, if I'll find out things about her that rub me the wrong way, or if she'll find out those things about me. If this is all just the early blush of infatuation and desire, and not what it feels like—the beginning of a relationship that could be full of the kind of companionship I've yearned for.

A relationship that feels like, in time, it could even become something I

hadn't dared to even think about—one where there's love, as well as affection or friendship.

When I kiss her, she leans into me, returning it with as much desire as I could possibly hope for. She's wet and eager by the time I slip into her, her moans filling the air as I make her come, and when I thrust into her for the last time, feeling the exquisite pleasure of my cum filling her, she orgasms for me again, tightening around my cock in a way that makes me wish I could keep her in this bed all day.

I don't notice, until we're lying there after, the empty suitcases by the wall.

"You didn't have to put your own things away." I brush a lock of blonde hair away from her face. "The cleaning staff will be here today, while we're out. They could have done it for you."

There's just one flicker of a strange, almost anxious expression on her face before she smooths it away. "I like having things in order," is all she says. "I'm not used to living out of suitcases." A small smile flickers at the corner of her mouth, and she kisses me again. "Besides, it makes me feel more at home."

That's enough to make me forget about the odd look on her face—almost. *She just might not have wanted strangers touching her things*, I tell myself, but that doesn't entirely add up either, because Marika has grown up with staff touching *everything* around her, doing everything for her, her whole life. It's strange that she would feel uncomfortable with the small staff I keep here unpacking her suitcases.

But it also doesn't seem important enough to ask anything else about it.

I kiss her again, getting out of bed as I walk towards the bathroom. "Come shower with me," I invite her, turning so she can enjoy her own view as I stop just short of the door. "And then I'll make you breakfast while you get ready."

"I don't think I can argue with that offer," she murmurs, and I'm treated to the view of *her* naked body as she pushes the covers back, the slick hint of my cum on her thighs as she walks towards me, joining me in the shower.

—

That takes longer than I meant for it to, also—I couldn't stop myself from fucking her in the shower, bending her over with her long blonde hair wet against her skin as I took her from behind. I haven't been this constantly aroused in longer than I can remember. I adjust my cock a little in my suit trousers as I go downstairs to make that promised breakfast, feeling a little sore myself. We might both need a night off tonight—but I'm not sure how that's going to go. I don't seem to be able to be near Marika without being so hard that coming feels like a physical necessity rather than a pleasure.

She comes downstairs thirty minutes later, in a striped sweater dress that falls just below her knees and low brown boots, her blonde hair soft and shiny around her face. She's put on just a little makeup, from what I can tell, and I feel an odd warmth when I see that she's wearing the pearl and gold jewelry that I gave her. It's the same feeling I have every time I look down at her left hand and see that she's wearing my ring.

It's not something I ever expected to feel, and yet, with Marika, it's there.

“Breakfast is almost ready.” I nudge a drink towards her, a homemade bloody mary, and she wrinkles her nose. “What?” I look at her, frowning. “You don't like these?”

“No one in the history of civilization has *ever* wanted to drink vegetables for breakfast.” She pushes it back. “I'd take literally anything else.”

I smirk at her. “I don't think I can justify two before a meeting, but if you want something else, I'll happily make it for you.”

Marika hesitates, looking at the red liquid, topped with citrus slices and a small pickle. “Fine,” she says with a sigh. “I'll take a sip—oh *god*.” Her entire face contorts, and she pushes it away again. “Never mind.”

I can't help but laugh at that, retrieving the drink and going to the refrigerator for champagne and orange juice. “I see I've found your one flaw,” I tell her teasingly, making a mimosa and exchanging it for the bloody mary. “There had to be something.”

“Not wanting spicy salad for breakfast is not a flaw.” She takes the

champagne flute and closes her eyes in obvious bliss as she takes a sip. “This tastes fresh-squeezed.”

“It is.” I slide the quiche out of the oven, reaching for a knife. “I’m very domesticated, Marika.”

“I see that.” She raises an eyebrow. “Next thing I know, you’ll be telling me you don’t want a nanny when we have children, that you’ll do midnight feedings and diaper changes yourself.”

The last word trails off suddenly as she says it, her face tightening in that odd, anxious expression again, and this time, I can’t help but question it. I turn to face her, reaching for my own drink to have something to do with my hands.

“You *do* want children, don’t you?” I frown. “I know it’s expected of you, Marika. I know you will have been told your whole life that it was. But I want to hear from you that it’s what *you* want.” Truthfully, I don’t know what I’d do if she said no. Children are both expected and a necessity—I can’t have a wife who doesn’t want children, or isn’t willing to have them regardless. I *need* an heir. It never occurred to me to think, before, about my wife’s own opinions on the matter.

But I find that it matters to me a great deal, whether or not Marika *actually* wants children, or if she’s only doing her duty.

“Yes, of course.” She says it *almost* firmly, setting her glass down, but I can hear the slight waver in her voice.

I let out a slow breath, leaning back against the counter. “I want to tell you that we could take our time, if you want, Marika. That we could be careful, even, until you’re ready. But I can’t give you that. Part of the reason the Kings insisted on this marriage—”

“—is because they want an heir on the way. I know.” She touches the edge of her glass. “It’s just nerves, Theo. That’s all.” She forces a smile, and I want to believe her. I *need* to believe her, because I’m beginning to care about her more than I thought I would, and I don’t want to think she would lie to me. That anything about this marriage is a lie. “My mother died when I was young. I have no idea how to be one. And it’s a scary thought. Especially—”

She waves a hand in the general direction of the house. “My father was hands-off, and even before my mother died, she was distant a lot of the time. But I don’t think that’s what you want. And I don’t know how to have that.”

This time, I *can* hear the honesty in her words. I see the glimmer in her eyes, and I know she’s trying not to well up with tears.

Quickly, I cross to where she’s standing, smoothing my hands over her arms. “I do want that,” I tell her gently. “A family like what I’m accustomed to—better, even. But we’ll figure it out together.” I reach up to brush away a tear, acutely aware that just last night, I was doing the same thing. “Who knows how long it will take before you’re pregnant, anyway. And once you are, I’ll be with you every step of the way. You’ll start wishing I paid *less* attention to what was going on.”

She laughs, but it’s unsteady and strange, not the kind of laugh I’m used to hearing from her. It concerns me, but I don’t know what to do about it. If she’s not being honest with me, I don’t think pushing the issue will help. And even if she told me flat out that she doesn’t want children, what the hell would I do with that information?

I can’t divorce her—and I don’t fucking *want* to. I like being married to her. But I also don’t want to force children on her.

We also don’t have time to draw this out. I’d lingered too long with her this morning, and now, if we don’t finish breakfast soon, I’ll be late.

“Let’s eat,” Marika says, as if she can hear the train of thought running through my head. “I know you have places to be.”

Breakfast is quieter than I’d hoped. Marika finishes off another mimosa and then switches to hot tea, sipping it as we eat the quiche, murmuring at how good it is. I’d hoped to impress her with my cooking skills again, but I don’t find the same pleasure in it that I did last night. Things don’t feel as good this morning, and I dislike that.

I wanted this trip to go perfectly, and instead, I’m starting to worry that perhaps I’m the one who has too high of expectations for this marriage.

The drive into the city is mostly silent. I’m focused on work, flipping through files I’d ignored largely until now, and Marika watches the scenery go by, her

face pensive and lost in thought. When the driver pulls up to the curb, I glance over at her. “This is us,” I tell her, and she jumps a little, a smile that seems a little forced appearing on her face.

It’s not the kind of worry I wanted to have before going into this meeting.

I get out and open the door for her myself. “You have the credit card,” I remind her, forcing a teasing note into my voice, a hint of our conversation from last night. “Use it however you like. I’ll call you and give you a time and place to meet after I’m finished.”

Marika nods, and then, to my surprise, before I can lean down to give her a kiss, she goes up on her tiptoes instead, leaning in with one hand against my chest as she grazes her mouth over mine. “I’ll see you later,” she says softly, and then she’s gone.

I find myself wishing I could spend the day with her, instead of dealing with the Dublin Kings.

They’re largely older than me by two decades; only a few men around my age are around the table as I go into the meeting. Within moments, it’s clear that they are *not* pleased about the marriage I arranged for myself, even less so than the Chicago Kings.

“Taking the Vasilev territory would be more profitable than marrying the girl.” Michael Hannigan, the leader here in Dublin, frowns at me. “Sounds like you let your cock get in the way of your thinkin’, lad.”

I frown at him in return, giving him the same steely glare. “And I think that’s no way to talk to your equal, Hannigan.”

“Hmph.” He shakes his head. “With three decades on you, lad, we’re not equals. Not until you’ve reached my age, and by then, I’ll be well in the ground. No matter that you hold that seat in the States.” He slaps his hand against the wood of the table. “It was a poor choice.”

“All the same, whether you think so or not, the marriage is done. And consummated,” I add. *Many, many times over.* “There’s no undoing it.”

“So take the territory anyway.” That comes from further down the table. “What would the lass do about it? Divorce you?”

There's a laugh around the table that irks me almost to the point of anger.

"He's right," Hannigan says. "Fuck the Vasilevs. You have the girl; now take their territory and businesses. There's no other organization in Chicago even close. Not even the mafia there holds that kind of power any longer. It's you, and Nikolai Vasilev. So take what should be yours, and we'll all profit from it."

"By breaking my word, you mean." I hold that glare on him. "Is that how you run things in Dublin? Because if so, I don't think it's Vasilev's position I should be thinking about taking."

It's a clear threat, and I mean it to be. "My integrity matters," I continue sharply. "I signed a contract in blood, and swore to it in front of a priest, in God's own church. You think that's something I should go back on? You think I should slaughter my wife's family and take their legacy for my own, after saying in front of her and all surrounded at the altar that I would protect her and honor her?"

There's silence around the table, and I nod. "I thought not."

"You should have consulted us before you married her," Hannigan says roughly. "Chicago still answers to Dublin—"

"I make my own choices. So did my father."

"Your father lost his life at the wrong end of a gun." It's another clear threat, this time directed at me, and I can feel the tension rising in the room.

"Marika Vasilev was a good choice of wife," I say firmly. "The alliance only strengthens us. A war would have cost lives and money, on both sides, with no clear promise of an outcome. We should all be too old and too wise, here, to spill blood when there's another way of doing things. Nikolai Vasilev is now our ally in all things. And my wife is young and happy to give me the heir that I need. Peace is better."

The heir that I need. My conversation with Marika this morning still echoes in my head, and it makes me feel taut and unsettled, thinking of it. There is no question that she *has* to give me an heir, sooner rather than later, the pleasure of getting there aside. Here, more than ever, I can see the shaky ground that I'm on.

The Kings are no democracy, but they're the only crime organization that I know of that has a table of men who sit in on decisions, not one leader making them with impunity. There are rules and laws, and it's true that I skated the edge of them by not consulting Dublin with my choice of a wife. I know all too well the tale of what happened in Boston, with the McGregors. Liam McGregor's fate is better than mine would be, if I can't follow through on what my marriage is meant to promise.

"The Vasilevs are weak." Gareth Collins speaks up from where he's sitting, his mouth a deep frown in his thick beard. "They nearly lost their seat to a man from inside, someone who should never have been allowed so close. Better to root them out, than breed with them. That weakness—"

"Enough!" I shake my head, my voice raising in the small room. "The marriage is done. I will not sully my vows by destroying my wife's family after swearing to do so otherwise, and I will not set her aside. This is how things will be."

"Then I suggest you hurry with getting an heir on her," Hannigan says, in a deceptively calm voice. "So we can all see that the girl is capable. After all, that's why you married her."

I want to plant my fist in his jaw, for speaking of Marika that way. But I know well enough that this is how things are—the way things have always gone, among these men. Doing them differently in any way will take time.

But it still gnaws at me, to think of forcing a child on her.

It was just nerves, she said. What other choice is there but to believe her?

Finn is waiting for me outside, when the meeting is over. Unlike Chicago, the Dublin Kings don't welcome him into the meetings, and he's leaning against the stone wall outside in his leather jacket, tucked tightly in against the chill of the day. He looks up as soon as he hears my footsteps, giving me an easy smile.

My right hand, and the only man I feel I can truly trust.

"I imagine that was no good time," he says with a laugh, straightening. "They're pissed you took the girl instead of wiping out the family, aye?"

I nod. He's smart enough he could have been a King himself, if he had the bloodline. Unfortunately, Finn's family are a long line of enforcers for those who lead, not leaders themselves. It occurs to me to wonder if he's heard about what they did in Boston, elevating men who were not from a Kings' bloodline to the table. It's not something I think I'd do in Chicago, not even for Finn. But then again, there's always the possibility of change.

"They're pissed about it, alright." I glance at the cigarette Finn is smoking with slight nostalgia. Years ago, I smoked and kicked the habit with the wisdom of getting older, and finding one's mortality a little closer. At times like these, I find myself wanting one. "But there's not much they can do, aye? A marriage done is done."

"Mm." Finn nods, taking another drag off of his cigarette, and I can see that he wants to say something. He's always been one I can trust to tell me straight out what I need to hear, and in return, he knows he can speak to me freely, with impunity. But today, he seems more hesitant to speak than I'm accustomed to.

"Say what's on your mind, lad." I lean against the wall next to him, looking out at the street. The snow of last night has turned to rain, melting away whatever might have fallen in the city, the cloudy skies heavy overhead. It's a match for my mood.

Finn lets out a heavy sigh. "The Vasilev girl was a good choice, I think. I agree with you that peace is better than bloodshed, especially when it comes to dealing with the Vasilev Bratva." He looks at me wryly. "You're a powerful man, Theo. But Nikolai Vasilev is no one to take lightly. The table might think it would have been nothing, but I'm not so sure. Fractured as they were, Nikolai was still more well-liked than his father and feared regardless. I think it would not have been as quick to fall as they think."

"I hear a 'but' somewhere in this conversation," I murmur, watching the trail of smoke from Finn's cigarette.

Finn glances sideways at me. "I wish there wasn't," he says ruefully. "But unfortunately, aye. I have some concerns, Theo."

"About Marika?" That surprises me. Finn hasn't spent much time around her, and he's not the sort of man likely to put in his opinion about my wife, either

—not on a personal level, anyway.

“In a way.” Finn lets out another of those long breaths, dropping his cigarette to the ground and crushing it out with the toe of his boot. “It’s that security her brother sent along.”

“I’m not pleased with it either. But in the same vein of keeping the peace, I thought it best to allow it the once.” I shrug. “If he tries to keep them with her past this trip, then I’ll be having some words with Vasilev.”

“I can understand that. It’s not so much the security as a whole, though—” Finn’s mouth twists a little, as if trying to think of how to say what’s on his mind.

“Just say it, lad.” I look at him. “I won’t come down on you for it.”

“Aye, I know. It’s just that it might be nothin’, and I don’t like to cause strife out of hand.” Finn shrugs. “It’s one of them. Tall blond lad—Adrik, I believe his name is. There’s something off about him. It feels like—” He pauses again, frowning. “Seems like he’s got his own agenda. Like he’s not really paying attention to what’s needed from the security as a whole, just what his own interests are. Problem is, I can’t really think of what those interests might be. Not sure what he might have up his sleeve.”

I frown, thinking of the bodyguard I’d seen on the plane, the one who saw me with Marika and seemed angry about it. He’d been blond—but so were plenty of the men on the security team Nikolai sent.

“It’s likely nothing to worry about.” I look at Finn, still considering. “I imagine a few of them, at the very least, aren’t pleased with being tasked to come here and watch her, working along with my security. But keep an eye out,” I add. “I trust your judgment—if you think there’s something a bit off, then watch him if you can. Tell me if you see anything in particular.”

Finn nods. “I’m not a man to rest on feelings,” he says slowly. “And from what I’ve seen of your new wife, she seems like a sweet lass—not that my opinion matters, aye?” he adds hastily. “But something feels wrong about all of this. I don’t often come to you with a thing without hard proof, but it worries me enough to say something.”

“And I appreciate it.” I step away from the wall, thinking of Marika and

letting her know that I'll be able to meet her soon. "I'll be with her this evening—if you see anything out of the ordinary, let me know tomorrow."

"I will." Finn fishes in his pocket for his keys, turning to go—and then he pauses, looking back at me. "I'm sorry if this is out of line," he says slowly. "But I think it needs to be said. I can see she makes you happy, Theo, and I'm glad for it. But you need to be careful."

And then, without another word, he turns and walks to his rented motorcycle, leaving me to stand there and consider what he's said.

Marika



The day out shopping turns out to be one of the better days I've had in a long time. It's cold and rainy—making my first purchase is a crisp, designer tweed raincoat to slip on over my sweater dress—but I find myself enjoying the day out all the same. It's been a long time since I've been out on my own at all, and though I still have security following me at a discreet distance, it feels as if I have a sort of freedom that I've never enjoyed in my entire life.

I've never even been this far from home before, and now I'm being allowed to explore Dublin on my own. It doesn't come without guilt—I'm more than a little aware that the reason I'm being allowed this is that Theo trusts me, and I don't really deserve that trust.

The guilt is also there because I can feel that deep down, I'm *happy*. I've been happy since the flight to Dublin, with the exception of the moments here and there when reality has slammed into me. I truly can't remember the last time I felt this kind of happiness.

I'm getting to see the world beyond my home in Chicago. I'm out in a new city, walking the streets, shopping, exploring a place more beautiful than I'd imagined. And when Theo is done with his meeting, my handsome, gentle, romantic husband will come and meet me and take me out to dinner, and then when we go back to the manor we live in here, he'll—

A shiver that has nothing to do with the chill of the air goes through me as I

think of what Theo will want to do to me this evening, no doubt, the touch of his hands and mouth, what new pleasures he might have decided he wants to experiment with. I push open the door to the coffee shop and bookstore that I saw across the street from where I purchased the raincoat, my thoughts fully occupied with ideas of Theo and me in our bedroom tonight.

I'm not *supposed* to be this happy. I keep trying to tell myself I'm not, that there's some sinister side to Theo that I'm not seeing, that all of this is going to come crashing down, but all I come back to, again and again, is that it's going to come crashing down because of *me*. Because I believed what Nikolai had been told and passed on to me, because I agreed to this plan, and Theo will suffer for it.

I'm going to suffer for it, because I care about Theo.

What about Adrik? The small voice in my head taunts, as I walk up to the hewn-wood countertop and the petite brunette barista standing behind it. *You were supposed to go back to him after all of this. Have you forgotten about that?*

I haven't forgotten about it. Nor have I forgotten how his hands made me feel, sliding roughly over my arms, my hips, under the silk of the shorts I'd been wearing yesterday afternoon. But I also haven't forgotten about the anger on his face at the end or the threatening way he'd told me that he would be watching me.

It hadn't felt like the romantic promise of a man who wants to protect me. It felt like the barely veiled threat of a jealous lover—and that's not the man I fell in love with.

It's not the kind of man I want to be with—and I can't shake the feeling of irony that the man I was meant to be afraid of, Theo, is the man I feel safest with right now. If anything, I feel more afraid of Adrik.

I wish I'd never gotten into this situation at all. The thought flashes through my head as I order a caramel soy latte from the girl behind the counter, and at the same moment, I'm not sure if I really feel that way. If I hadn't married Theo—

I don't want to undo the past few days. I've felt happier and more cared for

than I have in a long time, even if that's at odds with what I've been sent here to do. But now I'm faced with a problem that I have no idea how to untangle.

Once I have my hot cup of coffee in hand, I wander through the bookstore, browsing. It's warm and cozy in the small shop, the sound of the rain coming down more heavily outside, and I feel a sense of comfort that I haven't had in a long time. *I could be happy here*, I think, letting myself drift away for a moment in imaginings of a life with Theo here in Ireland, one where we spent more time here than in Chicago the way he's suggested he might want to, where days like this would be commonplace. A life where the manor would truly start to feel like our home. I wouldn't even have to feel badly about leaving Nikolai and Lilliana behind—I could fly to Chicago to see my little nieces and nephews whenever I wanted, easily...

Would Nikolai even allow you back home, allow you near his family, if you fail at what you've been told to do?

Once again, reality comes crashing back in, my heart seizing in my chest as I realize that all of this is impossible. If I fail at the task Nikolai has given me, I have no idea what consequences there will be from him. And if I fail, Theo will know. Whatever is growing between us will be gone in an instant, replaced with hatred. If I survive that, I have no idea what will be left for me on the other side.

There is no chance of anything other than doing what you were told.

The thought makes me feel sick. It's already harder than I could have possibly anticipated to keep up the charade. I've been trying not to think of the conversation Theo and I had this morning, when the topic of children came up, but it rushes back in, making my stomach twist anew. The fact that he'd said he would have been willing to give me time if he could just makes it worse, because it underlines the fact that he's not entirely without his own obligations and that, on his own, he seems to be in every way the opposite of the man he's been made out to be.

He saw my hesitance about children. I wasn't able to hide it well enough. But then again, my response *would* have been enough if Theo were the kind of man to be satisfied with a wife willing to do her duty.

The fact that he's not—that he feels some kind of guilt or unwillingness to

force children on me—feels like just another sign pointing towards him not being the kind of man that I’ve been told he was. I’ve never known *any* man in this world not to simply assume that he was owed an heir by the woman he chose to marry.

Theo wants a family in the true sense of the word—and that means a wife who is happy to bear his children. The fact that I can’t give him that fills me with an almost crushing feeling of guilt—and a sadness, too, because I think I can see the sort of father he might be. It’s so much better than what any other man I might have married would be.

I comb through the books, selecting a few novels that sound interesting. I can picture myself curled up in front of the fire with them or sitting in bed next to Theo, and the warmth that idea sends through me is more pleasant than it should be.

There’s nothing in particular that I *need* to shop for, and I don’t want to take advantage of how freely Theo is letting me spend his money, so I spend the rest of the afternoon browsing more than anything else. I buy a pair of sleek black rainboots to use while we’re here, in case I want to spend time out in the garden or even just to walk around—my leather riding boots that I’ve worn today have almost slipped on the cobblestones a number of times. There’s a lovely knitwear shop that I linger in for a while, purchasing a couple of cardigans in soft cashmere wool and a scarf, and when I pass by a lingerie shop, I hesitate.

I’d brought a few things with me from what Lilliana and I had purchased for the wedding. Still, I have the sudden urge to pick out something new, something that I think Theo specifically would like. It feels like admitting that I want to fuck him, that I’m enjoying it, and that keeps me lingering in the doorway for several long seconds before I finally get up the nerve to walk into the warm, floral-scented store.

A gorgeous, stick-thin blonde woman sweeps up, greeting me with a smile. “Is there anything I can help you with?” she asks breezily, and I manage a smile in return.

“Just browsing,” I tell her. “But I’ll let you know if I have any questions.”

It’s a beautifully high-end store, with a few pieces hanging on every gilded

rack as I walk through, looking at all of the items made of fragile lace and thin silk. I remember Theo saying that he liked the sweater that matched my eyes, and I pick up a babydoll nightgown of that same light blue colored silk, with cream-colored eyelash lace fringing it.

I could wear this for him tonight. I picture myself coming out of the bathroom after changing into it, hair loose and nothing underneath, and I can see the heat in his face in my mind's eye. I know exactly how much he would enjoy seeing me in it.

I shouldn't care what he would enjoy, what would please him. But I feel a warm flush of desire at the idea of him seeing me in the lingerie, imagining how it would turn him on. I find myself walking through the racks, choosing a few more things that I think he would like before I have the blonde woman ring me out, adding the bag to my small stack of purchases for the day.

When I step back out, I hand the bags to one of the security, asking him to take them back to the driver. "I'm going to go see about finding another cup of coffee," I tell him—the jet lag hasn't entirely worn off—and I start to head down the street towards another small coffee shop when a hand suddenly lands on my arm.

I spin to see Adrik standing next to me.

"What are you—" I stare at him, stunned. I hadn't seen him among the members of the security team assigned to me today.

He says nothing, only closes his hand around my elbow and pulls me into the alleyway next to us, backing me up against the wall. A cold rush of fear goes through me in a way that Adrik has never made me feel it before, and my stomach clenches.

"Adrik, I—"

"You want me to wait." His voice is low and rough. "You want me to stand by and wait while you play at being this man's wife, while you fuck him, while you buy pretty things for him to lust after you in." The anger in his voice is palpable, and I flinch, thinking of Adrik watching me as I shopped for lingerie. Somehow, the invasion of my privacy, of finding out that Adrik was aware when I didn't know he was nearby, feels worse than the thought of

Adrik being upset with me.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, my voice tight and anxious, but he ignores me.

“I don’t want to wait,” he growls. “I don’t want to stand by and watch. I want you, Marika. You were mine first, and I’ll be damned if—”

His words trail off, his gaze landing hungrily on my mouth, and before I can breathe or think of anything to say, he pins me back against the wall, his lips crashing down heavily on mine.

For a moment, I forget to be angry. I don’t feel the damp stone against the back of my head, getting my hair wet, or the water trickling down the back of my neck. I don’t feel anything other than Adrik’s hot, hungry mouth, reminding me of how things used to be, of how he would come to my room when I was lonely and hopeless, and make me feel as if everything would be alright. When he was what I clung to. The growing connection between Theo and me hasn’t made me forget Adrik completely. For a moment, when my hands come up to touch his chest, it’s with the thought of bringing him closer. His body is hot and hard against mine, his broad, muscled frame boxing me in against the wall, and I can feel his erection pressing against my thigh, his hands sliding down my hips—

He’s going to fuck me right here, I realize in dim shock. Up against this wall in an alley.

Whatever I might still want from Adrik, it’s not that.

“Stop!” I shove at his chest in an effort to push him back, but he’s twice my size. “We’re not doing this here—”

His teeth bite at my bottom lip, rougher than he’s ever been with me. One hand comes up to grab my chin, holding me in place as he inches my dress up. “The way you’ve been acting, this is what you deserve,” he growls against my mouth, his hips rocking against me, digging his hard cock into the side of my thigh. “To get fucked up against an alley wall. You haven’t been behaving like a Bratva princess, Marika. So maybe it’s time you get fucked like a whore.”

Shock bursts through me in an ice-cold wave, enough to dissolve whatever

desire had been building in me after that first startling kiss. I shove at him again, harder this time, and when he doesn't budge, I yank one hand out from in between us, slapping him across the face as hard as I possibly can.

There's a bright red mark where my palm connects, and he flinches back, just long enough for me to slip out from under his arm and closer to the street, away from him.

Adrik turns towards me, breathing hard, his face set in angry lines. "What the fuck was that for?" he snarls, and I take another step back, suddenly terrified of him.

"Get out of here," I hiss. "Go back to the house and leave me alone. You're putting me in danger, Adrik! You're not the only person out here watching me today. Half my security team for this afternoon works for Theo! You're being reckless and stupid, and if you cared for me, you wouldn't put me at risk like this. You wouldn't put *yourself* at risk, because as angry as I am right now, I still don't want you hurt because they've caught you! I don't want to know that Theo or my brother has fucking skinned you alive for what you just did!"

I wrap my arms around myself, shaking, my chest heaving as I stare at him with angry, tear-filled eyes. There are a dozen conflicting emotions churning inside of me—anger for how he handled me and spoke to me, fear for us both, guilt that I wanted him for a moment, guilt that I wondered how Theo would feel about it, and anger, too, that a day that had felt so perfect and happy has been ruined by Adrik's jealousy. There's guilt about that, too, because I know, in some way, Adrik does have a right to his jealousy.

This is so fucked up. It's a mess, and I can't begin to know how to untangle it.

"Get out of here!" I plead, staring at him, terrified that any moment now, one of Theo's men will walk down the sidewalk and see us here arguing, see me upset and Adrik with the handprint on his face, and know that something is wrong.

Adrik hesitates, and for a moment, I have no idea what he's going to do. I don't have the slightest idea what he's thinking, or how he might react. His jaw clenches, and I see his gaze rake over me, hungry and angry and possessive, his cock still a thick, threatening ridge straining against his fly.

My slap didn't turn him off; if anything, it made him even more aroused.

I hear the sound of footsteps coming down the sidewalk. I don't know if it's just passersby or if it's my security, and Adrik doesn't know either. I can see it from the indecision on his face, the way he hesitates for one moment longer before turning sharply on his heel and heading down the alleyway in the other direction, away from me and whoever is coming to join me.

It's a good thing, too, because it is one of Theo's security who joins me, a tall red-headed man whose name I think is Allan, the one I handed the bags to. "Are you alright, Mrs. McNeil?" he asks, his voice filled with what sounds like genuine concern, and I start with surprise at hearing my married name out loud. I don't dislike it as much as I should.

"I'm fine," I manage. "I just thought I saw someone in the alley, is all. It startled me."

"Well, people use them now and again." Allan gives me a crinkled smile that I'm not certain if it's meant to have some sarcasm in it or not. "Nothing amiss I can see, though. Your husband called," he adds. "Said he'll meet you at the Harp and Hound tonight at six—so whatever else you have to do, the driver will be around to pick you up about thirty minutes before then."

"Thank you," I manage, my heart still racing. I have a few more hours to kill before I need to meet Theo, in that case, and I'm glad for it. I don't know if I could handle it right now, after what happened with Adrik.

I have no idea how Theo would react if he knew, but I know for certain it wouldn't be good. Not for Adrik—and probably not for me, either.

I made a mistake, not telling Nikolai that I was no longer a virgin. My brother's disappointment, even his censure, would have been better than what I've gotten myself into now.

Now, things are so much worse.

Marika



“Are you alright, *mo gra*?”

It’s the first thing Theo says to me when I see him sitting at a wooden bench in a corner of the pub called the Harp and Hound, relaxed with a beer sitting in front of him in a tall glass. He managed to change somewhere between his meeting and now, and he’s wearing dark jeans cuffed at the ankles over brown leather boots heavier than what he normally wears, and a charcoal cable-knit, shawl-collared sweater. His auburn hair has been messed up a little from the smooth way it was combed for his meeting, as if he put something in it. The overall effect is casual and sexy in a way that makes my heart race seeing him like this.

At least, until I remember what happened this afternoon, and that Theo and I are no ordinary married couple meeting for a date after work.

“I’m fine.” I slip into the other side of the booth, looking at the cream-colored paper listing the drink specials for the night. “Just tired.”

“You’ll adjust soon.” He looks at me, and I can see a hint of something unsettled in his gaze, too. We’ve come to know each other’s moods more quickly than I would have expected. However, I think some of Theo’s insight comes from years of experience with so many different people. For me, it’s simply being on a heightened guard, considering my circumstances. “The jet lag can be a lot, at first.” He smiles, glancing at the menu. “Did you enjoy your day of shopping?”

I nod, doing my best to push the memory of Adrik and the alleyway out of my head. The more uneasy I am, the more Theo is going to narrow in on what the cause is. It's the downside, I'm learning, to having a husband who cares about whether I'm actually happy or not, rather than being alright with my merely being content and quiet. He wants to find the source of my unhappiness and fix it if he can, but in this situation, there's nothing he can do.

And if he knows—

Cold fear rushes through me again, and I have to tamp it down quickly, before it shows on my face. "I did," I manage, focusing on the drink list. "There's a little coffee shop and bookstore I really loved. The Bookish Beanery, I think it was called?" I glance up at him. "It was so cozy. I could have spent all day there."

"You'll have to show it to me." Theo smiles. "I can't say I've been there, although there's a couple of other bookstores in the city I've frequented."

The server, a short man with a mustache and a receding hairline, approaches our table, and Theo gives him that same easy smile. "We'll have the garlic prawns to start," he says, glancing at me. "Is there anything else you want to start off with, Marika?"

I shake my head, still trying to settle on a drink. "I—um...a hard cider on draft?" I ask, seeing one listed. "That sounds good."

"I'll bring that right away." The man smiles at us both, turning away to leave, and I sit back in the booth, looking at a menu for something else to keep my focus.

"Any other interesting purchases?" Theo asks. With anyone else, I would have thought he was grilling me about how much money I spent, but it feels as if he's genuinely interested as to what I might have gotten.

"A pair of rainboots," I tell him, laughing. "Since it's apparently going to pour or snow the entire time we're here. And a couple of cardigans."

"You could have spent as much as you liked," Theo says, taking a sip of his beer. "I won't be poring over the statements, tallying up what you spend. It doesn't matter to me."

“I know,” I say softly. “But I didn’t want to take advantage.”

Something crosses his face then, an emotion that I can’t quite pinpoint. He smiles at me, soft and genuine, and glances at the menu. “Do you need help deciding what’s good?” he asks, winking at me. “I can’t imagine pub food is something you’ve eaten often.”

“I’m not *that* spoiled,” I start to protest, but then I laugh, realizing that he is, in fact, right. “But no, I can’t say I’ve ever eaten at anything that could be called a pub.”

“Oh, I wasn’t calling you spoiled, lass.” Theo looks at me, that same soft expression still on his face. “I just wanted you to see—” he hesitates, pushing the menu aside slightly as he leans forward, reaching for one of my hands. “One of the reasons I like being here is that it feels—far away from who I have to be in Chicago. There, I’m a powerful and wealthy man, and here I am too, of course, but it’s less well known. The Dublin Kings and those who sit at their table don’t make themselves known the way the organizations in the States do. It’s a thing that’s known to those who matter, and kept quiet from those who don’t. Does that make sense?”

“I think so,” I say quietly, and Theo nods.

“It’s not power for power’s sake, aye? Or wealth that needs to be shown off. In Chicago, I couldn’t go to a place like this without it seeming odd. There’s a certain amount of expectation to keep up a way of living that fits with the sort of man I’m made out to be. But here—I can be myself. When I’m not in a meeting, I’m Theo McNeil, and that’s it. Aye?”

I swallow hard, nodding. It makes me wonder, hearing him, if this is the reason why my brother and everyone else seem to have him so wrong. If those appearances that he says he needs to keep up in Chicago is why I seem to be the only one who has seen this side of him.

“I’ve been thinking about how things could be, if we spent more time here.” He taps his fingers against the wood of the table, as the server drops off a plate of prawns in garlic butter and the hard cider for me. “Fewer expectations. A more normal life, for both of us.” He raises an eyebrow at me. “There was a time when I enjoyed having the appearance of so much power and wealth. I liked the fear, the respect, the luxuries, and the women

that came with it. But now—I find that with age, it doesn't mean so much to me. And I find that with you at my side, I don't need so much, either." His fingers trace over the back of my hand, and I feel that swell of guilt again.

"I still need an heir, Marika," he says quietly. "For the Kings in Chicago to be alright with me taking a step back, with being more hands-off, *especially* if I intend to give Finn a greater role in standing in for me, they will need assurances that there will be someone to follow me."

"You think they'll let Finn stand in for you?" I ask the question without thinking, realizing a moment later that I don't know if he wants his wife's opinion on matters of business. But Theo just shrugs, leaning back with his fingers still brushing against my hand, as if it's normal to him that I would ask something like that.

"In the past, maybe not. But there's a precedent set now, from Boston, of men without the bloodline of the table having a seat there. The McGregor brothers are doing things differently. And while I might not want to take it to the same lengths they are, there's something to be said for loosening the traditions a little." He pauses for a moment, reaching for his beer. "I don't think I'd go so far as to elevate Finn to the table—I don't think he'd want it. But he's more than capable of being my voice while I take a little more time away."

"Why are you telling me all of this?" I ask softly. "You don't have to. I don't think most men in your position do—"

"That's the point, Marika." Theo takes a sip of his beer, looking at me pensively. "I know you have some hesitation about children. I can see that you do—and if you don't want to tell me why, that's your prerogative, although I wish you could be honest with me. But I know that this is the beginning of our marriage, too. I simply—"

He lets out a breath, as if he's trying to think of how to explain what it is that he wants to say. "I want you to know that I'm hoping that this will be a new part of my life. A time to change my priorities. And if you fear that I won't be an active part of this family, that I will be the way you're perhaps accustomed to men behaving when it comes to their wives or their children or have been told to expect—if that's what is making you feel hesitant about the

prospect of children—”

My heart stutters in my chest, and I wish I could disappear. I wish I could go back to the beginning of all of this and tell Nikolai that I can't do it, that I can't marry Theo—not because I want to wish away the time we've spent together, but because I'm finding that I don't want to hurt him, and at the same time that there's no way around it.

“It's just nerves,” I tell him as sincerely as I can manage, all the while hating myself for the lie. “All of this—it's a lot to adjust to. That's all.”

Theo looks at me for a long moment, and then he nods. “I wish I could give you more time,” he says quietly, his fingers running along the back of my hand again. “But I will be there for you in whatever ways I can be.”

The server comes back to take our orders—Theo gets maple salmon, and I order the shepherd's pie—and another round of drinks. I sit there, picking at the appetizer and wondering how I'm going to get through this. I feel as if I'm being torn in two entirely different directions, between knowing I need to put a guard up between myself and Theo to keep from making this worse, and at the same time wanting to enjoy what I know could be one of the best nights I've had in a long time—if not ever.

Around the time our food comes, the sound of music starts to waft through the bar, and Theo grins at me. “They do live music fairly often,” he says, and gestures to a few couples starting to get up from their tables. “There's a dance floor over there, too.”

I blink at him, realizing what he's suggesting. *He really is different from what I possibly could have expected*, I think, looking at the smile on his face. I can't imagine any of the men I've known—not my father or brother or anyone else—going to a pub and having a beer around people they would likely consider beneath them. Even if my brother might, my father never would have. A place like this, lively and a little raucous, with music starting up and people dancing—none of it is something they would have been a part of. Like Theo said—it's not something they could be seen doing, not without damaging their reputation in Chicago.

“Maybe after we eat,” he says with a wink, and my heart flutters in my chest again.

I want this, I think, with a growing ache that spreads through me. *And I don't know what to do*. I want to enjoy this dinner with Theo, to drink another cider and get a little bit of a buzz, to go out there and dance with him. *I could refuse*.

I've been playing the game I was told to play—to make Theo want me and believe that I'm happy in this marriage so he'll let down his guard around me—but it's no longer a game to me. And all I can think of to do is to pull away from him, to make him believe that I don't want or care about him, so that he won't see what's really happening.

But when we've finished our food and another round of drinks, the cider leaving a soft, blurred fuzziness around my edges, Theo reaches for my hand, and I don't tell him no.

“Do you like dancing?” he asks as he leads me out to the floor, the lively music ringing in my ears, and I nod. It's the truth—I do. I love dancing at weddings, even dancing in my room alone, where there's no one to see. But I've never danced like this, out in public at a pub, with people all around me simply out having a good time for the night.

There's a freedom to it that I hadn't expected. I see a few older couples around us, out for their night on the town, younger ones who look as if they're on a first or second date. *We're one of those*, I realize dimly, as Theo's hand settles on my waist, his fingers intertwined with mine. Theo and I are married, but our wedding reception aside, this is basically our second date. It's such a strange thing to realize, and I look up at him, trying to imagine what it would be like if we were ordinary people. If I were just out for a night with him, having dinner and drinks, the kind of thing that I've never been allowed to expect.

I would like him. I would want to see him again. And as for anything else...

I feel another flush of heat, thinking of the lingerie I bought, of putting it on for him. He pulls me closer, the warmth of his body sinking into mine, and as I look up into his now familiar green eyes, I know what I'm feeling.

It terrifies me.

We dance through that song, and another, and another, the last a fast-paced

tune that has us all spinning in circles from one dance partner to another, until Theo and I end up back with each other, breathless and laughing in each other's arms. I can feel the alcohol humming through my blood, everything else momentarily forgotten as he pulls me closer and bends to kiss me.

"Let's go home," he murmurs, and I can't think of any argument with it. Not in that moment.

His hand rests on my thigh as the driver takes us home, the city at night giving way to the rolling green hills beyond it, his fingers slipping a little under the hem of my dress to stroke my bare skin lightly until I can feel a slow-burning heat spreading through me, a need for him that I know will spill over as soon as we're upstairs, if not before.

"I have something for you," I whisper against his mouth as he kisses me once we're inside, my shopping bags at my feet in the foyer as his hands slide up my hips. "If you can be patient, you'll see it once we're upstairs."

"I have heard patience is a virtue." He nips lightly at my lower lip, groaning as his hand squeezes my ass, but he lets go of me. "Upstairs, then."

This is only making it all harder. I have that single, dim thought as we go up, but somewhere in the haze of the night, it's started to feel less important that I put up those walls right *now*. *One more night won't make a difference*, I tell myself as we walk up to the bedroom, looking at my husband's lean body and his handsome face as we step inside. *It's not like you could stop sleeping with him altogether*, I remind myself as I go into the bathroom and slip out of my clothes and jewelry and into the blue silk nightgown, fluffing my hair out around my shoulders as I look at myself in the mirror.

What I *could* do is be less willing, less enthusiastic about it all. I could make Theo believe that this is all just me doing my duty, what it was *supposed* to be, before I discovered that my husband is, after all, a man who I might have even chosen on my own if I had ever been given a real choice.

I see him standing near the bed when I walk out, and when he turns and sees me, the look of absolute desire on his face makes my mouth go dry.

"God, Marika." His gaze rakes over me, taking in the silk that stops at the tops of my thighs, the lace brushing against my skin. The air in the room is

cool, and I can feel my nipples pressing against the silk, the sensation turning me on as I look at my husband. “You are a work of art.”

Theo crosses the room to me quickly, stopping just shy of me as his eyes slide over me again, as if he can’t get enough. “Tell me there’s nothing under it,” he murmurs huskily, as he reaches to strip off his sweater, revealing the taut body beneath that sends desire rippling through me all over again.

“There’s nothing under it,” I whisper, my voice hushed in the quiet of the bedroom as he strips off his pants, standing there naked in front of me. His cock is hard already, stiff against the ridged expanse of his stomach, and before I can say another word, Theo drops to his knees in front of me, his hands sliding up the outside of my thighs as he looks up at me hungrily.

It’s not just the fact that I’ve had more than I’m used to drinking tonight that sends a flood of heat through me, my entire body tightening as he slowly inches the silk up my legs, like he’s unwrapping a present on Christmas morning. It’s the way he looks at me—and the sight of my gorgeous husband, kneeling naked as he leans in to kiss each inch of skin he reveals as he pushes up the nightgown.

“Theo, we could get in bed—” I whisper, and he shakes his head, trailing more kisses up my skin, closer to where I’m already wet and aching for him.

“I want to worship you here, like this, *mo gra*,” he murmurs, his lips reaching the top of my inner thigh. “The way you deserve. *Mo bhean álainn*.”

I swallow hard, a whimper escaping as his warm breath grazes against my outer folds. “What does that mean?” I whisper hoarsely, and I feel his lips curve in a smile as he kisses the top of my other thigh, so very close to where I’m longing for his touch.

“My beautiful wife,” he murmurs, and then his hands press against my hips, holding the silk out of the way as he parts my folds with his tongue.

The first caress of it over my clit nearly buckles my knees. He groans as he tastes me, swirling his tongue exactly where I need it the most as he strokes it against my throbbing flesh, his lips pressed tightly against me. I can feel myself trembling as he licks me in slow, long strokes. My fingers trail through his hair, gripping it against his scalp without meaning to as he sucks

at my clit, fluttering his tongue as I cry out and nearly lose my balance; my knees feel so weak.

“Theo!” I gasp, hips arching into his mouth, and he bunches my nightgown in his hand, one arm wrapping around my waist as the other pulls my leg over his shoulder, doing his best to steady me as he keeps licking and sucking at my clit, sending wave after wave of throbbing sensation through me. It feels so fucking good, and I know I’m going to come, that I won’t be able to stop it, even if it sends me collapsing to the floor. My hand is hard against the back of his head, holding his mouth to my grinding hips, my other hand clutching uselessly at his shoulder as I cry out his name again, and my orgasm unravels through me, my voice rising in a shriek of pleasure as I come hard on his tongue.

He groans, his hands gripping me hard as he keeps licking, lips and tongue moving against me, until he suddenly stands, lifting me up as he carries my still-shaking body to the bed and follows me onto it immediately, his hand around his cock as he stretches over me.

“*Fuck—*” he groans as he pushes into me, my body still clenching and fluttering around him, and he slides his hands over my silk-covered hips and waist, his cock entering me in slow inches as he leans down to claim a kiss. “God, I could eat you all night—but I needed to be inside of you.”

“I wanted you inside of me,” I gasp, my fingers digging into his shoulders as he sinks into me more deeply. He fills me up completely, as if his body was made for mine, my legs wrapping around his hips as he starts to move in long, slow thrusts, his mouth slanted over mine as he deepens the kiss.

He kisses my throat, my shoulder, my collarbone, groaning with every movement of his cock inside of me, the sound tangling with my moans the same way our bodies are tangled together, hands and skin and mouths, arms and legs wrapped around one another, each slow thrust of his body within mine dragging a ragged cry from my lips. It’s so easy for him to make me forget everything else, the silence of the night wrapped around us in a way it never is back in Chicago, with the noises of the city never far away. Here, it feels like there’s only us, a world away from anything that could make this fall apart. Even though I know to the very depths of myself that’s not true, I’ve forgotten it at this moment.

There's only him and the feeling of his mouth on mine and his cock buried inside of me, and I've never felt as if I've wanted anything as much as I want him right now.

"Oh *god*, Marika—" Theo groans my name, his hips shuddering against me, and I can feel him hardening even more inside of me. "I—"

His hand slips between us, his fingers stroking my clit in quick, sure strokes that he knows will bring me over the edge, his cockhead rubbing over that spot inside of me that makes me shudder and cry out, and I tighten my legs around his hips in the same moment that I feel him go stiff and hard, throbbing inside of me as he fills me with the hot flood of his cum, my body tight around him in an effort to keep him as deeply buried as I can.

"Theo!" I cry out his name, my fingernails digging into his shoulders, and I want him to stay in me. I want this to never end, to not have to think about anything other than how good he feels, how good *this* feels, and I arch against him, grinding my hips into his as I try to stretch out both of our climaxes as long as possible, the sound of his pleased moans in my ear only extending my own pleasure.

It's not until afterward, when we're lying next to each other in the huge, soft bed, with his hand resting on my thigh and both of us catching our breath, that reality comes rushing back in.

The problem is, I have no idea what I'm going to do about it.

Theo



The next morning, my spirits are high. I wake to Marika curled against my chest, her soft, warm breath against my skin. When I turn her onto her stomach and inch the silk nightgown up her thighs again, slipping my cock into her from behind, my response is an eager moan and the arch of her perfect ass against me as I thrust into her.

I could get used to waking every morning like that.

When we're both finished, showering and dressing side by side, I turn to give her a quick kiss. "I had breakfast delivered this morning," I tell her, a little regretfully. "I have work to do in the office. But it shouldn't take me all day. Feel free to explore the grounds if you like, or get the driver to take you into the city. We'll have dinner together tonight."

This could be my life, I think as I leave her to breakfast and the book she brought down with her, stealing another kiss before I take a slice of quiche and a muffin with my coffee and go into the office. I have a remote meeting with a few of the Kings who are younger and more capable of managing it, and files to go over. It occupies most of my morning and into the early afternoon. I'm just beginning to consider finding where Marika might have gone off to and making plans for lunch when there's a knock at the door.

I find myself hoping that it's her as I call out for whoever it is to come in.

Instead, it's Finn standing there in the open doorway.

I hide my disappointment, motioning to him. “Come on in,” I tell him, setting my stack of files aside. “Is everything alright?”

From the look on his face as he walks into the office and shuts the door behind him, I’m not sure that it is.

“Did something happen?” I feel the lines on my brow creasing as I motion again to one of the seats in front of my desk. “Sit down. Is there some sort of bad news?”

Finn’s lips press together, and he shifts from foot to foot as if he’s uncomfortable, but he finally takes a seat. “You told me to keep an eye out yesterday,” he says finally. “And I did. I had a bad feeling about it all—about your new wife, alone in the city with just whatever security was assigned to her. I can’t explain it, and I told you I don’t often act on feeling, aye? But I did, and I’m glad I did, even if it’s not the news I hoped to bring you.”

I frown deeply. “I don’t understand what it is you’re trying to say, Finn,” I tell him, as patiently as I can. “So just out with it, so I can grasp the issue here.”

“I found out where your wife was shopping yesterday afternoon and went to check in with her security. Followed them a bit. And—” he hesitates, his hands pressing hard against his thighs as he looks at me with a grim expression. “I saw the blond bodyguard with her. The one I was concerned about—one of Vasilev’s. Name is Adrik, I’m told.”

It doesn’t register, at first, what Finn is talking about. “What do you mean, *with* her? He was assigned to her for the day? I’m afraid I don’t understand why that’s an issue—”

Finn lets out a heavy sigh. “He was *with* her, Theo. Had her in an alleyway, pinned up against the wall. Kissing the hell out of her, looked like. And from my vantage point, she wasn’t arguing with it. Didn’t look like the first time, either.” His jaw tightens. “There’s a way two people have, when they know their way around each other. I think you know what I’m talking about. I don’t think this was a first, and I don’t think it was forced.”

It takes a moment for what he’s saying to sink in. I look at him across the desk, the blood pounding in my ears, and I feel my jaw clenching so hard it

hurts.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Theo—”

“I want to make sure I have this right.” I hear myself speaking as if from a distance, like talking down a long hallway. “You saw Marika—*my wife*—kissing one of her bodyguards in an alleyway in the city, and she was willing?”

“I can’t say for certain,” Finn says heavily. “But it looked that way to me. Only way to know for sure—” he pauses, pressing his lips tightly together. “You’d have to talk to her, Theo. I’m just telling you what I saw, as you asked me to.”

I can feel rage starting to burn within me, thick and hot, and I don’t know what I’m more angry with—the idea that someone else has laid their hands on my wife or the idea that she might have wanted it. “Have you seen her?” I ask, my voice tight and hard, and Finn frowns.

“I passed her as I came in—she said she was going upstairs. Didn’t say anything other than that.”

“Find this Adrik, and make sure he doesn’t leave the property.” I stand up abruptly, feeling every muscle in my body tense. “I’m going to go speak to my wife.”

“Aye, I’ll do that.” Finn is quicker to get out of the office than I am, clearly wanting to be out of my way, and I don’t blame him. I walk towards the staircase in quick strides, feeling the tension within me build as I head up to the bedroom.

I see Marika the moment I open the door. She’s standing at the dresser in only a pair of jeans and her bra, and for a split second, I forget why I’ve come upstairs at the sight of her half-topless, her smooth skin bare and open to my hands and my mouth—

And then I imagine different hands and a different mouth sliding over her, and the anger I feel is blinding.

“Marika.” I’ve never said her name like that before, cold and hard and emotionless, and when she spins to face me, the shock on her face tells me

that she heard it exactly like that. “I think you have some things to explain to me?”

Her hands tighten around the sweater she’s holding. I try to tell myself that it means nothing, that it certainly doesn’t mean she knows what I’m talking about, but it’s hard for me to think rationally. “What are you talking about?” she whispers, her voice trembling, and that doesn’t help the furious certainty pounding through me that Finn must be onto something.

Finn wouldn’t have brought something like that to me unless he believed it was worth mentioning. He works for me, but he’s also my friend—very close to a brother, in many ways—and he wouldn’t tell me that, wouldn’t make it sound as if Marika were complicit, unless he was very sure that it was more than a bodyguard stepping out of line. I want to believe my wife wouldn’t do such a thing—but I’ve also known Finn much, much longer than I’ve known her.

I’m inclined to believe him.

“I’ve just been told that Finn saw something interesting in Dublin yesterday,” I say slowly, my voice hard with the anger coursing through me. “You, in fact.”

“Me?” She swallows hard, frozen to the spot, and I feel with a sudden certainty that nothing that is going to come out of her mouth will be the truth.

The question is, what am I going to do about it?

“You. Pinned up against a wall in an alleyway, kissing another man. One of the security team Nikolai sent.” I take a slow step towards her, and I don’t miss the way she shrinks back, the first time she’s ever flinched from me. It cuts me to the bone, because I had hoped to never see that. I know somewhere deep within myself that no matter what comes of this, no matter what the truth is, this will change what there is between us. Our marriage won’t be the same after today.

That hurts more than I thought it possibly could.

“Tell me the truth, Marika. Because Finn seemed to think that it looked as if you wanted him to be kissing you. Like you’d done it before.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I didn’t want it. I—”

“So it was you he saw. He didn’t mistake some other woman for you?” I wouldn’t have believed it if she tried to use that excuse—Finn is smarter than that—but I want to hear it from her own lips.

“It’s true,” she whispers, and her voice is shaking in earnest now. “I—he pinned me up against the wall. Surprised me in the alleyway—he pulled me in there and had me pinned before I could get away. I tried to push him off of me, but he was too strong—”

I’ve often heard it said that the best way to lie is to keep what you say as close to the truth as possible. As I look at Marika, at her trembling hands and lips, the wide-eyed stare she’s giving me, all I can think is that’s what’s happening here. “So you didn’t want the kiss?”

She shakes her head vehemently. “No,” she whispers, but I don’t believe her. There’s something wrong about this, and even if my anger is clouding my judgment, I don’t think it’s so far clouded that I can’t tell that Marika is holding something back.

“Who was it? Which guard?” My voice is ice cold, and I see her shrink back again as I take another step closer, and then another.

“I—I don’t know his name.” The tremor in her voice sounds, again, like a lie. Either she’s protecting someone else, or herself.

Or both.

“He was from your brother’s security, and you don’t know his name?”

Marika shakes her head, swallowing hard. “I don’t know all of them by name.”

“Nikolai sent them for your comfort. Wouldn’t he choose ones you *do* know?” I step closer still, within touching distance now, and I can see she’s shaking all over. “Maybe ones you’re familiar with. *Too* familiar with, even.”

“Theo, I didn’t—I don’t—”

“What?” I reach out, my fingers clasped around her jaw as I hold her there so she can’t look away. “Didn’t want the kiss? Don’t know his name? Why

don't I believe you, *cailín*?"

She shudders at the word that I've almost always used as an endearment with her up until now. "No, Theo. I didn't want it. I don't know who he was—"

"I don't believe you!" My fingers tighten on her jaw, my voice rising, and I hear her whimper of fear. A part of me shouts somewhere within my mind to back down, to have this conversation more calmly, but the anger is throbbing through me too forcefully, the thought that some other man has touched her making me feel nearly murderous with rage. The thought that I've been lied to when I trusted her, have begun to care for her, feels even worse.

"Has he touched you before this, Marika? Kissed you? Or—" I drag my gaze down the front of her body pointedly, as she tries to shake her head within my grasp.

"No—"

"Were you really a virgin when you came to our marriage bed?" The question comes out harsh, biting, and Marika's eyes widen in fear that, in my current state, only confirms to me that something is being kept from me.

That my wife very well might not have been a virgin.

That I've been lied to, and tricked.

Cuckolded within my own house.

"Theo—"

"Yes or no?" I shout, still grasping her jaw, and tears well in her eyes.

"Yes!" she cries out, but there's a quaver in her voice, and I don't believe her.

I don't fucking believe any of it, and all I can see are other hands on her, another mouth on hers, and I want to punish her for it.

I want to punish them both.

My hands land on her arms roughly, spinning her around to face the dresser. She lets out a yelp of fear, but I'm not listening. I can't hear anything beyond the blood rushing in my ears, the sound of my own heartbeat pounding

through my head, and I'm furious beyond belief.

I trusted her.

I cared about her.

I was going to change everything about my life for her. For us.

I was falling in love with her.

That last thought tears through me, and it feels as if my heart itself is ripped asunder as I grab her wrists, slamming her hands onto the edge of the dresser.

“Theo!” She cries out in fear and pain, but it doesn't register. I'm not the man who married her at this moment, not the man who took her out on a date so that we could get to know each other before we were married, not the man who touched her slowly, gently, on the first night so that she wouldn't be afraid. That memory tears through me too—how worried I'd been that I might hurt her, that she would be frightened the first time, my certainty that I needed to hold back my lust for her so that I could ease her into the newness of it all.

I've been physically hurt before, but this is a new kind of pain, the idea that she might have been lying to me. That our wedding night might not have been our first time. It's not only the deeply rooted possessiveness that I feel for her that makes me angry, not only that constant thought of *mine, mine, mine* that I have so often for her, that I've never felt before. It's the memory of how she played along, how she clearly *knew* what I was thinking and led me to believe that was the truth.

She lied.

She lied.

The anger is overwhelming. I've become the brutal man that all of Chicago fears at this moment, the man who was willing to tear apart what was left of the Vasilevs for what their territory could offer, the man who has kept the McNeils the most powerful family in Chicago since the mantle of power settled on my shoulders. “If you wanted the brutal husband you were promised,” I growl in her ear as I press her hands down against the wood, bending her over, “then all you had to do was say so.”

“Theo, *please!*” She cries out, her fingers curling against the wood. “Please don’t do this—”

“Then you shouldn’t have lied.” I stand back, looking at her trembling, pale body. My fingers reach for the hook of her bra, snapping it free, and Marika lets out a pitiful whimper.

Somewhere in the depths of my cold, angry heart, it strikes a nerve. It reminds me that this is my wife, and I don’t want to hurt her. But every time I falter, I think of another man’s hands on her, of her lying mouth making me believe that she was only mine. I think of all the moments she’s been left alone here, of the trust I placed in her, and the possibility that those moments were spent locked in a romantic embrace with another man, a man who she—

“That’s why you don’t want children with me.” Her hesitance suddenly makes sense. I run my fingers down her spine, touching each ridge. “You want them with someone else. Or were you planning to make it a race to see which of us could get you pregnant first, and then pass the little bastard off as mine regardless?”

“No, Theo! You’ve got it all wrong—” her words are whimpered, begging, and I feel my upper lip curl in an angry sneer.

“Don’t let go of that dresser,” I warn her, my hand pressing down on her lower back, forcing her to bend down over it, her ass arched outwards for me. “Has he fucked you like this yet? Is it as good as when I fuck you from behind?”

Marika lets out a whimpered sob as my fingers slide around to undo the button of her jeans. “Theo, it’s not what you think—”

“It’s exactly what I think. How did you manage to bleed that first night, anyway? Was it another trick, or is my cock just that much bigger than his?” I yank the zipper down, no longer expecting an answer from her. I wouldn’t believe anything she said, anyway.

“Theo, don’t do this—”

“Shut up,” I snarl. “The only sound I want to hear is when your lying little mouth screams for me when I make you come. I know *that’s* real, at least. Your fucking cunt doesn’t lie.” I snatch the jeans and her panties down over

her hips, dragging them down her thighs, throwing them aside so that she's bare and trembling in front of me, bent over the dresser, her blonde hair hanging around her face. The picture of submission, and that's all I care about right now.

Making her submit to me. Making her *hurt*. Making her regret what she's done.

"No one lies to Theo McNeil. Especially not his *fucking* wife." I undo my belt buckle, sliding the leather free. "My hand or my belt, Marika. Choose one."

"What?" she gasps, and I grit my teeth.

"I'm going to punish you for your lies," I tell her, my voice harsh and cold. "For being a disobedient wife. And then, when I'm finished punishing you, I'll fuck you the way a whore deserves to be fucked."

Marika lets out a strangled cry, and I see the tears hitting the wood of the dresser as she gasps, her hands clenching around the edge of it. "Please, no —"

"The time to beg my forgiveness has already passed. Choose, Marika. My hand or my belt."

"I can't," she whispers. "I can't—"

I toss the belt aside, making the decision for her. As pleasurable as it would be to hear the crack of the leather against her skin, I want to feel my own hand against her more. I want her to feel every ounce of the anger she's roused in me.

"You must have been so pleased when I was gentle with you," I murmur harshly, running my hand over the curve of her ass. "When you were given a reason to believe that I might not be the cruel man you were told you were going to marry. And how did you decide to use that? By lying to me and enjoying another man behind my back." My hand slides over the opposite curve, feeling her tremble beneath my touch, and despite my anger, I can feel myself getting hard. When I step back a little, looking at the soft pink folds visible between her slightly parted thighs, I can see her arousal glistening there, too.

I laugh, swiping my fingers over her, feeling her shudder beneath my touch. “Lying little slut,” I hiss. “Does he know how wet you get for me? Does he know you *want* me, that you’re not just enduring my presence in your bed the way you’re supposed to? Does he know the things you beg for when I’m inside of you?”

Marika lets out another shuddering sob, and I reach back, bringing my hand down sharply on one side of her shapely ass.

The crack sounds through the room, flesh against flesh, her creamy skin turning red where my hand was. I bring it down again, the flush spreading as Marika cries out, another sob of pain trembling through her as I strike her ass again, turning it red and hot with every impact of my hand against her flesh.

And I’m so fucking hard it hurts.

“I tried to be gentle with you,” I snarl. “I tried not to show you the darker things I enjoyed, to shelter you from how much I lusted after you, to ease you into it. Do you think I didn’t want that pretty blonde hair wrapped around my fist? Do you think I didn’t want to see those big blue eyes as wet as your pussy while you cried for me? Do you think that *I* am not capable of violence in bed? That I don’t want it? That a man like me could be satisfied entirely with sweet words and soft kisses?”

My hand cracks down against her flesh, over and over, on both sides, until her ass is burning red and a steady stream of sobs are tumbling from her lips. “Who the *fuck* do you think you married, *soith*?” I snarl as I strike her again, my cock throbbing in its confines. “I was gentle with you because I thought you needed it. Because I *wanted* to be. But now, *this* is what I want, and you will take it, you lying little whore.”

I strike her ass once more on either side, hearing her cry of pain dimly. Then I reach out, wrapping her hair roughly around my fist as I yank her head back at the same moment that I drive two of my fingers into her pussy.

She’s fucking *drenched*, and I hear myself laugh, the sound mingling with her sobbing moan as I thrust my fingers into her roughly. “Does being punished turn you on?” I growl, my thumb finding her clit as I lean in to snarl the words in her ear. It’s fucking swollen, throbbing under my touch, and I laugh again, realizing how much the spanking aroused her. “You enjoy being

treated like the slut you are? Good. I'll enjoy showing you how I treat a lying little *soith* who takes advantage of me."

"Theo—" she gasps my name, tears still soaking the wood of the dresser, but I no longer know if she's sobbing in pain or fear or pleasure. I thrust my fingers into her hard, driving her towards a fast, brutal orgasm, and I nip at her ear as I do, bending over her in the same way I plan to very shortly, when I fuck her hard.

"Come for me, my pretty little slut," I hiss into her ear. "Show me just how much you want your husband."

She lets out another cry, this one higher-pitched, her entire body trembling with the force of it as I feel her clench around my fingers, her hips arching back into my hand and her knees buckling as she comes unraveled, a helpless moan falling from her lips as I feel her arousal drip over my hand.

My cock is so hard it feels as if it might explode. I yank my soaked fingers out of her, dragging down my own zipper as I feverishly pull my cock out, angling myself behind her. I don't bother being gentle, don't bother giving her a moment to adjust to the feeling of my thick, swollen head against her entrance before I slam every inch of my cock into her, feeling her stretch and give around me as she lets out a howl of mingled pain and pleasure.

"That's it, *cailín*," I snarl in her ear as I thrust hard, gasping with the pleasure of feeling her tight, wet heat clenching around me. "Fucking take it. Scream for me. Scream loud enough that the *bastard* who fucked you first hears you screaming for my cock." I tighten my hand in her hair, dragging her head back as I press my lips to her throat, scoring my teeth over the pale flesh. "Scream for me, *soith*."

I've never fucked her this ruthlessly. I slam my hips into her with every stroke, feeling her body rock forward against the dresser, feeling that tight heat again and again. I've wanted to fuck her like this, to take her hard and violently, and I held back, because I didn't want to hurt or frighten her.

Now, I don't care, and the pleasure of it has me on the verge of coming more quickly than I'd like.

But I want her to come on my cock again while I fuck her like this.

My fingers find her clit, rubbing it hard, not giving her an inch of gentleness as I pound my cock into her. I can feel her tightening around me, her body pulling me deeper even as she sobs and pleads, and it feels so fucking good. The velvet heat of her caresses my straining, aching flesh with every stroke, sensation overwhelming me, and I snarl in her ear for her to come for me again as I pinch her clit between my fingers, rolling it roughly between them as Marika lets out a long, shuddering gasp.

“Come for me, *soith*,” I growl, fucking her as hard as I can, harder than I’ve ever fucked anyone in my life. “Come on my fucking cock, and scream my name.”

I see her jaw tighten, see her fighting it, but there’s no fighting the pleasure I can feel rippling through her. My pretty little whore of a bride likes pain as well as pleasure, and with each slam of my hips into her reddened flesh, she lets out a sobbing cry that I can tell has her on the verge of orgasm.

“I’m so fucking close, Marika—*ah*—” I let out a groan of pleasure, my cock stiffening as I feel my balls tighten with the onrush of my climax, and I rub her clit hard, feeling her entire body go tense. “I’m going to fill you up—oh *fuck*—”

She lets out a strangled cry as I slam my cock into her once more, the hot, satisfying rush of my orgasm spurting inside of her as her back arches despite herself, her fingers scratching against the wood of the dresser, her sobbing scream of pleasure no doubt heard past the house as I keep thrusting, keep fucking her as my cock spills inside of her, wanting my cum inside of her as deeply as it can possibly go. She’s still trembling when I feel the last of it spurt inside of her, her pussy still fluttering and clenching around me, and I hold myself there for a moment, breathing hard with my hand still wrapped in her hair.

When my cock softens, slipping out of her, I feel the trickle of my cum around it. I reach down, sliding my fingers along her inner thigh as I gather up what’s spilled down her soft skin, pushing it back inside of her as I thrust my fingers deeply into her. “This stays inside of you,” I growl into her ear. “You keep my cum in you, and it will be *my* child that you’re pregnant with. *My* heir. I will make absolutely fucking certain of it, do you hear me, *cailín*?”

Marika lets out another shudder, nodding as she keeps her head down, her body trembling around me.

“There will be no chance for you to see him again,” I tell her harshly. “Whatever passed between you before this, that will be the last of it. You are *mine*. My wife. And there will be nothing for you except what *I* decide you will have.”

I thrust my fingers into her once more, curling them, feeling the heat of her pussy and my cum against my hand as she lets out a whimpering moan. “I tried to give you gentleness. Now, I will simply give you what you should have had from the start.”

Stepping away from her, I tuck myself away and zip up my jeans, looking at her still-trembling body bent over the dresser. “You’ll stay here, in this room,” I tell her sharply. “I’ll send food up to you later. We’ll go home tomorrow.”

And with that, those last harsh words ringing in the air, I turn away from her and stalk out of the room to go and find Finn.

Theo



I gave Finn instructions to have the bodyguard taken to a warehouse outside of Dublin. I could have taken care of matters at one of the outbuildings on the property, but I didn't want to sully the peace of my home with memories of what I planned to do to the man who dared to touch my wife, or stain a single inch of it with his blood.

As for Marika—

My jaw clenches tightly as I drive, trying to put her out of my head. I chose to forego my usual driver, hoping that driving myself might help me to clear my thoughts—put me in a more rational frame of mind when it came time to confront Adrik.

So far, that hasn't been the case. With every mile, I only feel more and more furious, more determined to take my payment of vengeance out in his flesh. I've never been one to take much visceral pleasure in torture, as brutal a man as I can be, but this is different.

This time, I'll enjoy every moment of it.

I park the car around the back of the warehouse—a plain, nondescript black sedan, nothing to draw attention—and pause at the back door, trying once more to gather myself. To appear cool, calm, and collected in the face of a man that I want to take apart piece by piece, and relish in his screams.

Letting out a deep breath, I step into the warehouse.

Finn is already waiting there. The man, who must be Adrik, is in a steel chair with his head lolling forward, bound around his upper arms, stomach, calves, and thighs with straps ratcheted tight. He's been stripped naked and drugged, and I can see him starting to twitch faintly as the effects of the drugs start to wear off. He'll be awake soon, and I'm glad I made it here for that.

I want to be the first thing he sees when he wakes up and realizes his fate.

"He's all yours," Finn murmurs, shifting on his feet. There's something uncomfortable in his face, and I'm fairly sure I know what it is.

Finn is my enforcer as well as my right hand—he's a man capable of the violence and brutality I would expect from someone in that position, but he doesn't take pleasure in it. Not like Nikolai Vasilev, who, in the days before his new wife tamed him, was known to visit the sex clubs his family owned after torturing men, to work off the—adrenaline.

In my younger days, I got a certain rush from the power of it, being able to inflict pain without consequence, holding the power of someone's life...and their death, fast or slow, in my hands. I'd always find myself wanting a woman, later on, those nights. But I never fucked them with the blood still on me, as Nikolai was said to do.

There were rumors, of course, and I let them abound. With the Vasilevs as my primary opposition, there was nothing that could be hurt by letting others think I was a more primal and violent man than I ever have been—and certainly more so than I am now.

"I can do the dirty work if you want, boss." Finn glances at me. "No need to get your hands bloody if you want to just stand there and watch."

"No, this is personal." I walk over to the table, sizing up the implements. There are plenty of tools for me to use on his flesh, but I flex my hand, considering the impact of a good, old-fashioned punch to the jaw first. It sounds enticing.

And I can do whatever the fuck I want.

Adrik's head starts to lift, his eyes blinking stickily. It will take a moment for the drugs to wear off fully, and I plan to wait until he's fully conscious. I don't want him to miss a second of what I plan to do to him, and I certainly

don't want him to be numbed for any of it.

“Thhheo—” He slurs my name thickly, blinking at me, his lips working as if to try to summon some spit from what must be a painfully dry mouth. “Fffuck you—”

“No,” I tell him almost pleasantly. “That’s what you did to my wife. And that’s why you’re here.”

Adrik blinks a little more awake at that, as if he’s beginning to realize the true implications of the situation he’s found himself in. “You don’t know what you’re—talking—about—”

The words still come out slurred, but slightly less so.

“Oh, I think I do.” I narrow my eyes at him, a taut, vicious smile playing at the corners of my lips. “And what I don’t know, you’re going to fill me in on.”

“I won’t...tell you...*shit*.” The words are starting to be clearer now, letting me know that he’s close to being fully aware. I take a few steps closer, enjoying the hint of fear starting to grow in those angry, ice-blue eyes trained on me. He’s the kind of man who wants to think he fears nothing, but he’s about to find out exactly how wrong he is.

“Plenty of men say that. They’re all wrong.” I step close enough to be within striking distance, sizing him up to be sure the drugs have worn off enough. Then I rear back, swinging my fist into the side of his jaw with a pleasant sound of flesh and bone meeting, sending his face jerking to one side in a spray of blood.

“That’s for my own pleasure,” I tell him. “For taking my wife’s virginity. There’s more to come, don’t worry.”

Adrik reels for a moment, but he recovers a bit more quickly than I might have expected, to his credit. That’s fine with me—the longer he holds out, the longer I’ll get to enjoy taking out my anger on him.

“I didn’t take *shit*,” he manages, spitting out a mouthful of blood. “She was happy to fuck me. Practically *begged* for it.” He sneers, curling his upper lip at me, which didn’t take much of the first blow.

I rectify that with the second.

My fist smashes into his upper lip and nose, sending him rocking backward—hard enough to knock the chair over, if it hadn't been bolted into the floor. He doesn't let out a sound, which I could appreciate—if I weren't so fucking furious with him.

“Why don't you tell me how it happened, then?” I ask smoothly, my voice deceptively quiet. “If I've got it so wrong.”

“She was lonely.” Adrik spits out blood. “Roughed up from what Narokov did to her. She was still recovering when her brother went off on his honeymoon.” He sneers at me again. “Any man would have done the same.”

“Except you cared for her. I'm told from men who have it on good authority that you were the one who carried her out of Narokov's compound. Not enough for you to care about her from a distance, to protect her, hm?” I land another blow, as his nose starts to stream blood, more of it trickling down his chin from the split in his lip. “Not enough to just do your fucking job, without putting your hands on her?”

“Fuck you!” Adrik shouts, eyes blazing up at me. “She wasn't even fucking engaged to you when we—”

Another blow, this one intending to leave him with a black eye later. “She was going to be engaged to someone. Whoever that was, you were stealing from them, and you know it. But that's not even the worst part, you fucking *bastard*.” I snarl at him. “The beating is just for what you took. The rest will come later.”

He reels for a moment, the blows starting to take their toll a little. “I didn't take shit,” he repeats, spitting out another mouthful of blood on the concrete. “I *asked* if I could kiss her. She said yes. And everything that happened from there, she said *yes*. I didn't force her or coerce her. She *wanted it*. And she wanted it every fucking time I put my cock in her after that, too.” Adrik sneers at me from a mouth smeared with blood. “Only place I didn't fuck her was her sweet little asshole, and now I wish I had. Just so there wouldn't be a damn part of her that you could have for yourself.”

For a moment, the world goes red. I lurch towards him, delivering blows to

his face, his gut, slamming my fist into his unprotected balls. He finally lets out a noise at that, a deep, guttural sound that even makes Finn flinch, but I don't give a shit about Adrik's pain.

"I should cut your cock off for that," I hiss. "For even *thinking* about her like that, much less touching her. Much less—"

"I came in her. Did she tell you that?" Adrik manages the words between gasps, as he struggles to suck in air through the pain of having been struck in the groin. "The night she went to meet you at her brother's dinner. She always made me use a fucking condom or pull out, but I wanted her sitting at that table with the smell of me on her. With my fucking cum leaking out of her while she discussed her engagement to you."

He starts laughing then, rough, almost hysterical laughter as he spits blood directly at me. "She was fucking leaking my cum while she made promises to you in a goddamn church. How's that for taking something from you, McNeil? I was still fucking *inside* of her while she was signing that contract."

I think I black out for a moment, hearing him rant. I've never felt so unhinged before, torturing a man. It's a methodical thing, usually—determining what should be done, in what order, to extract as much information as possible with the *least* amount of pain. A man who can't bear anything more will say whatever it takes to make it stop—and what he says won't always be the truth. But a man who thinks he still has a chance, who thinks he can recover from the torture, who believes he might even leave with his life, will tell the truth.

All that is gone, here. I intend to leave Adrik alive and mostly in one piece, since I want him upright, conscious, and capable for the rest of what I have planned for him and my lying, conniving wife. But I have every intention of making him hurt as much as I possibly can.

I hardly realize what I'm doing until the pliers are in his mouth, fixed around a tooth. *That* gets a scream from him, when I tear it loose, mingled rage and pain in his face like I've rarely seen in a man before. He's impressive—if only he were loyal.

Adrik snarls at me, an almost animal sound, as I toss the tooth aside. "Why did you come here?" I ask him, clicking the pliers together. "Why did you

decide to follow her to Ireland? Besides utter stupidity, of course.”

“Because she’s *mine*,” Adrik spits. “She was always going to be mine.”

I laugh at that. “She’s married to me, *leathcheann*. Even if she carried on an affair with you, she’s more mine than she’d ever be yours.”

Adrik smiles then. It’s an unnerving thing, to see a man who’s just had a tooth ripped out of his mouth, lips and face swelling from the beating he’s taken, smile with such glee. “Not once you were dead, *podonok*.”

I go very still at that. I hold up the pliers, letting him see the blood still on them. “You’re going to tell me what you mean by that,” I say slowly, in a deadly quiet voice. “And depending on what you say will decide how many teeth are left in your mouth by the end, and how many fingernails on your left hand. I’m only going to need the right operable for what I have planned for you.”

Adrik laughs again, and I can tell that we’re going to be at this for a while.

—

When I get back to the manor, and walk up to the master suite—I can’t bear to think of it as mine and Marika’s bedroom, right now—I find her huddled on the bed, wrapped in a robe. I can tell from her tangled hair and tear-streaked face that she hasn’t showered yet, and under other circumstances, I’d be aroused by the knowledge that she’s bare under the robe, still full of my cum from earlier. I’d cross to the bed and kiss her, pin her onto the mattress, thrust into her, and fill her up again. I’d fuck her so hard and deep that sooner rather than later, she’d be pregnant with my child.

But instead, it’s all I can do to contain my rage, knowing everything Adrik has told me. Everything she did with him, everything that she plotted with her brother. It feels as if I don’t even know the woman curled up on the bed in front of me. She’s the woman I married, but I barely recognize her.

Nothing she did with me was real. And now—

Now I have to decide if I’m going to remain married to her. How I’m going to exact her punishment, how I’m going to deal with her brother.

I still need a wife. I still need an heir. Our marriage could be annulled on the grounds I have now—but she could already be pregnant with my child. Adrik said that she asked for contraception the morning after he came in her—the thought still makes me see red, makes me want to punish her all over again and beat him to a pulp for the second time—and if he’s telling the truth, he hasn’t fucked her since then. But I’m not entirely certain I believe that.

I certainly don’t believe anything out of her lying mouth.

“Theo.” She breathes my name, and it makes my chest ache, knowing that not so long ago, it would have been with desire. Now, it’s with fear.

“You bit off more than you could chew with this, *cailín*,” I tell her, my voice low and hard. “I was beginning to care for you, but now I see the truth. I’ve had it all laid out for me.”

She starts to open her mouth, and I hold up a hand. “I don’t want to hear a word,” I tell her flatly. “You will listen, and be silent.”

I give her a moment, to be sure she understands, and then I continue. “You will not leave this room, or this house, until tomorrow when we fly back to Chicago. And you will not be allowed to leave our home there, until I’ve decided how to handle this. I will let you know when I’ve decided what it is that I will do.”

She’s trembling, there on the bed. Once, I would have gone to her. Once, I would have done anything to make the fear in her eyes vanish.

Now, I simply turn and walk away, out of the room—and away from the marriage I once hoped to have.

Everything has changed now.

Marika



I'm not sure I've ever been so terrified.

Maybe in the compound, when I was kidnapped by Ivan Narokov—but I'm not even sure if that was worse than this. Then, at least, I had some expectation of what those men would do to me. I was prepared for violence, for pain. Now—

I hadn't been prepared for this, from Theo. But I should have been.

"I was so stupid," I whisper, sinking down to sit on the edge of the bed, wincing even despite how soft the bed is against my bruised and reddened ass. I took a shower after Theo left, washing myself clean despite his insistence that his cum should remain inside of me—it's not as if it matters, anyway.

Another secret, one that he hasn't uncovered yet. I'm terrified to think of what will happen if he does.

How did I think I could keep this from him?

And now he knows for certain. I close my eyes, trying not to think of what he must have done to Adrik, trying not to put that guilt on myself. I drew Adrik into this by choosing to sleep with him, even though I knew it could never go anywhere, even though I knew the consequences would be dire if anyone ever found out. But I *told* him about Theo. I told him that I would have to stay away from him, until my marriage was finished.

And I never, never asked him to follow me here to Ireland. I would never have asked him for anything so dangerous. If I had known he planned it, I would have told him to stay in Chicago. I would have *ordered* it, if I thought it would do any good.

But Adrik would never have listened to me. I know that. And now—

I can't begin to imagine what Theo's done to him. All I know is that it was enough that Theo knows the truth now. He knows that Adrik took my virginity, that it wasn't only the once, that it wasn't forced. He knows that we were together, that I promised Adrik that in time, we would figure things out. He knows I kissed Adrik back in the alley that day in Dublin.

I wonder if Adrik told him about all the times I defended Theo, insisted that we needed to stop, that I pushed him away when he came up to the bedroom, and slapped him after the kiss. Somehow, I doubt it. I think, after what Theo no doubt did to him, Adrik would be too angry to think rationally, and try to salvage some of my part in all of this.

The one thing I don't think he spilled was the plot that Nikolai hatched to bring Theo down, and my part in it. If he had, I don't know that I would still be alive right now. Certainly not still unbruised and in one piece, after Theo came up to tell me what he'd learned from Adrik.

What is he going to do to me? I clutch the sides of the bed, my heart hammering in my chest. I'm not allowed to leave this room until tomorrow, when I've been told that we'll fly back to Chicago. And then—

I have no idea.

My face is swollen from crying, my head aching. Everything has fallen apart, and I don't know how I thought it would play out any differently. I don't know how I believed that I would get through this without Theo finding out, without him knowing what we were up to.

I feel insane for ever thinking that was possible. And angry—angry with myself for being so foolish, angry with Nikolai for putting me in this position, angry with Theo for not understanding how I might have wanted to have something for myself after what happened, for not wanting to give myself to the highest bidder, for not believing me or even listening when I

tried to tell him that I'd put a stop to it once we were engaged—or tried to, anyway.

This morning, I'd been so happy. Now I feel nothing but anger and hurt and grief—and so much fear. Enough fear to drown in.

All I can do is try to find some way to keep busy, so I spend the time packing my bags, feeling the deep ache in my chest worsen as I fill up the suitcases with the clothes that I only just took out. I hadn't wanted to go on this trip—but then we'd arrived, and Theo was so different, and I found myself looking forward to the days and weeks ahead. I found myself not wanting to go back to Chicago, enjoying the idea of the idyllic life here that he painted a picture of for me. I hadn't been in any hurry for the trip to end.

Now it's over, unceremoniously and in the most terrifying way, and I feel as if I have emotional whiplash.

Just get through it one moment at a time, I tell myself as I fill up one suitcase and zip it closed. *There's nothing you can do now except for that.*

I'd buried the birth control pills under a stack of sweaters, and when I see them, my blood runs cold all over again. This is the one lie Theo hasn't uncovered, and when I think of the conversations we had about children, his reaction to it, how sincerely he had said he wished he could give me time—

If he found them, I think he might consider it a worse betrayal than even not having come to his bed a virgin.

I bury them in my suitcase, stacking clothes and toiletries and everything else that's left atop them, a solid lump in my throat. I'd really thought that this all might be different. That I might have gotten lucky with Theo—that I might have a chance at something more than I could have ever hoped for with him. I had been considering what a real future, a real marriage with him looked like, and how I would break that to Adrik—that I'd fallen in love with my husband and what there was between us needed to be over.

“It's not fair,” I whisper aloud to the empty room. Other girls get to choose who they fuck for the first time, get to have relationships that end because they find someone else, or it simply runs its course. Other women aren't expected to stay with the first man they go to bed with forever. Other women

are allowed to fall for men like Adrik, for muscled chests and broad hands, and to decide later that they might have changed their minds.

But not me. I was born Marika Vasilev, daughter of the Bratva *pakhan*, and so I'm going to be punished for something as simple as choosing who to sleep with first, choosing when to get pregnant, and choosing to change my mind about who I want.

I never asked for any of this, but it's still my burden to bear.

I shut the suitcases, setting them aside as I sit on the edge of the bed again, trying to think of what to do. To come up with a plan. But there's nothing that I can imagine will help. Whatever Theo is going to do, I feel certain he's made up his mind.

There's nothing I can do to change it, now.

—

As I'd expected, Theo doesn't come upstairs to bed. I sleep alone, tossing and turning in the huge bed, my sleep full of restless dreams and fear for what's to come.

I expect to see him on the drive to the hangar, my stomach full of anxiety, but he's not in the car either. That's somehow more frightening, the idea that he can't even stand to be near me, that he's keeping his distance until we get back to Chicago.

And what happens then?

There are three members of his security team in the car with me—notably none of Nikolai's—and Adrik is nowhere to be seen. The car ride is absolutely silent, none of them even looking at me as we make the long drive to the private jet hangar. I sit there with my hands knotted in my lap, sick with fear, wondering what happens next.

I'm not entirely sure that I'm going to make it out of this alive.

Theo is nowhere to be seen when we get to the jet, either. There are no vases of flowers strewn around the interior of it or soft blankets or champagne

waiting, no handsome husband eager to make our honeymoon special. It's still impossibly luxurious, of course, but there's a cold feeling to the rows of luxe beige leather seats and wooden paneling now stripped of the way I saw it the first time.

I'm escorted back to the bedroom at the back of the jet by the security, boxed in so I don't even have a chance to try to sit down or deviate from the path. The door to the room is opened, and one of the guards looks impassively at me. "You'll stay in here until we land," he says simply. There's no emotion in his voice, no hint of censure or suggestion of whether he has any feeling about it one way or another, if he disapproves of what I've supposedly done to his boss, or if he even knows. He could just be following Theo's orders, and have no idea about any of this.

I go into the bedroom. There's no point in fighting that I can see; there's no reason to try to say no. The room is comfortable enough, outfitted with a large bed, a selection of books, and a television, but I couldn't focus on anything if I tried. My head is a jumble of thoughts and fears, every muscle in my body twisted tight in preparation to flee the coming danger—as if there were anywhere I could go. As if there's anything I can do except wait to find out what my husband's verdict is.

The seven-and-a-half-hour flight feels impossibly long. I'm torn between fears for the future and memories of the flight in the opposite direction—the champagne toast, Theo pulling me into his lap, fucking me in full view of anyone who might have walked by, taking pleasure in me knowing how much he couldn't wait to be inside of me again. And then—

I shudder, remembering seeing Adrik at the end of the aisle. *Why couldn't you have listened?* I think despondently as I play it over and over again in my head. This wouldn't be happening if he'd stayed in Chicago, as he was supposed to. *Why did you have to do that?*

But I know, deep down, it would have come to a head eventually anyway. We would have come back to Chicago, and Adrik wouldn't have been patient enough to wait.

One way or another, I think we would have gotten caught—and that I was a fool to ever think otherwise.

When the plane lands, I'm once again escorted to a car without seeing Theo. It takes me back to the mansion outside of the city, and I'm marched inside what is technically my own home, straight to Theo's office, where I see him at last.

I've never seen him look so cold and impassive, not even the first night I met him, at dinner with my brother and Lilliana. His face is set in hard, chiseled lines that do nothing to take away from how handsome he is, but make him look every bit the brutal crime lord that I was led to believe he was, not a hint of the gentler, softer man that I came to know anywhere to be seen. He's sitting behind a long, heavy walnut desk, in a leather chair, his hands settled in front of him.

"The last time you were in this office," Theo says, his voice deceptively low and quiet, "you sucked my cock for the first time. In an effort to get me to allow your brother to send his own security with us to Ireland. Don't bother denying it," he adds, as if I were even considering it. "I knew even then that's what you were doing. I just didn't know you were angling to have your lover come along on our honeymoon."

The bitterness that drips from his words tells me there's no point in arguing. That he's not going to be convinced otherwise, no matter what I say, no matter how I plead with him to understand that while I *had* wanted my brother's security along with the trip, I never asked for Adrik to come along, and I never would have.

"And I fucked you right here." He taps the chair, heedless of the guards standing around me, or perhaps simply not caring. "I wanted the fucking scent of you here in my office, so I could remember it—my beautiful, lustful wife, wanting her husband's cock. You were so wet for me that you *dripped* all over my chair, and I fucking loved it."

My heart clenches as I hear the torn emotion under those last words, the only hint of it he's given. A glimpse at the emotion he was beginning to feel for me that's destroyed now.

There is such a fine line between love and hate.

"Now," he says calmly, his hands still folded on the desk, "things are different."

The door opens again, and my stomach clenches with fear as I see my suitcases being rolled in. Theo is still sitting behind the desk, still and silent, his face as impassive as if he's simply watching a series of events be set in motion—which is exactly what I think is happening. He's planned all of this, and I'm merely a piece in the tableau he's about to enact.

I've never, since that first date he set up, felt as if I meant absolutely nothing to Theo. It's a strange feeling to have now, after so much has happened. I don't even feel like I'm looking at the same man I married.

This is someone else. The man I was told I ought to fear.

I feel my eyes welling with panicked tears. I don't want to cry—I want to be strong, to have a spine of steel and stand up to him, but what does it matter? He already knows almost everything. He knows about Adrik. And for all the things I know about *him*, one of the things I don't know is what will touch him more—bravery or tearful pleading.

The man I spent the days with before and after our wedding would have been moved by tears; I feel sure of it. But this man—I have no idea. I don't know if *anything* would matter.

Tears and pleas didn't help when he fucked you over the dresser.

A shudder goes through me at that memory. I still feel ashamed for how I responded, for the way the pain of his hand spanking me melded into a strange, heated kind of pleasure that left me wet for him, *soaked*, that had me coming on his fingers and then on his cock with the kind of wild abandon that I don't seem to be able to control around him, not even when I should.

“Adrik told me everything, you know,” Theo says calmly, his fingers laced together in front of him. “Everything *he* knows, at least, which wasn't extensive. Smart of you, not to spill it all to him. I'm quite sure I got everything he had to tell me out of him—no man can withstand that and not spill his guts to God and man. He had a few choice things to say to me at first, but I curbed that tongue of his quickly enough.”

Tears spill onto my cheeks as I try not to imagine what he could possibly be referring to. *Did he cut out his tongue? Oh god, please—*

“I know what you're thinking, *cailín*. His tongue is still intact, although I did

consider cutting it out, for having dared to taste you—even kiss you, for that matter. But I left him mostly in one piece for now, minus a few little bits here and there. Everything *you* might consider important. Especially his cock—I want him to have that for what comes next.”

“What are you talking about?” I whisper, horrified. “Theo, please—this isn’t you—”

“No, *a stór*. You only *think* it isn’t me, because I never showed you this part of myself. I tried to be a better man for you, to give you only the parts of me that could be gentle and kind. I thought perhaps, with my wife, I could be different. But I see now that gentleness only breeds complacency and makes others think they can take advantage of me with impunity.”

“Theo, no—”

“I’m telling you all of this,” he says abruptly, cutting me off, “because I don’t wish to waste time with your efforts to convince me that I’m wrong, or that I don’t know the truth, or that I don’t understand what’s happening. I know, Marika, that you were not a virgin when you came to our marriage bed, as I was led to believe. I know that I was not your first. I know that you sullied yourself with a guard meant to protect you. I know that this *entire* marriage was a plot between you and your *goddamned* brother, to entrap me and lull me into a sense of security so you could have me murdered.” He gives me a cold, tight smile. “And the worst part about it, Marika, is that it very nearly worked. If not for your foolish bodyguard, I would have fallen for all of it. That is my fault. But I will rectify those mistakes now.”

He motions to the guards again, other ones than the men boxing me in so that there’s nowhere for me to go in the small office, and they unzip my suitcases. For the first time since I’ve walked into the room, Theo stands up, pushing his chair back as he stalks over to them.

“Let’s see what else you’re hiding, *cailín*,” he murmurs. “You were so quick to put your own things away. Not very fitting of a spoiled little Bratva princess, is it? You’ve been waited on hand and foot your whole life; why would you start doing something for yourself now?”

I feel every muscle in my body go tense as he starts to sift through the suitcases. I know what he’ll find—it’s almost impossible for him *not* to find

the pills hidden there, unless he stops with just the first few items in the suitcase. And I don't think that's what he's going to do.

He flings my clothes over the office floor—sweaters, jeans, dresses, down to my underthings, and my face burns as Theo flings my lacy bralettes and panties over the rug, followed by some of the lingerie I'd bought for him and hadn't had a chance to wear. He looks up, seeing the flush on my face, and sneers at me.

“Shy now?” he growls, holding up a see-through blue pair of panties tied in the back with velvet ribbons. “You weren't so shy when you were letting *Adrik* fuck you raw, were you? He made *sure* I knew about that, that you let him come inside you and then told him to buy you a pill the next day. You couldn't even save *that* for me, could you, *fraochún?*”

His accent is thick and ragged, the words coming out in a burst of rage. I've never seen him so angry, and it's terrifying. And both the anger on his face and my fear only intensifies when I see his hand close around something inside the suitcase, and I know he's found the pills.

“You fucking bitch.” Theo stands up, his face contorted in anger as he holds up the packets of birth control pills for me to see. He stalks towards me, his guards moving aside to give him a clear path, and I shrink back, sure that he's going to hit me. The rage on his face is more violent than anything I've ever seen, even on my father's face.

“I know you remember the conversations we had about children,” he hisses, his voice low and deadly. “How I told you that I wished I could give you time. That I didn't want to force children on you. How I bared my feelings to you about the insistence of the Kings that *I* produce an heir. I gave you *ample* chances to confess! And you told me it was all just nerves, that you were happy to *do your fucking duty*, and all the while, it didn't matter if I came inside of you or on your face or your goddamn tits, you wouldn't have gotten pregnant either fucking way!”

He's breathing hard by the time he finishes, and he throws the pills down to the wooden floor, stomping on them with his shoe. Again and again, as the plastic and the pills crush beneath his foot, leaving shards and powder in their wake, until it's all destroyed, and he's looking at me with an expression very

close to hate.

Theo reaches out, his fingers touching my chin in a gesture that's almost gentle, a reminder of how he once touched me, how I'm sure he never will again. "I cared for you, *cailín*," he murmurs. "I wanted to make a life with you. And every word out of your mouth was a lie." He nods to the guards on either side of me. "Bend her over the desk and strip her. And bring the other one in."

I open my mouth to let out a scream, but one of the guards clamps a heavy gloved hand over my mouth, two more manhandling me to the desk as Theo stands there watching. I writhe in their hands, gasping and trying to plead, realizing what's almost certainly going to happen. Theo is going to fuck me here while his guards watch, and he's going to make Adrik watch, too. And after that—

After that, I don't know what happens to either of us.

I'd worn a cranberry cashmere sweater dress on the plane and black velvet knee-high boots, hoping I'd see Theo and it would remind him of our flight to Ireland, soften him enough to let me explain. Instead, one guard kneels to unzip my boots while another reaches for the dress and drags it unceremoniously over my head, throwing it aside as two more hold me in place, making sure I can't fight back. I *should* be trying to fight back, I know that—but I can't move. I can't believe this is happening—and at the same time, I don't know how I ever expected that it would turn out any other way. I conspired with my brother to bring down the most powerful man in Chicago, all the while lying to both him and my brother about my innocence. What other way could it ever have gone besides this—me humiliated and punished for my crime?

The guards, for their part, handle me with a sort of detached terseness that half-surprises me. However, I suppose it shouldn't when considering that I'm half here because of my dalliance with another man. They know what happened to Adrik, almost certainly, and I'm sure that's the reason their hands and eyes don't wander as they strip me bare. They carefully avoid touching my bare skin as much as possible, avoiding my breasts and thighs and pussy as they strip off the black lace bra and panties I'd worn just in case Theo *was* softened enough by my appearance to listen to me, and he got a

chance to see them, carefully looking away.

“You can enjoy the show, men,” Theo says sarcastically as they step back, the two holding me, maneuvering my now-naked body towards the desk. “After all, I’m not the only one who got to see and touch her, so you might as well enjoy the view. But keep your hands to yourself, until you’re on your own time. Make sure he does as well,” he adds, and I hear the sound of someone being dragged into the room.

I twist my head around, and see Adrik—but he’s in terrible shape. His hair is matted against his head, his face swollen, his hands cuffed behind his back. He’s dragged in naked, and bruises and cuts and welts mar so much of his skin that there’s barely any untouched flesh. I can’t see if he has all of his fingers, but when he bares his teeth in a snarl at Theo, I can see that a few of them have been ripped from his mouth.

“Get him up against the wall where she can see him, and he has a clear view of what I do to her,” Theo snaps. “Since you couldn’t keep control of your cock while she was in your care, we’ll see if you can while you watch me punish her and fuck her. See how all my other guards manage to keep their cocks in their pants and their hands off of themselves *and* her—and she’s bare in front of them? They can see her fucking cunt, and they still manage to keep their erections all zipped up. But not you. Pathetic excuse for a fucking man.” He spits at Adrik, who recoils, the furious look on his face clearly indicating that he wants to go for Theo. But there are too many guards around him for him to lunge at the other man.

His gaze rakes over me, bent over the desk, my hands pressed against the smooth wood, my head turned to one side as I look at him. It drags over every inch of my bare skin, down to where I know he can see my pussy between my slightly parted thighs from his vantage point, and to my horror, I see his cock begin to twitch and swell.

My eyes fill with tears, and I hear Theo laugh.

“Poor Marika.” He smooths his hand over the curve of my ass in a familiar motion, and I shudder. “You actually thought he loved you? You’re going to be treated to a first-hand view of how a man like this behaves. A man who would put his own pride in front of your well-being, and insist on coming to

Ireland to watch you, because he's so fucking jealous he can't stand back while you do your precious duty to your brother. He's going to watch me punish you, and then he's going to watch me fuck you. I guarantee every one of my guards has a betting pool going right now on whether or not he comes all over himself while I do it."

"He wouldn't," I whisper, and I desperately want to believe it, that Adrik—even for all his foolhardy, stupid decisions and bullheadedness when it comes to me—would be that aroused by watching what Theo is about to do to me. But I see Theo walk around the desk, opening a drawer and pulling out a leather belt thicker than the one he's wearing, and folding it over. When I look at Adrik again, he's half-hard, his cock stiffening as Theo circles around behind me again.

"Better than porn, eh lad?" Theo asks sarcastically to Adrik, as if they're buddies, and he isn't responsible for torturing Adrik not a day ago and then dragging him in here to be humiliated. Adrik lets out a snarl, but as Theo rears his arm back and brings the leather down on my ass, leaving a burning mark with a cracking sound that mingles with my cry of pain, I see Adrik's cock lurch to full hardness, slapping against his firm abs as he lets out a low groan of arousal.

"I told you." There's a smug satisfaction in Theo's voice as he brings the belt down again, and then twice more. "Let's see how long he lasts. He'll be dripping in seconds." He brings the belt down again and then again, my cries filling the room, and I have no doubt that every guard in the room has an erection by this point. I can feel their hungry eyes on my bare skin, my breasts pressed against the wood, my hands scrabbling at it for something to cling to as I yelp in pain, my tears dripping down my face, my legs spread enough for every man in the room to see my pussy as Theo reddens my ass with the belt.

I would expect the other guards to be hard. I would expect them to watch and be aroused by it. But not Adrik.

It feels like a betrayal, and that tears at my heart in more ways than one, because I know Theo feels equally betrayed.

I should have told Nikolai no from the start.

I bow my head as the belt comes down twice more, stinging my ass. I let out a whimpering plea as I feel the pain start to meld into that warm pleasure, the heat spreading down my thighs and into my pussy, my folds swelling with arousal, my clit starting to throb. I hear Theo's laugh and the sound of him shifting as he steps aside.

"You just can't help it, can you, *fraochún?*" he says, chuckling again. "Look at that pussy, so wet from your spanking. I almost want to tell you you're a good girl, taking it so well, getting so wet for my cock." Out of the corner of my eye, I see him adjust himself, and I know he's just as hard as every other man in the room.

He pats my reddened ass, his hand slipping down to repeat the same motion on my pussy, the wet sound filling the room as my face burns with humiliation. "You get a few minutes break, *cailín,*" he says flatly. "Don't move your hands."

My clit is throbbing, my ass and my face equally on fire. I steal a glance at Adrik and see that he's looking at me and Theo with an equal mixture of rage, hatred, and lust, his cock veined and throbbing with arousal, pre-cum dripping from the tip now. Every guard in my line of sight has a thick ridge in his pants, straining against the fly, but not a single one of them has moved to touch themselves—not even the man who I see now is red-faced, a dark stain on the green front of his trousers where he lost control while Theo whipped me. He looks young, barely twenty, and I can imagine he's never seen anything like this before. I almost feel sorry for him.

Theo circles around the desk, picking up the phone. "I just need to make a call. You'll wait on me, won't you, dear?" His voice is thick with sarcasm and anger, and he taps a button, smiling wickedly at me as he does so. "I've never gotten to be so creative with a punishment before," he adds as he waits for the call to pick up. "I really almost think I should be thanking you."

I hear a faint voice on the other end of the line, one I think I recognize. *No, please,* I think, closing my eyes in shame. *Don't let this be what I think it is.*

But it absolutely is that.

"Nikolai?" Theo's voice is deceptively pleasant, almost conversational. "Theo McNeil here. Yes, I'm back from Ireland early. Why? Well, you see, I

discovered that you sold your sister to me for the express purpose of finding information that would let you murder me and take my empire. What? No, don't bother denying it. I also discovered she wasn't a virgin when she married me. Did you know that?" He pauses, looking at me. "I'm sorry, Marika," he adds, covering the phone with his hand for a moment. "I'll get back to you just as soon as I finish this call."

I glare at him, my own anger starting to take over, just as Theo puts the phone on speaker.

"What the fuck are you talking about, McNeil?" My brother's voice roars over the phone, and Theo chuckles.

"Well, it seems she fucked one of her bodyguards. Man by the name of Adrik. I might not have found out about it, except he came along with that security detail you insisted on sending. My man Finn caught them kissing in an alleyway. Seems he just couldn't let her out of his sight—or his hands, apparently. Now he's naked in my office, beaten within an inch of his life, while we take bets on whether or not he can keep control of his cock long enough to not come all over himself while he watches me fuck your sister in front of my guards. Since she likes other men's eyes on her. I'm sure you understand—"

"What the *fucking fuck*?" My brother's voice is a furious snarl. "I don't know what kind of sick joke—"

"It's not a joke. Tell him the truth, Marika." Theo's gaze tells me, without a doubt, that I should not consider trying to lie. And faced with my current situation, I can't see how it would do anything other than make things worse.

"Marika?" There's a thread of desperation in Nikolai's voice. "Marika, are you really there? He's lying, tell me where to find you—"

"He's not." I can hear the hopelessness in my voice. "I'm sorry, Nikolai. I didn't want you to be disappointed in me—"

"What are you saying? Marika—"

"I slept with Adrik." I close my eyes, feeling the tears dripping out of them onto the table. My entire body is a disastrous mess of pain and arousal, anger and sadness and fear, and I don't know what's going to happen any longer.

“While you were on your honeymoon.” It almost feels like a relief to confess it after all this time. “I was lonely, and I wanted to reclaim something for myself, after what Narokov did. I wanted to make a choice about my own body. That was the way I justified it. Maybe I was right, maybe I wasn’t—I don’t know any longer. But I said yes to Adrik, when he let me know he wanted me. And it didn’t stop until Theo and I were engaged.”

“Marika—” There’s a thickness in Nikolai’s voice—disappointment or grief or both, I don’t know. “I would never have gone through with it—”

“I know.” I swallow hard. “And then what would have happened to our family?”

“I don’t know—but you should have told me the truth!”

“Maybe. It doesn’t matter now.” I take a slow breath, feeling the pounding of my blood through my veins. “Theo will do what he wants now. Just—”

Theo cuts in. “See? She admitted it. She fucked another man, lied to you, and then let you lie to me. You and I were deceived, Nikolai, and I would almost feel sorry for you, if not for all of this having started with your fucking plots. Just like your father, wanting more than you should have, and sacrificing your family on the altar of it.”

“She said it stopped when the contract was signed—”

“I don’t believe that, *bráthair*,” Theo snarls. “But even if that’s true, it changes nothing. You are a liar, and so is she. I will have the head of the man who cuckolded me, once I make him suffer here and now. And when I am finished with him, I will decide what happens to *my wife* next for her lies and disobedience. As for you and your lying, conniving family, I haven’t yet made up my mind. So we will begin with this.” He sets the phone down, reaching for the belt again. “You can listen to me as I finish punishing Marika. And then, since you sold your sister to me like a whore, you can listen to me fuck her like one.”

“Theo, *no*—” I try to beg, but he’s already behind me, the leather coming down hard on my ass as I let out a cry of pain. When he strikes me again, my clit throbs, and the cool air on my swollen pussy lets me know Theo has angled himself so the whole room can see how aroused I am by this.

“Spread your legs wide, like the good little slut you are,” he growls, nudging at my ankles. “Let them all see how wet you’re getting for my cock. Maybe they should bet on whether *you* come before my cock is in you, hm, lass?” He brings the belt down again, and I see a slow trickle of Adrik’s pre-cum drip onto the wood from his cock, the muscles in his abdomen tensing as his cock bobs and twitches in front of him, his balls tightening against his body. Next to him, as Theo brings down the belt again and I let out a sobbing moan of pain, another of the guards loses control. I see his cock lurch inside his fatigues, that stain of cum spreading as his hips shudder and his jaw clenches, his cock spurting inside his pants as he watches Theo whip me with the belt, and my pussy drip arousal from it.

“Two of them already. How does that make you feel, *cailín*?” Theo growls. “Since you love arousing other men, the guards who are meant to keep you safe, you little fucking cocktease. How do you feel, seeing these men lose control of their cocks watching you be punished? How many do you think will come watching me fuck you?”

I shake my head mutely, tears still dripping down my cheeks. The guard who just came is beet-red, but he can’t take his eyes off of me, even now. I’ve never been more humiliated in my life, and I channel it all at Adrik, glaring at him. “Fuck you,” I mouth, looking at his cock, letting him see just how furious I am that *he* is aroused by this, that there’s a mess on the floor in front of him of his pre-cum, his cock throbbing as he watches Theo bring the belt down lower, across my thighs.

The worst part of it all is that Theo is right. I *am* aroused by this, horribly, terribly aroused by something I would never have thought would turn me on. I’m bare in front of strangers, being exposed and punished, on the verge of being fucked in front of all of these eyes, watching these men be aroused by my nakedness, my punishment, watching them lose control of their lust. All of it—the pain, the punishment, the spanking, the exposure—is making me feel so aroused that if Theo so much as grazed my clit, I think I would come. My muscles are tight and trembling, my clit swollen and throbbing, and it’s all I can do not to moan with every strike of the belt, my own orgasm fast approaching as I feel the utter humiliation of so many strangers seeing me like this.

When Theo fucks me, I’ll come. I won’t be able to stop it. Nikolai will hear

me, and that depravity just makes me feel all the more humiliated, the utter loss of control of my own arousal driving me insane. I have a sudden vision of every man in the room coming as Theo whips me, as he fucks me, and I let out an involuntary moan as Theo brings the belt down over my ass again, and I feel my arousal sliding down my inner thighs.

“God, you’re fucking *soaked*.” He adjusts himself again, and looks at Adrik, whose face is set in a murderous glare that’s half hatred, half lust. His cock is red and throbbing, the veins standing out almost painfully, and I have no idea how he’s hanging onto his self-control, but I can’t imagine it will last.

“I think this little *fraochún* needs her pussy punished, too,” Theo drawls in a low, growling voice. “Don’t you, Marika? You let another man’s cock inside of you. You’ll remember not to do that, won’t you, once I whip your pussy in front of all these men to see?”

“Theo, *please*—” I let out another sobbing plea, but he ignores me. I can hear my brother cursing and raving on the other end of the phone, as he has been, but Theo ignores that, too. “Theo, *no*—”

But it’s too late. I hear the swing of the belt, feel it crack upwards between my thighs, and the instant the leather connects with my pussy with an embarrassingly wet slap, the strike snapping against my clit, I’m flooded with such absolute pain and a burst of white-hot pleasure that my knees buckle, and I let out a scream at the same time that I come hard, the gush of my arousal spreading down my thighs and dampening the floor.

I’m in tears, crying with shame and pleasure and pain. I hear Theo laughing behind me as he strikes my pussy again, twice more, the pain bursting through the shattering orgasm. Then he steps behind me, and I feel something rough shoved inside of me.

“Come on this fucking belt,” he snarls, “and thank me for your punishment.”

I realize it’s the leather, the folded-up belt pushed inside of me, thick and unyielding, and I see Adrik’s expression of horror as his cock jerks at the same moment that I come again, clenching around the belt and moaning helplessly, the guard next to him groaning as he loses control too, coming in his fatigues as Adrik snarls out a roaring curse at Theo and his cum starts to spurt over the wooden floor without ever having been touched, his cock

jerking with his climax as he watches Theo finish my punishment and seal my humiliation.

“Thank me,” Theo growls, thrusting the belt inside of me as I come around it. “Or I’ll whip your pussy until it’s as swollen and bruised as your ass, and then fuck you anyway.”

I know he’ll do it. I *know* he will, and as much as I want to tell him to fuck himself, I know I’m only buying myself more pain.

I’m shaking all over, moaning as I come, the pleasure radiating through me, and my face is red, covered in tears. “Thank you,” I whisper. “Thank you for punishing me.”

I hear Theo groan, his zipper slides down, and I let out a helpless moan.

“You guards that couldn’t keep control of your dicks, get out,” Theo snaps. “You won’t be punished, I fucking get it, but the ones who could, you’re getting a fucking bonus. Maybe a promotion. You stay, and we’ll see who makes it to the fucking end. Keep a hold on him,” he adds, motioning to the guards switching out next to Adrik. “He doesn’t get to leave yet. Not until he watches this.”

I feel the swollen, blunt tip of Theo’s cock brushing against my entrance, and my head hangs down. I vaguely hear my brother demanding Theo let me go, shouting that he’s sending men to Theo’s estate, but what I hear over everything is Theo’s low, sensual voice murmuring in a mockery of all the nights we spent together, as he rubs his cockhead against my drenched entrance: “Do you want my cock, *cailín deas*?”

My eyes well with tears all over again, for everything I thought we had, and everything we’ve lost. There’s no point in lying.

“Yes,” I whisper and close my eyes.

I feel the press of it, the snap of his hips, and then his cock slams into me.

It feels like something breaks inside of me. Not literally, but emotionally. I’m afraid and heartbroken and horribly aroused all at once, my body responding to Theo the way it always does, and my mind mired in confusion. I feel lost, and each thrust of Theo’s huge cock inside of me, stretching me and filling

me in the way he always does, only makes me feel worse. I can feel my body tightening, rippling along his length, pulling him deeper. I *want* him. I've wanted him from the start, even before the emotions that made this all so much more horribly convoluted.

I've lost track of whether or not more guards have come, watching Theo fuck me. If they have, I think it's ones out of my line of sight. I turn my head to look at Adrik, hoping to see shame or humiliation on his face as well, hoping to see his cock deflated after leaving his mess of cum on the floor, but instead, I see him glaring furiously at Theo, his gaze fixed with that same mixture of lust and hatred as he watches Theo fucking me ruthlessly, his own cock stiff and throbbing again.

Theo laughs, his fingers digging into my sore, reddened ass as he fucks me. "You like watching me fuck the girl whose virginity you stole from me?" he jeers. He slides out of me so that only his cock tip is resting against my entrance, and I know what he must look like, thick and hard, drenched with my arousal. "You like seeing how she moans for a bigger cock than yours? She fucking *screams* for me when I fuck her. She said she's never been so fucking full. And I understand now, seeing your pathetic dick."

He slams into me again, and Adrik lets out a stream of curses, lurching against the guards holding him as his erection sways in front of him. His cock is far from pathetic, but Theo *is* bigger, longer and thicker both, and it feels better than Adrik did. It always has, but that's more because of *how* Theo fucked me, how he took his time arousing me, how he drew it out and made sure I was dying for him to be inside of me before he ever took that first thrust.

I can't reconcile the gentle man on our wedding night, the man who licked chocolate off of every inch of me, with the man pounding into me now as his guards watch, as *Adrik* watches, his tortured body straining against the men holding him as he watches me with a mixture of hunger and fury in his gaze.

I have no idea if Nikolai is still on the phone or not. I think he's hung up, and I hope so, because I'm on the verge of coming again. I can feel it tightening through me, and I know Theo can too, because I hear his dark chuckle from behind me.

“That’s it, my pretty little slut. Come on my big cock. Let your lover see how hard I make you come. He’s close, too; I can see it. He’s fucking *dripping* cum, watching me fuck you. Doesn’t that make you angry, seeing how much he likes watching you get fucked?”

Theo’s hand wraps in my hair, dragging my head back, twisting it so I’m forced to watch Adrik as Theo pounds into me, his hips slamming against my bruised flesh with every thrust. “If I ordered his hands uncuffed right now, he’d jerk off. He’d jerk his fucking cock with my men holding him, because he’s so desperate to come, watching you get fucked.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” I whisper, my words barely heard over the fresh string of curses Adrik lets out, but I’m no longer sure that’s true. His cock is every bit as rigid and veined as before, on the verge of orgasm again, and as Theo slams his hips into me once more, grinding his cock deeper so that it rubs against that sensitive spot, a scream of pleasure is dragged out of me as I start to come.

“That’s it, *cailín*. My good little whore. Come on my fucking cock.” Theo thrusts shallowly, drawing out the pleasure until there are tears dripping down my face and moans helplessly falling from my lips. “Uncuff his right hand,” he orders the guards. “Hold onto him, and one of you put a gun against his side, on the left.” He thrusts with each statement, more leisurely now, drawing out the last shuddering aftershocks of my orgasm. “Let’s see if my little slut of a wife is right. Let’s see if her lover can manage not to jerk himself off watching.”

Adrik snarls, elbowing one of the guards as he moves to uncuff Adrik’s right wrist, but there’s a click as the other guard pushes a gun into Adrik’s side, holding it there. “I’ll shoot you if you try anything,” the guard growls. “And I know just where to aim so you’re in terrible pain, but you won’t die.”

“Theo, please stop this,” I whisper, my voice trembling, and Theo thrusts into me again, holding himself there for a long minute.

“Stop what?” he asks in a deceptively low tone. “Stop fucking you? I don’t think you want that. I think I can make you come at least twice more before I do, and you fucking *love* how hard I make you come. Stop tormenting your lover? I can’t do that. He’s lucky he still has his cock, after he put it in you.

But I'm curious to see what he'll do with it."

I stare at Adrik, pleading with him. His right hand is in a fist, his face contorted in furious lust, his cock throbbing as he stares at me, my pale, naked body stretched across the desk, my reddened ass upturned, my thighs glistening with my arousal as he sees my soft flushed pussy stretched again and again by Theo's massive cock.

It's turning him on. I can see it. And I hate him for it. Almost as much as I hate Theo for doing this to me.

Theo slips a hand beneath me, and I let out another muffled sob as I feel his fingers find my clit. "She's so fucking tight," he murmurs, his cock driving into me again. "Like hot wet velvet around my cock. It feels so fucking good when she comes around me—so good I can't help but keep making her come, even though I really shouldn't let her. She's been such a bad girl. But it's for my pleasure too, so—"

He pinches my clit in that way that he knows drives me over the edge faster than anything else, rolling it between his fingers in time with every stroke of his cock. "You're never going to fuck her again," he snarls. "This is the closest you'll get. So you might as well jerk your fucking dick while you watch, because it's all you'll ever have of her. I know you want to fucking come, watching this."

I can see Adrik getting turned on by Theo's rant, see the way his cock throbs, the fury in his face at the knowledge that being taunted by this powerful man is making it even harder to resist. And somehow, it's arousing *me*, too, hearing Theo taunt Adrik after everything he put me through, the fear and frustration and refusing to listen to me, grabbing me in the alleyway, seeing Adrik put in his place is making *me* slide over the edge. I let out a sobbing, helpless moan of lust and confusion as Theo rolls my clit between his fingers and slams his cock into me. I feel myself fall over the edge again, moaning my pleasure as I come hard to the sound of Theo's laughter and Adrik's string of furious curses.

At that moment, as I buck against Theo, my knees weakening and my fingers scrambling against the wood, my mouth hanging open on a desperate moan of pleasure, I see Adrik let out another snarl, cursing Theo as his hand

reaches up to grip his cock, stroking it madly as he watches Theo fuck me harder still, slamming into me with the kind of purpose that lets me know Theo is on the brink of coming too, and I close my eyes against the tears as I hear the slap of Adrik's hand against his flesh as he furiously strokes his cock to the sight of my husband violently fucking me.

Theo's hand tightens in my hair, turning my head fully toward Adrik. "Watch him," he growls. "Watch what your lover does. You think he cares about you? You think he gave a shit about anything other than his own pleasure? He's going to fucking jerk off until he comes, watching me do this to you, and he's going to fucking enjoy it. He can't control himself, and that's why he ended up on that fucking plane in the first place. That's the kind of man you want, *cailín*?"

I swallow hard, shaking my head. It's not, and Theo knows it. But I didn't realize that about Adrik, in the beginning. If I'd been able to have a more normal life, a normal relationship, I would have. I would have learned those things in time, but instead, it's all ended up like this, because of this world I was born into. I learned too late that the Theo I knew is the man I wanted.

"No," I whisper. "But I don't want the man you are right now, either."

For the slightest moment, I feel him slow behind me, his thrusts stuttering as if something in my words struck a chord within him. And then he's slamming into me again, hard and rhythmic, and I see Adrik furiously stroking himself, his jaw set and muttered curses spilling from his lips, the gun shoved in his side as his muscles tense, and his cock starts to spurt at the same moment I feel Theo slam hard inside of me, his cock rigid and throbbing, and I feel the hot rush of his cum filling me.

The wave of pleasure that hits me is unexpected and stunning, the orgasm unraveling through me at the feeling of Theo's huge cock filling me up, the heat of his cum, the pain and pleasure, and the sight of Adrik spilling his cum onto the floor for the second time, his muscled body rigid as he hunches forward, his hand stuttering along his swollen length and his gaze fixed hatefully on the scene in front of him.

Theo slips out of me suddenly, leaving me hollow and still clenching around him. I know every man in the room can see my swollen pussy, dripping cum,

tightening around nothing as Theo stands behind me. I don't realize what he's doing until I hear his low voice fill the room again.

"Turn around and get on your knees, Marika."

It's an effort for me to move. My body feels stiff and painful and, at the same time, boneless with pleasure, a strange mix of sensations, my skin sticking damply to the wood as I peel myself away. I collapse more than kneel, landing ungracefully in front of Theo, looking up at him exhaustedly. It takes me a moment to see his hand still squeezing along his cock to realize that he's spilled the last of his cum on the floor in front of me.

"Lick it up," he orders. "And then clean my cock while they watch, like the good little slut you are."

I stare up at him, horrified. "Theo—"

"Don't you dare say no." His voice is full of something else now, some ragged emotion, and I can see something in his face that I don't understand, and that terrifies me all the more for it. "Lick it up, Marika, and then clean me. And if you don't, I'll make you lick up your lover's, and then I'll let every man in here take care of the iron hard-on I know they all have, and you can clean up every puddle of cum they leave behind with your tongue, until you've mopped this floor shiny." His face is so hard and angry that I know, with a gut-wrenching certainty, that he'll do it. "Or you can clean up for me like a good little girl, and we'll be done here."

Tears are dripping down my face again as I bend my head to the puddle on the floor, licking up his cum. I can feel the eyes of every man in the room on me, and I know they're all thinking something different. Some are probably disgusted, and some are aroused. Some probably wish they were in Theo's place. Some probably wish I'd stuck to my guns and refused, so they could jerk off to the sight of my naked, kneeling form and then watch me lick up their cum.

I've had Theo's cum in my mouth before, and enjoyed it. This is different. I see Adrik staring at me, disgust wreathing his features as he watches me, and I feel actual hate for him—*real* hate, because this is his fault as much as mine. If he hadn't forced his way to Ireland, I might have gotten out of this. Things might have gone very differently. At the least, I wouldn't be right

here, at this exact moment.

If he gets hard again watching this, I might kill him myself.

Thankfully, two rounds seem to be all Adrik has in him. *Theo could go more*, I think without realizing it, my face flaming as I realize that, for some reason, I'm still fucking defending this man who has done all of this to me today. I see Adrik standing there, his right hand cuffed again, his cock deflated against his thigh as I clean up Theo's mess on the floor, and when I look up at Theo, I see he's still half-hard as he watches me.

"Now clean my cock," he growls, his hand reaching for my hair and fisting in it as he drags my mouth to his cockhead. I hear a low groan from the wall, see another guard jerk and shudder as he loses control of his erection, and I run my tongue over Theo's cock, cleaning up our mingled arousal and his cum just the way I did that afternoon in the foyer of the manor—except that time, I did it eagerly.

He hardens against my lips as I swirl my tongue over his cockhead, lapping up the remainder of his cum, and I feel his hand tighten in my hair as he shoves his cock into my mouth. It's not slow or gentle; he gags me with it, and I hear another choked groan that tells me another guard has lost the fight against the extended sex show they've all been forced to view. I can't really blame them. I don't think any of them were expecting this.

Theo fucks my face the way he fucked my pussy, in hard strokes that have me gagging, his fist hard against the back of my skull as he groans, his face taut with lust as he watches my lips stretch in the effort to take all of his huge cock. I see Adrik's cock starting to rise again, too, out of the corner of my eye, but he never manages more than half an erection as Theo drives his cock over my tongue and down my throat again and again, his pleased moans making my pussy drip all over again.

"Rub your clit," he orders hoarsely. "Come on your knees for me, Marika, but not until I tell you that you can."

It's the final part of my punishment, and I know it. My hand slips helplessly between my thighs, fingers slipping over my slick, swollen clit as my hips arch up into my hand, wanting more of the shameful pleasure as my husband fucks my face in front of our audience, and as he stiffens on my tongue, I

know what's going to happen before it does.

He jerks free of my mouth, his hand stroking his cock hard as it starts to spurt, and I feel the hot splash of it on my face, my mouth, my tits, my thighs. I feel my own clit throb as I moan, my mouth opening on a cry of pleasure as another climax rocks through me, tasting Theo's cum as he aims a spurt into my mouth, and then he grabs my hair and arches me backward, aiming so that some of his cum lands on my rapidly stroking fingers, making me smear his cum over my clit, the heat of it sparking another rush of pleasure.

Every inch of me is drenched in his cum. I'm painted in it, marked, his possession in front of all of these men, in front of Adrik. Tears run down my face not only from the shame of it, but from the fact that I'm still shuddering with ripples of pleasure, that as Theo squeezes out the last drops of his cum on my breasts, groaning with the sight of the pearlescent drops clinging to my nipples, all of this is turning me on beyond belief.

I'm exactly the slut that he claims I am. I got off on being spanked and fucked and humiliated in front of strangers, and if he did it again, I'd come then, too. I close my eyes, hearing Theo's orders vaguely as he tucks his cock away, hearing the heavy stamp of boots. It's not until I hear the slam of a door and the turn of a lock that I open my eyes and realize I've been left alone in here, covered in my husband's cum and surrounded by my ruined things, my former lover's cum still puddled on the floor across from me.

The room spins around me, all the fear and exhaustion and the endless orgasms catching up, and I feel myself tilt in the instant before I collapse onto the floor, passed out cold.

Theo



I emerge from the office to what seems like the beginning of a riot.

Nikolai Vasilev is standing downstairs, heaving, a bruise blossoming on his cheek, and a standoff happening all around him between his guards and mine, three of my men laid out on the wooden floor. He looks up and sees me at the top of the stairs.

“I’ll kill you, Theo McNeil.” His voice is ragged, a roar that comes out only half-shouted, and I hear the click of guns as my men aim at him.

“No, you won’t,” I say calmly. “In fact, I should have my men shoot you right now, for what I know you plotted. But instead, we’ll go into my living room, with plenty of security on either side, and we’ll have a conversation. And then when we’re finished, we’ll talk about who lives and dies.”

Nikolai looks for a moment as if he’s on the verge of attacking me anyway. He looks around at the number of guns aimed at him, as if weighing his options, and his shoulders slump slightly. He brought a force, but not enough to contend with mine.

Not when a chunk of his security is under my guard, too, on the verge of losing their lives if Nikolai handles this poorly. And I think he knows that. His sister’s life hangs in the balance, too. I can see him weighing all of that, and then he nods, his face set in angry, harsh lines.

“A conversation,” he says finally. “But it will end with blood, McNeil. How

you handle this will determine whose.”

“A bold statement from a man whose thinning force is partially under my control and whose sister’s life is in my hands.” I motion for him to go first, to the door across the hall, and he reluctantly does.

When we’re inside, I walk to the bar at the far end. I badly need a drink after the scene that just played out in the office.

It tore my heart out to punish Marika, to break her in that way, at the same time that it satisfied every vengeful fantasy I’ve had since the moment I realized Finn hadn’t been mistaken in the slightest about what he’d seen. I’ve never felt so torn in two in my life, so horrified with myself and full of righteous anger all at the same time. I felt vindicated with every stroke of the leather, every thrust inside her body, and sick with what I was doing to her all at once.

I want Adrik dead, still, and he will be. He’s under specific guard, and I have a slow death planned for him, when I’m finished here. The rest of the security Nikolai sent, and Marika’s fate, still hang in the balance.

I don’t know what to do about her. I haven’t from the moment I discovered her lies. I don’t know how I can continue a marriage like this. With the lie of the contraception uncovered, I could still have children with her, regardless of how she feels about it. She could still fulfill her duty as my wife, bridging the peace between our families and giving me the heir I need. I know after today, I can still get it up—she doesn’t sicken me so much after her lies that I can’t fuck her.

But I feel like it would destroy my soul, bit by bit, to force her. Not even that the sex would be forced—Marika can’t hide her desire for me no matter what the circumstance is; she proved that today. But there’s a difference between her body being willing and her heart being in it, and I know what it’s like when Marika cares for me. When she *truly* wants me. I’ll destroy her by what I would do to her, and it would tear me apart, too—because I loved her.

A part of me still does, even knowing how she lied to me. Even knowing she was plotting my death.

Or at least, she was complicit in it. And I intend to find out how much.

“I want your head on a fucking platter,” Nikolai snarls as I turn away from the bar with a glass of whiskey, before I can offer him a drink or a seat. “You’ve done enough to the Vasilev women. First my mother, and now what you inflicted on my sister today—”

“Marika put herself in that—wait, what?” I blink at him, taken aback. “Your *mother*?”

I start to laugh. I can’t help it. It’s beyond belief, what Nikolai has done, and I don’t know how Marika would ever forgive him for it, if he dragged her into this based on that nonsense. “You’re telling me that you think those fucking rumors are true, and you *still* had your sister marry me?”

Nikolai’s face is pale with rage, his cheekbones highlighted red as he glares at me. “My father showed me the diary entries,” he says contemptuously. “He told me what happened, what the two of you did together. My mother was killed for your affair. Now I’m going to ensure that you don’t murder my sister for making the same mistake—”

“You were lied to,” I tell him flatly. “Your father manipulated you, just as you’ve clearly manipulated Marika. You Vasilev men are all the same, and I’m beginning to regret marrying her, and not simply slaughtering you and preventing any more of your filthy bloodline from fouling this earth.”

Nikolai takes a shallow breath. “You’re a lying shit, McNeil, and I—”

“Your father tried to set me up. He *sent* your mother to seduce me, to set up exactly the same sort of bullshit that you fell into, setting up Marika.” I laugh again, unable to help it. “It’s like a fucking curse! You fucking Vasilev men, using your women to try to undermine me, and it nearly fucking *worked* this time, because at least you were fucking smart enough not to send a goddamn married woman to seduce me.”

“Theo McNeil,” Nikolai speaks very slowly, his eyes narrowed. “I’m going to need you to say plainly what the fuck you’re talking about, or else I will risk your men shooting me, and tell mine to open fire in this room, so at least I know your fucking corpse has hit this floor by the time mine does.”

There’s steel in his voice that tells me he’s not joking, but I don’t let him see whether or not it affects me. I take a slow sip of my whiskey, making him

wait for a moment before I set it aside and lean back against the bar as if there aren't twenty guns ready to aim in my direction. "Your father wanted my territory, my empire. He wanted me dead, same as you seem to. Your mother was a beautiful woman." I let out a slow breath. "Close to my age back then, too. I can't imagine your father was all that generous with her, in —" I wave a hand. "Never mind. I'm sure you don't want to think about your parents fucking. But she wasn't as averse to the plan as you might think. So while I'm of the mind your father likely fabricated a lot of those 'diary entries' you saw, at least any that detailed us actually going to bed together, I'm also of the mind that some of them might have been real. Your mother wanted to be in my bed. But I told her no, even though at first I wasn't aware of the plan being hatched."

"Why the fuck would I believe you?" Nikolai asks evenly, that same steel still in his voice, and I shrug.

"Marika can tell you how I feel about marriage. I know most crime bosses in our world don't think it means anything. They marry for alliances or lust or power and then screw around on their wives at will, while those wives sit dutifully at home having their children and taking cock from husbands who don't care about pleasing them with it. But I didn't want to be that sort of husband. That's why I held off on marriage for so long. I wanted a wife I liked, at the very least, a wife whose company made me not want to stray. I intended to be faithful. So I waited to marry until I was sure my eyes wouldn't wander." My jaw hardens as I glare at Nikolai. "So you can imagine how it felt to find out that my bride had lied to me from the very first night."

"We're not talking about Marika right now," Nikolai growls. "We'll get to that."

"Oh yes." I smile tightly at him, taking another sip of my whiskey. "We were talking about me fucking your mother."

Nikolai's gaze burns with fury, and his hand moves slightly. His men start to shift, and I chuckle.

"Are you really going to die over a jest?" I finish my whiskey and set the glass aside. "I turned your mother down, before I knew the plot your father had concocted. I told her she was very beautiful and that it was difficult for

me to tell her no. That I did want her, and she deserved better than the hand she had been dealt. But I also believed that marriage was not something to be tampered with. I felt for her and the marriage she had been forced into. I wouldn't judge her, for finding her way into another man's bed. But it wouldn't be mine." I shrug, turning to pour another slug of whiskey. "Of course, your father had a plan, and she wouldn't give up. She came to me with bruises on her face, playing on my sympathy. I have no doubt they were real. I also could tell that her mental state was—not the most stable. She begged me to give her something she could enjoy. She tried every way she could to seduce me. She practically pleaded with me to fuck her, trying to pass it off as desire, until I finally saw the panic underneath the seduction, and managed to get her to tell me what was really going on." My mouth tightens, and I glare at Nikolai, returning his angry stare. "Your father made me complicit in her death against my will. I knew that getting her to tell me the truth would endanger her, and I justified it by telling myself that she would have been punished anyway, for failing to succeed at the trap your father baited with her. But I convinced her to tell me anyway, and then I sent her back to your father."

"What was the *trap*?" Nikolai asks, his voice dripping with disbelieving sarcasm.

"Your father planned to have her seduce me, and then when she came back, frame me for rape. There were already cracks in his Bratva, long before your late father-in-law took advantage of them. He knew forcing his men to try to attack my territory could fail, and if it did, they would revolt against him for the bloodshed it would cause. But if he could pin his wife's rape on me, they would attack me gladly, and count every man lost a martyr, until they either ran out of men or took me down. Of course, when she failed, and he discovered that she had ratted, he murdered her. I hear he beat the truth out of her, first. A little bird told me."

Even as I say the words, trying to sound careless, I can't keep the emotion out of my voice. Irina Vasilev hadn't deserved the fate that had been thrust on her. Marika and Nikolai hadn't deserved to grow up without a mother. I hated Nikolai's father for forcing my complicity in it. And now I hate Nikolai for the same—for putting Marika in this position that I'm beginning to see has done something very similar.

I punished Marika for something that, while her lies were very real, she was also manipulated into by some extent. She's not as blameless as her mother was—but neither is she entirely at fault. And if I'd known—

If you'd asked more questions first, you would have. But you let your temper get away with you instead.

I can't remember the last time I acted in such reckless anger. I don't regret what I did to Adrik, and I haven't changed my mind about what I intend to inflict on him. I, at the very least, can't let him live, not after this. I'd make an enemy that I'd be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life. But I feel a sick pang of guilt over what I did to Marika.

For Adrik, I would have punished her. A spanking, a good fucking, to remind her who she belongs to—but I should have asked her *why* first, I realize, with deepening guilt. For all that I'm furious with her for lying to me, it's not the loss of her virginity that I mind so much. I might have understood, if she'd told me the truth from the beginning. It's the lies about everything—and I see now that all those lies stemmed from her brother's plots that he involved her in. How could she have told me the truth, and risked my turning her away, when Nikolai had depended on her playing her role?

She wouldn't have expected me to start to care for her. She wouldn't for a moment have thought I'd be anything but cold and distant. I realize, as I stand there facing off with Nikolai, that I caught Marika off guard. I gave her something she never expected—and she didn't know what to do with it except try to stay the course.

It doesn't make it easier knowing that she lied to me. It doesn't heal over the wounds that created—and it doesn't fix what I did to her, under the assumptions I'd had. But it does make me wish I'd done things differently.

It makes me wish that, somehow, we both could have.

“I was happy with Marika,” I say quietly, looking at Nikolai. “Before I knew all of this—before I knew that she lied to me on our wedding night, before I knew that she was lying about the contraceptives, before I knew that the two of you—but mostly *you, you lying bastard*—were plotting my death, I was *happy* with her. I was falling in love with her, and I treated her in ways that no other man you might have married her off to would have. I wanted to

make a life with her that was more than just duty.” The words come out between gritted teeth, each hard thump of my heart in my chest underlying the pain I feel—the regret for how I’ve handled the situation, now that I know the truth.

Nikolai is staring at me, his jaw clenched. “I don’t know whether to believe you or not,” he says in a low voice. “If it’s true, then I’ve set Marika on this path over a lie that our father concocted. I would have been less inclined to move on your empire if—”

“If you knew that your father was a lying *píosa cac*?” Each word comes out harsh, punctuated. “For a man who has inherited so much, you aren’t very bright, are you, Vasilev?”

Nikolai’s glare could melt ice—or at least, ice not as thick as the layer surrounding my heart. All of this is a convoluted mess beyond anything I could have imagined, and the fault rests with him more than anyone else.

“If I accept that you’re telling the truth, what then?” Nikolai lets out a slow breath. “What you did to my sister today—”

“Was no more or less than other men in my position would have done, and you know it. You want more proof that your father lied?” I shrug. “I can show you a letter I meant to give your mother, until I found out she’d been murdered before I could. It’s dated, although I suppose you can believe I made it up and wrote it for just such a reason—even though I didn’t know you believed any of that was true until just now. You’ll have to give me a moment to get it, though. It’s upstairs—”

Ignoring the men still ready to point their weapons at me, I stride towards the door, shoving it open. It slams into something hard, and I flinch back—only to see Marika on the other side, about to flee.

I grab her arm before she can. She looks like a mess still—it’s clear she hastily cleaned herself up and threw on a loose shift dress, her hair wet and tangled around her face, her eyes swollen and red-rimmed. “What are you doing out here?” I growl, and she wrenches her arm free of my grip, hard enough to almost hurt herself as she darts out of my reach.

“Listening to find out what the hell was going to happen to me and my

brother!” she hisses. “The one thing I’m good at beyond taking your cock, apparently. And now I know everything.” She moves away from me as I grab for her again, shoving her way into the living room, and I enter behind her just in time to see Nikolai’s stunned face as it occurs to him that Marika might have heard our conversation.

“Marika, I—”

“Don’t say a word,” she whispers, her voice harsh and cutting even at the low register. “I heard everything. I thought for sure, when you told me, you must have real proof. Actual evidence that made you *sure* that Theo had done that to our mother.” Her voice breaks, choking up as she stares at her brother. “The more time I spent with him, the more I didn’t think it could be possible. I didn’t see how it could be true. I questioned it and questioned it, but we were in Ireland, and all I could do was stay the course. It was *days* before I knew something must be wrong about all of this, and I wished I’d never agreed to it, but it was too late. And now—”

“Marika—we don’t know that he’s telling the truth—”

“I do.” She swallows hard, tears dripping down her cheeks anew, and it’s my turn to stare at her in horror, because she could have so easily turned her brother against me. Whether or not she *actually* believes me, this was the moment for her revenge, the moment when she could have found some way to convince Nikolai—probably without that much difficulty—that she had reason to believe I’m lying, and that I did what his father set me up to do. After the scene in the office, after what Nikolai heard, I can’t imagine it would have been that hard.

But after all the lies, she’s choosing now to tell the truth.

“I don’t believe he would have had an affair with a married woman,” she says softly. “Not with what I know of him now. And even if some married woman could have tempted him, it wouldn’t have been our mother. Not the wife of another powerful man, the second most powerful man in the city. The affair would have threatened too much, if it was found out.” She takes a deep, slow breath, without looking at me. “I believe the one thing that matters most to Theo is what his family has built. His family’s legacy. He wouldn’t have risked that for lust.”

And with those words, my heart shatters in a way that I never knew it could.

No one has ever said, out loud, something that strikes to the deepest part of me so clearly. I realize at that moment that Marika knows me. That in our brief marriage so far, she paid enough attention to me, to the things I said, to the things *unsaid*, to know me so well.

I wasn't wrong to think that she could have been the wife I never knew I could want.

If only she hadn't lied. If only I'd known the truth.

If only her brother hadn't set this all up in the first place.

If only—but then I never would have had her at all.

This was always going to go up in flames.

“Marika—” I reach out for her, but she jerks away from me, trembling.

“I won't be a part of this any longer,” she whispers, looking at her brother and then finally at me.

“Marika, I—” I can hear the same words that were on Nikolai's lips falling off of mine, that *Marika, I—* that I know she'll cut off, but I can feel the apology burning at the back of my throat, even as I don't know what to say. How can I begin to apologize for what's happened here? How could I possibly fix what's happened with a simple *I'm sorry*? It won't be enough, and I know that. Not when she knows as well as I do that a part of me was terribly, painfully aroused by what happened upstairs. That it turned me on as much as it horrified me.

It aroused her, too, but that won't matter right now.

But I have to say something.

“I'm sorry, Marika—”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” She rounds on me, her voice high and shrill, like I've never heard it before. “You have got to be fucking kidding me. ‘*I'm sorry?*’ That's what you have for me? After you humiliated me in front of your men, in front of Adrik, after what you made me do—” A shudder runs

through her. “You can go fuck yourself.”

I can see in the way her face has gone bone-white, in the taut look there, in the crazed expression in her eyes, that she’s beyond caring what happens to her for what she says. She’s beyond worrying about her punishment or about consequences. She’s finished with this, and that digs the broken pieces of my heart in deeper, makes me feel it bleeding in ways I never knew I could.

I thought I knew what I had to lose with Marika, but I only knew the beginning of it. My feelings for her were deeper than even I realized—and it’s too late now.

“Marika—” Nikolai’s voice rumbles through the room, and Marika wheels, turning on him with those same blazing, furious eyes.

“You can go fuck yourself, too! Both of you can. I *never* wanted to be a pawn in all of this,” she hisses. “If I made a mistake in letting Adrik be my first, I’ll accept that, but it was *my* choice. I was *kidnapped* because of our family! I was starved and beaten, lived days in that compound wondering when Ivan might let his guards violate me, wondering what was in store for me. I wanted *something* for myself. I hoped I might be able to convince you to let me do things differently, to—”

“To marry Adrik?” Nikolai looks stunned. “You can’t possibly think—”

“I don’t know!” Marika throws her hands up, looking both frustrated and furious all at once. “I don’t fucking know! I wanted him, and I cared for him. That’s *all* I know. I wanted time to figure it out. I wanted a chance to make my own choice, even if that meant someone other than Adrik. I thought after what happened to me on account of our family, you might at least give me that—the chance to have a normal relationship, to figure it out on my own terms, to decide if it was going somewhere or if I wanted to end it. But then you *needed* me to marry Theo. To stop a war, you said, to save our family, and how the *fuck* could I say no? I couldn’t tell either of you what I’d done then. *You* wouldn’t have taken me if I wasn’t a virgin,” she added, wheeling back to glare at me. “You would have just murdered my fucking family over a few drops of blood on a sheet and one man in my bed!”

“I don’t know,” I admit quietly, and I feel the weight of that sentence hang over the room. I’ve never thought about it that way before. I’ve lived my

whole life under the traditions that all men in this world are raised with, with the idea that our brides must be virgins, even if we've fucked hundreds of women, that innocence is prized above all, that nothing else matters besides purity and pedigree, when it comes to taking a bride. And yet—

Once I had met Marika, would I have turned her away for having made one choice? If she would be mine forever, would it have mattered so much that there had been another man?

“If you had told me after the dinner—if you had assured me that it was over between the two of you, I might have let it go,” I tell her quietly. “It’s the lie that makes it difficult for me to forgive you, Marika, not the man.”

“And if I had said I wasn’t sure? If I had said it would take me time to get over him, but that I would try? If I had told you *everything*?” She narrows her eyes at me. “You can’t tell me for sure. You can’t say, without lying to *me*, that you wouldn’t have forfeited the marriage and taken down my family instead. So you see why I had to lie. And for what it’s worth,” she snaps, her voice taking on a colder, harsher edge, “I *didn’t* lie to you in Ireland. I didn’t ask Adrik to come. I told him *not* to. He did all that of his own volition. I pulled away, when he came up to our room and tried to get me in bed. I slapped him, when he kissed me in the alley—but your man didn’t see *that*,” she adds contemptuously. “I told him to leave me alone, until this marriage came to an end.”

“Until I was dead,” I reply icily, but what she’s saying strikes me to my core. She’s right that she was left with little choice of whether or not to be honest. The web of manipulation and lies that Nikolai drew her into left her with little recourse—and my own threats against the Vasilev family...though I would never have imagined that the prospective bride I was offered would come to me, *not* a virgin.

“I didn’t want you dead,” she says softly, her voice laced with fresh pain. “I was starting to have feelings for you. Starting to fall for you, even—to imagine the life you were painting for us. I saw that you were a different man than what I’d been told. I saw that there was more to you than Nikolai knew—but I didn’t know what to do about it. And I didn’t have time to figure it out. I didn’t know *how* to be honest with you—how to explain—”

“If you had told me in Ireland, I would have tried to find a way to understand. To come to terms with your brother without harming you.” That, at least, I know is true. By the time we’d been in Dublin, I’d been besotted with her. “I would have been angry over the lies—I might have punished you for them, but I would have tried—”

“I don’t believe you.” She tips up her chin, her gaze fixed on mine. “You’ve ruined it all, Theo, any chance there was. I can accept that lying to you ruined things, too, on my end. But you can see that I had very little choice. You can see the situation I was in because of *both* of you.” She hisses the last words, her eyes narrowed. “You had a choice in how you handled it, Theo. In how you handled *me*.”

“I lost control.” I look at her, wondering if there’s any way to salvage this, any way to convince her how much I regret how things have gone. “I’ll find a way to make it up to you, Marika—I should have handled things differently. I can admit that. I let my temper get the better of me, my possessiveness, I—”

“It’s too late.” The words come out harsh, sharp. “I want nothing to do with either of you. It’s up to you if you’re going to let me leave this house, Theo, but I want to go in the morning. I’ll figure out how to manage—” She sucks in a breath, and I can see her thinking about how she has no money of her own, no recourse to survive without her brother or me. It’s something I’d meant to change, to give her access to funds of her own, without them being tied to me. But I hadn’t had a chance.

“Marika—”

“Please don’t say anything else.” She turns away, and starts to walk past me, her shoulders curved in as if she’s afraid I’ll grab her. A part of me wants to—to pull her into my arms and beg for her forgiveness, to ask what I can do to make it up to her. To plead with her to find a way for us both to accept our part in this, and find a way forward. But I already know what she’ll say.

There’s nothing I can do, and there is no way forward.

And I can’t blame her for feeling that way. At the end of the day, I can see why she thought she had no choice but to lie.

No one forced my hand.

I don't stop her as she walks past me, out of the living room, and towards the stairs. I stand there, watching her go, feeling the shredded pain of my broken heart in my chest.

"McNeil—" Nikolai's voice comes from behind me, and I turn sharply towards him, turning my remaining anger on the one person who does, without a doubt, deserve it.

"Get the fuck out of my sight and out of my house, before I kill you where you stand," I snarl. "If I catch so much of a hint of you trying to sniff around my territory, or my businesses, or my men, or anything else, I will slaughter you and everyone around you. The peace holds, Vasilev, as long as you stay the fuck away from me."

"What about Marika? And my men—"

"I'll have them released and sent back to you today," I tell him flatly. "As for Marika, I want to try to speak to her once more. But if she still wants nothing to do with me, she can leave tomorrow if that's still what she wants. I'll give her enough money to do what she pleases, whether that's going back to your house or something else. But I won't touch her again."

"How can I trust you?" Nikolai's jaw is set, and I let out a long, slow breath.

"Because I haven't killed you already," I tell him calmly. "You would be nothing but meat on the floor right now, if I didn't have reason to feel that the peace should try to be preserved—for Marika's sake, if nothing else. But if you're not gone in less than a minute, I might change my mind."

For a moment, I wonder if he's going to hold his ground and force me to decide whether to follow through on it or not. He looks at me for a few beats; the tension is heavy in the air around us, and then he motions to his men.

I wait for them to be gone before I go upstairs. I know it's foolishness—I know Marika won't be swayed, that especially right now, she won't want to speak with me. But I have to try.

I'd had something with her that was beyond anything I had known to imagine. I had *wanted* the life I'd tried to paint for her, the life that I saw unfolding for us—and now I know that she wanted it, too. It feels like even more of a slap in the face, knowing how close we both came to what we

hadn't known to want, and having lost it in such a horrible way.

She and I both made mistakes. But even I can see that mine are beyond what I can blame her for.

I take the stairs two at a time, eager to get up to see her, to try to make things right in any way that I can. I'll let her scream at me, curse, hit me if she wants. I'll let her rant about the mistakes I've made and the ways I've hurt her for as long as she needs to, without saying anything about the ways she deceived me. I won't try to pretend that she wasn't pushed into impossible choices by me, by her brother, by Adrik.

By all the men in her life.

It's taken very little time for me to realize that I would do whatever she needs, if it could give us a chance at patching up what's gone wrong in our marriage. In *everything*.

The door to the master bedroom is locked, unsurprisingly. I would have been more shocked to find that she *hadn't* tried to lock me out.

"Marika." I rap my knuckles against the door, taking a deep breath. "Marika, please. We need to talk. Whatever that means, I understand. I'll listen to whatever you have to say. But *please*—"

There's only silence. It's not hard to understand why. I let out a slow breath, reining in my frustration. Letting it out will only make things worse between us—it will only underscore what she's already accused me of. Not being able to hold onto my temper. Letting my anger get the better of me. Letting it ruin what we had.

Along with any chance of being able to patch it up.

"Marika, I swear all I want is to talk. You can talk first. I'll listen before I say a word. You can hit me, if it'll make you feel better. Anything—please talk to me. What your brother said—" I feel a slow burn of panic starting in my gut, thinking that she might refuse to speak to me again. That she might leave tomorrow morning without ever saying another word. That what happened just now, in the living room, might be the last conversation we ever have.

It feels impossible to believe that two days ago, I'd been thinking about the

names for our future children, imagining all the ways they'd be conceived, planning the ways Marika and I would spend the days we had left just the two of us, before we became parents. I'd had an entire future thought out, and it had shattered in an instant.

Like my heart—and hers too, I'm beginning to think.

“Marika.” I listen for any sound in the room, anything that might tell me what she's doing. If she's crying, showering, packing, pacing the room—even the sound of shifting bedsprings that might tell me that she's sleeping. But there's nothing.

And after a moment, I start to worry about worse things. Darker things.

The window is too high up to escape out of—but if she were desperate enough, she might try. If she wanted to throw me off by telling me she'd leave tomorrow morning, when she planned to run away now. She might not care if she made it down in one piece. Or—

I can't think what else might have happened. The idea that Marika might have hurt herself intentionally because of all of this is too much to bear. I would never be able to forgive myself if that's what all of this wrought.

I would certainly never forgive Nikolai.

When she doesn't answer when I call out for her twice more, and I still hear no sounds from inside the room, I don't have a choice. The doors in this house are heavy wood, and it's not easy to kick it open, but there's enough rage and frustration left in me that it's not as hard as it could have been, either. I slam my foot against the door until it cracks open, shoving it far enough to get inside, and I look wildly around the room.

There's no sign of Marika. The room is empty and silent. There are no signs of her packing—her suitcases aren't even out, and the bed is smooth and still made-up. She wasn't taking a nap.

I don't hear the sound of the shower running, but I burst into the bathroom anyway, heedless of any privacy she might need. It doesn't matter—it's empty too.

When I turn around, that's when I see it—the open window on the far side of

the bedroom. I know before I go to stand in front of it that I'll see footsteps in the mud below, leftover from the rain that fell last night. What I expect is to see Marika's—small, barefoot prints.

What I see instead are heavy boot tracks, and a rut next to them, as if someone was dragged along.

Turning sharply on my heel, I rush down the stairs. I'm shouting Finn's name before I even get to the front door, yelling it on the stoop like a madman. He comes around the corner, brow creased in confusion, looking at me like I've lost my mind. It probably seems that I have.

“What the hell is going on, boss?”

I catch my breath, feeling a heavy fear spread through me. “Marika is gone. Where's Adrik?”

Marika



Of all the possibilities that I might have imagined between what occurred in Theo's office and now, *this* was never one of them.

I never pictured myself being dragged away by Adrik, still strong enough to do so despite the torture he's clearly endured, wearing black cargo pants and a t-shirt clearly stolen, since they're a little big even on his brawny frame. I never imagined him ignoring my pleas for him to let me go, his broad hand wrapped in my hair as he shoves me towards a weathered Jeep and jingles the keys in his other hand.

"Adrik, what are you doing—"

"Shut up," he snarls, pushing me into the back seats and slamming the door before getting into the driver's side, engaging a lock that I'm sure includes the child lock, so there's no chance of me throwing open the door and flinging myself out. "We'll talk when we get out of here."

"If you're trying to rescue me, this is only going to make things worse—" I don't *really* think he's trying to rescue me—his handling of me clearly says otherwise—but I'm trying to give him an out, a chance to rethink whatever he's actually up to and claim that was his plan. "Just let me go, and I'll go back to the house. I'll tell Theo I went out for a walk—"

"You're not telling Theo shit." His mouth twists into an angry grimace as he says it, as if saying Theo's name hurts him. Maybe it does. It would be hard to blame him, honestly. "You're *mine* now, Marika. And this time, *I'll* be the

one who decides what *I* do with you.”

A cold chill runs down my spine. I’d known he would be angry—he has a right to be angry, just as Theo has a right to be angry with him...no one has any clear case for right or wrong in this mess—but a horrible possibility enters my mind, that this is no longer about Adrik having feelings for me, or what feelings I might have for him. That we might be past all of that now, and all that’s left is a man using me to get vengeance on another man, now that he better understands what I mean to Theo.

Or at least, what I *meant* to him.

“How did you get away?” I whisper, clinging to the edge of the seat with my fingernails as Adrik takes a hard left, driving faster than he should. I’m grateful that he didn’t drug me, at least—or even tie me up. I’m surprised, and I can’t help wondering how long it will last. I don’t know where he’s taking me, and I’m afraid to find out. “He had you under guard—”

“He did,” Adrik says, his voice a low, angry rasp. I can hear a difference in the cadence of his speech, no doubt from what Theo did to his mouth, the missing teeth, and the swelling left behind. “But half of them were busy cleaning up after that little porno that Theo directed up in his office.” I don’t miss the disgust in his voice as he says it, or the way he looks at me in the rearview mirror, as if it’s *me* that disgusts him now. “And the ones still watching me assumed I was so hurt and *drained* after that little performance that they didn’t need to be as careful as they were before.” He snickers, his lip curling. “They were fucking wrong. Soon as they uncuffed me to chain me up to the wall in that outbuilding Theo was having them keep me in, I took them down. Got one of them stripped so I wouldn’t be running around bare-assed. And I came after you.”

Much like his promise in Ireland that he was watching me, those last words *should* sound romantic. Once upon a time, maybe they might have. But now, all I hear is the anger in them, the threat.

“Where are you taking me?” I whisper, and Adrik chuckles, a low and bitter sound.

“You’ll see when we get there.”

He drives into the south part of Chicago, past rundown streets and condemned buildings. I shrink back into the seat, knowing that this can't be good.

“Adrik, please—” I say softly, leaning forward. I'm not above begging for him not to do whatever he has planned now. After what happened in the office, I have no dignity left to lose. And I don't know if I can take much more of the kind of hurt that's been meted out to me over the past few days.

He doesn't say a word. He backhands me without even turning to look, the movement so casually cruel that the cry I let out isn't so much out of pain—though it does hurt—as the shock of it. Adrik has been angry with me before, but he's never struck me. I almost can't believe he did now—but I think back to the scene in the office, the hatred on his face as he looked at me, as he watched Theo fuck me. Not just hatred for Theo, but for *me*.

I swallow back a sob, my hand pressed to my face. “Adrik—”

“Shut up, *suka*,” he snarls. “*I* decide when you speak, now. *I* decide what happens to you. You are no longer the Bratva princess. You are not even Theo's queen. You may be married to him still, but he has shown how he treats you.” His eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror again, and he doesn't bother hiding the contempt in his face. “Like a common whore. That's all you ever were; I see that now.”

Pain clenches at my chest. First Theo, and now Adrik. There was a certain pleasurable degradation in hearing Theo call me his good little slut when he fucked me, an arousal that I wouldn't have expected to get from such a thing, but when Theo called me a whore to my brother, when Adrik says it now, there's no arousal. Just a horrible feeling that I'm entirely alone now, that the men I once believed cared enough about me to protect me have cast me aside and discarded me as worthless.

A set of holes to be fucked, and nothing more.

If that's all I am, then my life is expendable. I know enough about this world I live in to know that.

And I'm afraid to find out what Adrik has in store for me.

He pulls around behind a squalid-looking house near the end of a street with

cracked pavement, parking the Jeep and killing the engine. Once again, he doesn't turn to face me, looking at me in the rearview mirror. "If you fight me," he says in a voice that's deadly serious, "it will be worse for you. I don't have drugs, so if I knock you out, it'll be the old-fashioned way. A pretty little *devochka* like you isn't built to handle that. I don't recommend it."

It's strange how he says it; almost like he thinks he's helping me out. Like he's giving me advice that I should *appreciate*, when what he's really talking about is whether or not I allow him to drag me into that house without fighting back, or whether I make him knock me out cold.

"I should never have slept with you," I hiss through gritted teeth. "But I never thought you'd make me regret it."

Adrik gives me a look that almost seems as if he has regrets of his own. "Neither did I," he says finally, and then he's sliding out, coming around to open my door.

For a moment, I consider fighting. I could claw at him, scream, try to kick him in the balls. He's already hurt, and I wonder if it is possible that I might be able to overpower him. I could punch him where the missing teeth are, where his face surely must be sore, try to aim for some of the wounds I saw —

But at the end of the day, he's bigger and stronger than I am, and in close quarters, I'm almost sure he can evade me or knock me out before I get much of a fight in. And even if I did manage to escape, what then?

Who would I call? Where would I go? I'm in danger here or elsewhere. I don't know exactly how to get back to Theo's, and the idea of going back to him makes me feel sick. Going to my brother raises the same issues—both of how to get there and whether I want to lean on him for help at all.

I have no money, no phone, no identification. Going to the cops would solve little, if anything. Most of them are either in Theo's or my brother's pocket. If I ask the right one, they might get me back to Nikolai. A different one might take me back to Theo. Either way, I'd end up back there—if I could find a police station safely.

And by the time I think of all of that, I'm already out of time.

Adrik manhandles me out of the back of the Jeep, his hand fisting in my hair as he wraps it around his hand, yanking my head back in a way that's becoming all too familiar to me. He grabs one wrist and then the other, and I feel plastic around them as he tightens it behind my back, almost *too* tightly.

"Do you want me to keep all my fingers?" I snipe at him, twisting my head around as much as I can. "Because you might not want to cut off my circulation, if so."

"Only on the right hand," Adrik sneers, and my stomach flips with nausea as I think of the implications.

It's hard to believe that only a brief time ago, it was hard for me to turn him down. That I struggled with both my feelings for him and my feelings for Theo. Now I think of Adrik getting turned on watching the scene in the office, and all I feel is a sick hate. Combined with what he's doing to me now, it's hard to remember why I ever wanted him. Why there was ever anything between us.

This isn't the same man who kissed me on that vintage couch and convinced me to let down my guard. Not the same man who touched me slowly, gently, making my first time something worth remembering instead of something harsh and unpleasant.

There's nothing of that man left here.

Is that what Theo thinks when he looks at me? The question slides into my head, intrusive and unwanted, as Adrik pushes me towards what looks like a basement door. *Does he see me and find it hard to remember why he fell in love with me, when he believed everything I was lying to him about?*

I don't know what possessed me to vouch for him today with Nikolai, when I so easily could have made it seem as if Theo were lying, and watched as my brother found a way to rain down hell on him. Even as I think it, a small voice in my head whispers the answer.

I wanted Theo to know that when I had a real choice about telling the truth, I would. That all the lies I told were because I didn't see any other way out.

I want him to realize that at least some of it was true.

And deep down, I also know I wouldn't feel that way if I didn't still feel something for Theo.

It doesn't matter, I think miserably, as Adrik pushes me down the wobbly steps into the dark basement. *There's no forgiving what he did. You know that. Things could never be the same, even if you tried to work through it. It's over. It was never meant to be, anyway.*

If Adrik has planned for me what I fear, it won't matter anyway.

Adrik snatches a chain hanging from the ceiling, and the basement is filled with harsh light from a naked bulb. It's damp and smells musty, and I wince as he backs me toward one of the brick walls, where I see an iron ring hanging from it. I doubt I'm the first person brought down here.

"How did you know about this?" I whisper, and Adrik chuckles.

"I listen," he says with a smirk, grabbing the handcuffs attached to a chain running through the ring. "It's a spot your brother uses for keeping a prisoner out of the way until he can get around to torturing information out of them."

"They'll come looking for you here, then." I stare at him as he cuffs my wrists, wincing at the cold feel of the metal, my stomach lurching as he cuts away the plastic ties, and I feel the sharp slide of the blade against my skin.

"No, they won't," Adrik says with satisfaction. "He won't expect me to come here. Whichever of them comes looking for you—or both—they'll expect me to take you somewhere farther away. Somewhere that will be harder to find."

"Nikolai and Theo are both smarter than you think," I spit at him, and he laughs.

"*Too smart. Smart enough that they won't look right in front of their faces.*" He steps back, contemplating me. "So. What should I do with you first?"

"Let me go." I glare up at him, and he chuckles darkly.

"That I won't do."

I don't miss the way he says *won't*, and not *can't*. He reaches out, trailing his fingers over my cheek—and then he rears back, slapping me hard.

My head jerks to one side, and then the other when he repeats the motion on the other side of my face. He slaps me twice more, until my face is burning and throbbing and my ears are ringing, and then he grabs my chin, holding my jaw painfully tight as he looks down into my eyes with his piercing blue gaze.

Once upon a time, I loved him looking at me. I loved his eyes. I was falling for everything about him, the way an innocent, foolish girl does with her first crush.

Her first *everything*.

I didn't see the darkness inside of him. At least with Theo, I knew it was a possibility. But with Adrik, somehow, this feels so much worse.

“That was for refusing to run away with me,” he hisses. “And for refusing to fuck me, when I came up to your room in Ireland, and for slapping *me* in the alleyway.”

He grabs my hair, wrenching my head back as he shoves his fingers into my mouth. “How do you like this, little *shlyukha*? Would you prefer my cock?” His fingers thrust over my tongue, a crude mimicking of what he's done with my mouth in the past. His fingers taste like iron and stale cum, and I gag as he pushes them to the back of my throat, my eyes tearing up.

“No?” Adrik smirks. “That is for my humiliation in front of your *der'mo* of a husband. And this—”

He grabs my hair, forcing me to my knees in front of him. His face is swollen, his expression hitching with pain, but it doesn't stop him. “This is for coming on that *svoloch*'s fucking cock.”

I know there's no escaping this. And in this moment, as I never have before, I simply wish it would all end.

I wish *I* could end.

Theo



“F uck,” Finn breathes as he hears me ask where Adrik is. “He’s got a guard on him. The outbuilding at the back of the property. He’s supposed to be cuffed, and I’ve got men watching him, but—”

He looks at me with the same tense expression that I can feel frozen on my face. The only person other than Nikolai who has reason to want to take Marika away is Adrik. And Nikolai would have marched her out of my house before she got out of the living room if that’s the route he’d wanted to go.

“It’s got to be him.” I’m already striding away from the house, Finn on my heels. “We’ll go and see.”

We’re halfway to the outbuilding before I see guards coming towards us. My gut clenches as I see the looks on their faces—they’re expecting punishment, and they’ll get it. *Careful of your temper*, I remind myself, cognizant of the havoc it’s wrought already. “Don’t hurt them too badly,” I tell Finn. “But have them confined while we deal with this.” I don’t need to question them to know Adrik is gone, and Finn is more than capable of handling tracking him.

What I need to do is go and talk to Nikolai.

It’s the last fucking thing I want to do. He’s the last man on the green earth that I ever want to ask for help with anything, especially now—but Marika’s life is more important than my pride. Seeing her safe, after what’s happened and the part I’ve played in it, is more important than anything else could be.

“Find out where he’s taken her,” I growl at Finn. “I’ll be at the Vasilev estate. Come straight there when you have anything.”

Finn nods. “Will do, boss.”

I have no doubt that he’ll take care of it. I turn to go back to the garage, foregoing a driver. I don’t want to waste the time calling one, when I could be on the road quicker by myself.

As soon as I’m behind the wheel, I call Nikolai.

“McNeil?” The surprise in his voice is palpable. “What the fuck do—”

“Marika is gone.” I cut him off, uninterested in whatever he was going to say. “Adrik escaped and took her.”

“You incompetent son of a—”

“Shut the fuck up,” I snarl, my impatience building with every word. “Neither of us wants to work with the other. We both want each other dead. But we’re bound by a truce brokered with your sister, and I *know* you still care about her. She’s missing, and I know who has her. So I’m coming to you, and you *will* ensure my safety while we figure this out.” I press my lips tightly together, glaring at the road ahead. “I don’t have to remind you that if Marika is gone, there is nothing binding me to our deal, Vasilev. And I will *gladly* take my anger out on you.”

“I’ll make sure the gate is open to you,” Nikolai says tautly. And then he hangs up.

I speed all the way to his estate. Traffic laws aren’t something that matters to me—there’s no point in bothering with them. I own a solid portion of the cops in this city, and those I don’t still won’t fuck with me right now, because they belong to Nikolai. I’m a good driver on the best of days—a common hobby when I was younger was taking sports cars out on a track for a spin—I weave in and out of traffic, my pulse pounding at the base of my throat.

I should have killed him. I should have put a bullet in him before I left the office. I’d wanted to spare Marika the sight—but more than that, I’d wanted the chance to exact a slow punishment on him. I’d once again let my rage, my desire for vengeance, win out over the smarter choice. I’d let my anger lead

instead of reason, and I'm paying for it over and over.

Marika will pay for it, too, if I don't get to her quickly. And that I can't stand.

I speed onto the estate, hardly slowing down to ensure that the gate *is* open before I turn into the courtyard, spraying gravel. The car has barely come to a stop before I kill the ignition and jump out, striding up the stairs to the front door.

I don't bother knocking. Nikolai seems to have let his security know as well that I'd be here, because no one tries to stop me at least as I stride through the mansion towards his study, bursting through that door too.

Nikolai is sitting behind his desk, as expected. What I didn't expect was to see his wife there—tall, beautiful, and blonde, wearing leggings and a lemon-yellow top that drapes over the swell of her stomach.

The sight of it makes me ache, thinking of Marika like that, pregnant with our child, beginning to look soft and round. It was what I'd hoped for, longed for—and now, even if it is still a possibility, which seems slim, it won't be the way I imagined it.

There will be no love, no close family, no laughter and joy filling the manor house in Ireland. It will be the kind of family that I was raised to expect, Marika cold and me distant, and our children caught between the two of us.

The thought hurts more than I could have ever expected it would.

Lilliana turns, her face taut, hardening even more when she sees me. I expect her to leave, but she stays there, spine stiff as she watches me sit down in front of Nikolai's desk.

"You know where she is?" Nikolai asks abruptly, and I frown.

"Not yet. Adrik is gone. My assumption is that he took her—Finn is checking it out—"

"And you're here?" His mouth tightens. "You're *sure* it was Adrik? You didn't have him under guard?"

"I *did*," I reply sharply, my own jaw clenching. "And after what I put him through, I wouldn't have thought he would have had the capability of taking

those men out and getting away, or getting to Marika. But I was wrong. And I'm here because I assume you want to assist me in getting her back. Unless —" I narrow my eyes at him. "Unless my first thought was right, and you were the one who took her after all. Is she here? Is that why you're so quick to question whether or not I know what I'm talking about?"

"I'm questioning it because you're an arrogant sack of—"

"Enough! Both of you!" Lilliana's high, chiming voice carries through the room, carrying more force than I would have expected—enough that both Nikolai and I momentarily stop and look at her, out of shock more than anything else. She narrows her blue eyes, glaring at us both. "Theo, my sister-in-law is not here. And based on what I know of her and Adrik's relationship, he likely didn't take your marriage well. If things have deteriorated as much as my husband has told me, I believe you when you say you're sure he's the one who took her."

She takes a deep, slow breath, her gaze still pinned icily on both her husband and me. "So both of you need to stop fucking fighting, act like men, and get Marika back."

Nikolai's lips press together tightly as he looks at his wife. "You knew about Adrik?" he asks finally. "And you didn't tell me?"

Lilliana gives him an even look, not flinching back in the slightest. "Marika was kind to me before you were," she says calmly. "I owed her a similar kindness. So yes, I kept her secret."

There's something that passes between them as they look at each other, the kind of unspoken conversation that can only happen between husband and wife, between two people who know each other so intimately. I can see a hint of what's in Nikolai's face, some hint of a knowledge of past wrongs, of sins he's atoning for. It makes my chest ache anew—both because I'd hoped for that kind of intimacy with Marika, and because I feel sure now that there's no hope of it in the future, no hope of righting my wrongs with her.

"Your wife is right," I say as calmly as I can manage, looking at Nikolai. "I've handled this poorly thus far—we both have, in different ways. The only thing I can do to try to atone for any of it is to do what I can to protect her now—"

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I reach for it. “It’s Finn,” I tell Nikolai as I answer it. “He may have some news.”

“Theo.” Finn’s voice is urgent, before I can even say a word. “We managed to track his vehicle. We don’t have an exact location of where he’s at, but we have an area. I’m getting some men together to leave now. If you get back over here—”

“I’ll be on my way in a few minutes. Possibly with more backup.” I end the call, looking narrowly at Nikolai. “Well? You were quick to send your security with me to Ireland to keep an eye on her. Are you going to send backup with me to get her safely home?”

Nikolai is already standing up. “I’ll do you one better,” he says evenly, glancing at his wife. “I’m coming along too.”

Finn already has men assembled when we get back to my property, Nikolai’s car, and the ones with his men pulling in behind me. Everyone spills out into the courtyard, Finn moving forward before I even need to give him directions to tell Nikolai’s men where to go, consolidating our force into the fewest necessary cars. “He went into the south part of the city,” Finn tells me as he barks orders. Nikolai, to his credit, doesn’t try to interrupt, even though Finn is directing his men too. “We don’t know an exact pinpoint, but we’ll find him. You’re coming, I assume?”

I nod, and Finn throws me a bulletproof vest. “No telling what he’s got backing him up. Put that on.”

“Do we normally have these?” I eye it, and Finn shrugs.

“I might have arranged for a few from the local cops. For the more dangerous missions, you know?” He grins. “Can’t have you getting shot and leaving all this to me.”

“Are you wearing one?” I glance sideways at him, and he chuckles.

“Hell no. That takes all the fun out of it.” He motions to Nikolai. “I’m guessing we don’t give him one, either?”

For a brief moment, Finn’s joking erases a little of the heaviness surrounding me, letting me feel as if I can breathe for just a second. It’s why he’s doing it,

and I know that.

He's a good enforcer, a good right-hand man. But he's also a good friend.

"Hell no," I tell him with a wink, and then I head back to my own vehicle.

Finn is in the lead car with the men he trusts most to have his back, the ones closest to him that he relies on when he has a choice of backup. I follow behind him, Nikolai in the car with me despite my inner feelings about it, and the other cars trailing. As we leave the mansion, my chest is tight, my thoughts swirling as I try to focus on what's ahead of us.

I can't think about anything other than Marika—about getting her back, but also about what we had, and what has been lost. I regret how I handled it from start to finish, from the moment Finn told me about Adrik, and I felt my temper spiral out of control. If I could go back—

But I can't. There's no going back. I've lost Marika's love—or the chance of ever having it, anyway—and there's nothing I can do to fix that.

What I can still do is protect her. Save her. And once I get her out of there and out of Adrik's hands—once I make sure that he'll never touch her again —

"I'll send her home with you once she's out of there," I tell Nikolai quietly, my hands clenching around the steering wheel. "I'll annul the marriage, and I'll stay out of Vasliev territory. The truce will hold regardless, and I will make sure the other Kings hold to it." I take a deep, slow breath. "I've done enough harm to your family without meaning to."

Nikolai says nothing. But out of the corner of my eye, I see him nod in acceptance.

There's relief in knowing that, at least.

Even if the future won't be what I hoped for.

Marika



I wake to cold, damp darkness. I'm not sure how long I was out for, only that when Adrik was finished with my mouth, he left me there, covered in the sticky evidence of what he'd done to me, telling me he'd be back when he was ready for more.

I won't let him inside of me again. The thought beats heavily in my head, even as I'm not entirely sure how I'm going to make that happen. I'm chained to a wall, with very little recourse for anything. There are no weapons that I can reach or use, nothing that I can defend myself with. I'd considered biting him earlier, when he'd pushed himself into my mouth, but that had seemed more likely to end in pointless pain than anything else. It wouldn't get me free, but it would give him another excuse to hurt me more.

So, instead, I'd done a purposely bad job. I hadn't tried to please him—even tried to make it clumsy and unpleasant, even as he slapped my face and yanked my hair and told me that I know how to suck a cock better than that—which is true, of course, but I have no intention of letting Adrik enjoy those skills *ever* again.

In the end, it hadn't mattered. Abusing me, having power over me after what's been done to him, was enough to get him off. I turn my head, feeling the stiffness in my neck as I wipe my cheek and mouth against my shirt, wanting as much of him off of me as I can. Better the ruined shirt than the taste of him still on my lips.

No one is coming for you.

I know that's not true. I knew it wasn't true when he said it, and yet I still don't feel very much hope. Adrik seemed very sure that they wouldn't look here, that they wouldn't believe that he would bring me somewhere so close to home, a place that Nikolai had used before. I don't want to think that's true—but as much as I know Nikolai and Theo will be looking for me when they realize what's happened, I feel like a needle in a haystack right now.

I have no idea what kind of resources they have at their disposal to find me. That's not the kind of thing I was ever told, not information I have, and it makes me angry now—angry that so much of the world I'm forced to live in is kept from me because I'm a daughter and not a son, that so much of my life is decided for me, that choices have been forced on me over and over that have ruined my chances at happiness again and again.

It doesn't feel fair that because I was born a daughter, I'm expected to bend to the whims of everyone else around me. That I'm subjected to abuse and kept on a short leash, and told to be grateful because I'm afforded luxury as a result of it.

I think I'd rather be on my own struggling and allowed to make my own choices.

I sit there for a long time, my head aching, eyes burning with tears that I'm too tired to cry any longer. The stress has kept me from being hungry, which is a small blessing, but I'm still thirsty, my mouth parched and dry.

I'm not holding out any hope that Adrik will bring me water, though—or anything else I might need.

The basement door swings open again after a while, letting in a sliver of sunlight and fresh air, and I suck in a breath as it wafts through the basement before the door closes heavily again. I hear Adrik's heavy, booted footfalls before he yanks the chain attached to the lightbulb, and that glaring light presses uncomfortably against my eyes again.

“Here.” He holds a cup up to my lips, and it takes me a moment to realize he's actually brought me water.

I don't bother worrying about my dignity, or give him a chance to enjoy

getting to take it away. I tilt my head so it can pour into my mouth, and I'm so happy for a drink that I don't notice it's warm and stale at first. I don't even care—I didn't really expect water at all, let alone anything cold and fresh.

As I'm drinking, I let my gaze flick over him. I try to make it seem like there's some desire in it, like maybe I'm struggling with how I feel about him, so he won't realize that I'm trying to figure out if there's any way that I can escape this. I don't think he just came down here to give me water. He'll want something else—payment for the small kindness or simply because he can. There's no love in the way he looks at me now, and seeing him like this, tallying up the moments when I questioned it before—since I told him about Theo—I have to wonder if he ever really did.

I can't believe that someone who loved me ever, at any point, would do something like *this* to me. Even as awful as Theo's punishment was, it wasn't *this*.

My gaze skates over Adrik's abs, down to his hips—and that's when I see it.

He has a knife on his hip, shoved into a slim holster attached to the nylon belt threaded through his cargo pants. I blink, startled—I've never seen him wear it before, and he catches where my gaze drifted to, a smirk curling his lips.

“Are you wondering what I brought that down here for?” He takes the glass of water away before I can sip any more from it, setting it aside still half full, and I can't stop the way I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth, sucking away any last moisture. The few gulps I got weren't enough.

I look at him mutely, refusing to answer. The smirk stays there as he slips the knife free, a dark-colored blade with a serrated edge and a black handle. He trails the sharp side of it over his finger, looking at me as the smirk turns to a grin.

“I could have stripped you any number of ways,” he says slowly, turning the point of the knife against the tip of his finger. “I could have just cut it all off quickly with a pair of scissors. Hell, I don't even *have* to strip you, I could just lift your dress and pull your panties down, and have you like that. But I think this is more fun.”

I shudder as he steps closer, the point of the knife resting against my chest in the narrow v of the loose neckline. “It looks like a sack, anyway,” he says contemptuously, looking down over the shift dress I’d just thrown on before I went downstairs earlier. “I’m surprised I could get it up earlier, looking at you in this.”

And then he grabs a fistful of the fabric in his hand, and starts to drag the blade downwards.

It’s sharp, terrifyingly so. The fabric parts smoothly the moment it glides against it, cutting the dress down the middle. Adrik slices through the bottom of the hem with a flourish and lets it hang open, the dress falling to either side to reveal my bare breasts—I hadn’t bothered with a bra earlier—and the black cotton panties clinging to my hips.

“Mm.” He lets out a low, satisfied sound deep in his throat as his gaze trails down over me. When he reaches out, pressing the point of the knife against my nipple, I flinch, and Adrik chuckles.

“So frightened. Do you think I’ll hurt you? I haven’t decided yet, actually. How much, that is. How much do I want to punish you? How many times do I want to fuck you before it’s enough, and I’ll just finish you off? Will it be fast or slow?” He circles my nipple with the knifepoint. “I can’t make up my mind. But we’ll just see how it goes.”

A cold chill goes down my spine, a lump of fear sticking in my throat as he pulls the knife away, pressing the point to the soft flesh of my arm now as he drags it down to the edge of the sleeve. He cuts slower with those, sliding the knife through the fabric bit by bit, until the dress is hanging off of me in tatters, and then he cuts the last snippet on the other side, and it falls away, leaving me in nothing but my panties.

I tried to keep quiet, not to gasp or squirm, but when he presses the knifepoint to my abdomen, I sink my teeth into my lip to fight back the whimper of fear. I see his smile widen, realizing just how much he’s enjoying this, and my stomach flips over with nausea as he starts to cut through my panties.

“Will you be wet, when I get these off?” he murmurs, and I realize to my relief that I’m *not*.

When Theo punished me, it turned me on despite myself. I don't have the capacity to try to figure out what that means—why Theo punishing me and hurting me aroused me while Adrik only leaves me terrified, but I imagine it has something to do with the way the two men have gone about it.

Certainly, the choice of location hasn't helped Adrik out at all.

Adrik draws the knife down, slipping it between the outer folds of my pussy as he slices away the fabric of my panties, and I choke back a cry of terror in a mouth gone dry all over again. My heart is pounding, my senses all coiled tight with fear, and when Adrik presses the point of the knife against my clit I let out a shuddering, terrified sob.

“Mm. You like that?” he murmurs, misinterpreting the sound, and I shake my head wildly, staring up at him in mute, frozen horror. It's not a lie—I *don't* like it, I'm not turned on by this at all, and I swallow hard, my throat dry and scratchy as he cuts away the rest of the material and lets them fall to the floor.

When he sheathes the knife and slips his fingers between my legs, he lets out a growl of displeasure.

“*Suka!*” he snarls, his other hand knotting in my hair again as he pushes his fingers roughly into my clenched, dry pussy. “You can't get wet for me, hm? You were so sloppy it was embarrassing for that *svoloch* who fucked you in front of me, screaming and coming and dripping all over the goddamn floor, but for me—”

Tears well in my eyes as he spins me around, the chains twisting roughly around my back as he presses my face to the damp brick wall, his hand tight in my hair. His other hand fumbles with his zipper, and I hear it drag down the moment before I feel the hot nudge of his cock against my ass—and I have a sudden, insane thought.

My hands are behind my back. He's right there, so close. If I could twist—if I could get the knife—

It's a long shot. If I slip, if I falter, if I don't manage to drive the knife where it will do the most good—I'll only get one chance at it. If I don't succeed, my fate will be so much worse.

But if I don't try—

He's already said he's going to kill me. It's just a matter of how many times he wants to fuck me before then, how many times he violates me, humiliates me, and whether he decides to do it fast or slow. I might as well try.

All I have to lose is the possibility of a quick death. And what I have to gain

Fear twists in my gut, cold as ice, and my fingers tremble. Adrik doesn't notice—or if he does, he takes it for what it is...sheer terror.

I don't know if I can do this. I feel his cock nudge between my thighs, feel his mouth against my shoulder, teeth grazing against flesh, and I consider holding out. Waiting to see if Theo and Nikolai find me. But I might not get this chance again. And if they don't—or if it's too late—

The thoughts jumble up inside my mind as he groans. "I'm going to fuck you until you're wet for me," he growls against my flesh. "And you *should* get wet, for your own good—because before I leave this room, Marika, I'm going to fuck that tight little asshole. Theo hasn't done that, has he? Too worried about getting an heir." His teeth bite harder against my shoulder. "I've been the first in the other two holes, and I intend to be the first in that one, too."

It's at that moment that I know I'm going to try to kill him.

He can't have that, too.

When he presses against me, his clothes rubbing against my bare flesh as he tries to angle his cock into my unwelcoming pussy, I wait. I wait for him to be so focused on trying to get inside of me, spitting on his hand to lube himself a little, grunting with frustrated effort, that he's not paying attention.

I close my eyes and hope that my one chance will be enough.

And I grab for the knife.

My hand closes around the hard, rough handle, yanking it free. I have milliseconds to strike. I want to stab him in the fucking dick, but that won't be enough. I'm chained, and as soon as he moves away, that's it. I need to stab where it will do the most damage.

So I go lower.

I snatch the knife, sliding down the wall a little, and I wrench my head around to get the best chance of seeing where my blow will land as I stab for his inner thigh, as hard as I possibly can.

Flesh is harder to cut through than you'd realize. I remember hearing that somewhere, and I lurch back as I stab, throwing my weight into it as I drive the blade into his upper thigh, through canvas fabric and skin, near the inside, and drag the serrated edge upwards with every bit of strength I possess.

It takes me a moment to register his ragged, furious scream of pain, but when I do, it's the most satisfying thing I've ever heard. The feeling that rushes through me is pure adrenaline, euphoria, as I twist around so my back is to the wall again and watch as Adrik presses his hands against the wound that is spurting blood.

I hit the artery. It was my best chance, and I did it. I—

“Fucking—*suka*—” he snarls, snatching the knife free of his thigh, and running at me. I shrink back, dodging to one side just in time, and the knife hits the brick as he starts to wobble, his skin paling as he stumbles to one side.

“I'll kill you,” he hisses, ice-blue eyes staring at me with hatred, but it's too late. I clench my fists in the shackles as he crawls backward, his breathing labored, and I hear his guttural, dark laugh as he slumps back, his chest heaving as he sucks in for air.

“No, I think *I've* killed *you*,” I whisper, unable to understand why he's laughing—what could possibly be funny to him right now. What he could possibly find amusing—

And then, as I watch the life drain from his eyes as he slumps against the far wall, I realize *exactly* what it was, when I see the carabiner of keys hanging from the other side of his belt.

He has the key to my shackles. And he's far out of reach—further than I could even manage to reach if I managed to get ahold of some implement around the basement.

If no one finds me, I'll die of thirst.

I look at the half-full glass of water on the folding table out of reach and feel a hysterical bubble of laughter pressing behind my lips. Adrik's last form of torture, left there for me to look at, knowing I can't get to it. I know within a day or two, it will be a new kind of horror that I've never experienced before or even imagined.

And yet—

I don't feel as if I regret it. If I'm going to die, it won't be because Adrik chose the means of it, and he won't have gotten to violate me in every way he could think of before that point.

He's dead.

I won.

There's a bittersweetness to it, even if it means I'm going to die down here with his corpse. I sink down to the floor, shivering at the thought as I look at him, all the life drained out of his face now. I haven't been so close to a dead body since my mother—and that was a closed coffin.

Now I know why. Whatever my father did to her, it wouldn't have matched the story he told. And he didn't want us to know.

I lower my forehead to my arms, crossed over my bare knees, and let myself cry. I cry for my mother, Lilliana, myself, and all the women who are caught up in this horrible world of men, bent and broken to their whims, all of their lives decided before they ever have a voice to speak. I cry for the innocent girl I used to be, and for the girl who fell for her bodyguard and let him have a part of her that she wanted to choose to give away. I cry for the time when I thought Adrik was someone else, for the moments that I'll never be able to think about the same way again—and for the ones with Theo, too, because no matter what, I don't think I can ever forgive him either. Even if it's not the same—he still hurt me. He still lost control. And our marriage was always built on lies.

The foundation was broken from the start.

I might have drifted off from exhaustion. All I know is that at some point, I

hear voices and footsteps, and then suddenly, there's more light, sunlight coming in from outside, and some of that fresh air, and when I look up, I hear Nikolai's voice. I hear Theo's voice—and others, too.

For a moment, I think I'm dreaming. And then they start to come down the stairs, Theo's right-hand man Finn leading the way with others I don't recognize or only vaguely know, and then some of Nikolai's men that I do—and then Nikolai and Theo, guns in hand, looking around the room.

“There!” Finn motions to me, quickly averting his eyes when he sees the state I'm in. “Oh, fuck,” he murmurs as he turns and sees Adrik's body, and I catch a glimpse of him motioning to a few of the men before Theo and Nikolai are suddenly blocking my view, moving towards me.

“Here!” Finn yells to Theo, who turns and catches the keys that Finn throws. “One of those should get those cuffs off.”

Nikolai is holding a blanket, and he throws it around me, covering me as Theo starts to try keys in the handcuffs. Nikolai reaches for my hands, looking at my bruised face, his expression a mask of concern. “Marika, are you—”

“I'm not sure I'd say I'm fine,” I whisper, the words overlaid by Theo's curse as another key fails to work. “But I'm alive, and he's not. And I killed him before he managed to hurt me too badly.”

Nikolai looks at my face, still filthy, and winces. “We need to get you home,” he murmurs. “Please don't argue, Marika—”

“Where do you think my *home* is?” I whisper, looking up at him, at the same moment that Theo finally finds the right key, and I feel the cuffs come loose from around my wrists.

I stand up slowly, wrapping the blanket around myself, and look between the two men. Theo's face has pain and regret written all over it, and he winces as he looks at me. His fern-green eyes meet mine, and for the briefest of moments, I forget how angry I am with him. I forget everything except the comfort and happiness that I so briefly had with him. As he stands there looking at me helplessly, his hands starting to reach for me without meaning to, I collapse against his chest.

I hear his sharp intake of breath, feel the way his arms go around me unhesitatingly, and there's no anger in him any longer. He pulls me close to him, his breath warm against my ear, and to my shock, as my cheek brushes against his, I feel the sudden dampness of tears on his skin, his hand pressing against the back of my head. "I thought I had lost you forever, Marika," he whispers, and then his breath catches, his body tensing as he suddenly lets me go, stepping away. "I mean—"

Theo clears his throat, wiping quickly at his face before anyone else can see. "Home is with your brother," he says calmly, and I think only I hear the slight crack in his voice, the way it breaks a little over those words. I realize, with a faint crack in my own heart, that it's the sound of a dream dying—the dream he had shared with me of a different life in the manor outside of Dublin, of family photos that would hang on that wall space next to the staircase, of a quieter life together. A sort of retirement for him—a second life, in a way.

I see the resignation in his eyes as he steps back again, his hands dropping to his sides. The anger is long gone, replaced only by defeat and regret. And while with another man I might have thought that it was a trick, a guise to try to get me to fall back into his arms, there is one thing I learned about Theo from the very beginning—and that was how to tell when he was being genuine.

There is very little dishonesty in him, at least when it comes to those he cares about. I imagine that's why my lies hit him so hard, and I feel an ache of regret in my own chest.

"I know it doesn't matter," he says softly, those green eyes still holding mine. "I know that nothing I can say or do can ever make up for it. But I am so deeply sorry, Marika."

I swallow hard, looking at him. For a moment, the basement narrows down to the two of us, the sounds of Adrik's body being removed and my brother shifting restlessly nearby, of low voices and footsteps fading away. There's only Theo and I, and the broken expression on his face as he speaks.

"There is nothing I can do except give you back a life made of your own choices," he says quietly. "And though I expect you will go back to your

brother's house, if he wishes the truce between us to continue, he will honor that and let you make those choices, whatever they may be. He will make no more decisions for you, nor will anyone else." Theo looks at Nikolai with narrowed eyes, and he nods.

"You will have a divorce," Theo says quietly, looking back at me. "And a settlement—a generous one. It will be in your name—money for you to do with as you please, yours and only yours. And you will have your freedom, Marika." He lets out a long, slow breath, his shoulders slumping. "I will never bother you or your family again."

I don't know what I would have said, but he turns away before I can get a chance to say anything at all. "I'll be in the car," I hear him say to Finn in a low voice before he starts to go up the stairs. He doesn't look back, leaving me there shivering even though I'm wrapped up in the blanket, an ache spreading through me that feels strangely like a broken heart, even though I couldn't say why.

"Let's get you home," Nikolai says gently, his hand on the small of my back. "I'll have a doctor meet us at the house. You can get some rest—"

I don't hear the rest of what he says. Exhaustion swims up and grasps me, making me totter on my feet, and the last thing I feel is Nikolai's arms around me before I pass out cold.

Marika



When I wake up, I'm in my old bed at the mansion, in my room. I sit up in a cold sweat, wondering dizzily if I somehow dreamed it all, before I see the note on the side table in Lilliana's scripted handwriting.

Text me when you wake up. I've been staying here. Nikolai comes by as often as he can, but I'll come up first, in case you don't want to see him.

I read the note twice, a sudden rush of gratitude for my sister-in-law filling me. Lilliana was raised to be a pawn, a biddable mistress to Nikolai's father, but she has a spine of steel that no one saw until she chose to show it. Even now, she doesn't hide it from Nikolai, reminding him often with her behavior that *he* chose *her*—and if he wants to keep choosing her, it will be as she is.

It's a remarkable trait in a woman who was groomed to be anything but that, and I know she must have exercised it on Nikolai, for him to agree to wait to see me.

I fumble for my phone, feeling a faint ache still in my wrists and fingers from the cuffs. *I must not have been out that long*, I think as I type out a message to her, letting her know I'm awake, and sink back under the warm blankets against the downy stack of pillows.

After the basement, this feels like heaven. I'll never take it for granted again.

I'm back home. The thought should fill me with happiness and relief, and it does—but there's a measure of sadness too that I hadn't expected. A longing

for someone that I know I shouldn't miss.

Theo. I close my eyes against the wave of yearning for him. I miss waking up next to his warmth in the bed, the heavy press of his arm over me, the brush of his lips, the eagerness with which he touched me every morning. I miss that brief time when I was able to pretend, for small stretches, that everything would be okay. That I could be happily married to a man who was so very different than I'd been led to believe.

That everything would somehow work out, and Theo and I would be happy.

I close my eyes against the burn of tears. *I miss you.* The words hover behind my lips, unspoken, and the man I want to say them to is nowhere near. As far as I know, I'll never see him again.

That thought shouldn't tear at my heart, but it does.

There's a soft knock at my door, even though I'd told Lilliana to come up. "Marika?" she calls softly through it. "I've brought up tea and some food. Do you want me to come in?"

"Please," I tell her, raising my voice a little, and the door creaks open a moment later, Lilliana holding a tray with a teapot and two china cups on it, and a plate of scones and jam and cream.

"This might be silly, but I always liked the idea of tea service when I was younger," she says with a small smile. "It's not the sort of thing I was ever allowed—too many carbs and fats, you know." She lets out a chiming laugh, though I can imagine that once, it was nothing to laugh about for her. "I saw you had everything for it in your kitchen, and I thought it might be a nice thing to bring up to you."

"Thank you," I say softly, as she sets it down on the bed and moves over to the other side to come and sit next to me. "And Nikolai?"

"Downstairs, working in your father's old office." She reaches for the teapot, pouring a steaming cup for us both. "He was more than agreeable that he'd wait to see you until you were ready. Or not at all," she adds, setting the pot down and reaching for the cream.

"You don't have to take my side in all this," I tell her gently. "I understand

he's your husband—”

“I'm taking *my* side,” Lilliana says crisply, dropping a cube of sugar into each cup and handing me mine carefully. “The side, I think is right. And I think both my husband and yours were horrible idiots for the way they handled everything.” She gives me a tight smile, her fingers closing around the knife for cutting open the scones in a way that makes me think she's angrier than she looks. “I was furious with Nikolai when he told me everything. And I'm furious with Theo for what he did.” Her voice falters a little, the knife trembling over the clotted cream. “Nikolai told me what he heard over the phone. Marika, I'm so sorry—”

“It's not entirely his fault,” I whisper, wondering even as I say it why I'm defending him. I take a sip of the tea, feeling the warmth spread through me. “I lied to him about so much. He was—” I take another sip, feeling my own fingers tremble. “He was so gentle with me, on our wedding night. It wasn't anything like I expected.”

Lilliana sets the knife aside, reaching for her own cup of tea, her expression patient. And I know I can tell her everything.

If anyone could possibly understand how I feel, the conflict in me, if anyone could possibly help me understand what to do, it's her.

“I thought he would be cold and harsh. Everything—everything was wrong from the beginning,” I admit. “I knew from the moment he took me out on the date, to dinner and the theatre and then went out to the garden with me—” I motion towards the back of the house— “I knew he wasn't what he was made out to be. Something was wrong—someone had gotten it wrong. But Nikolai was so sure. And it was too late—we'd signed the contract, and I couldn't tell him that I wasn't a virgin. I couldn't risk that he'd destroy our family. That was his fault,” I add, taking another sip of the tea. “If I hadn't had that hanging over my head—”

“That's the fault of this entire fucking world,” Lilliana murmurs. “All these wars over territory and business and family names. You would have told him the truth, if so much hadn't been on the line.”

“The thing is,” I whisper, feeling my heart ache, “I think he knows that. I think he regrets it. He said—he said he wouldn't have cared about my

virginity. He doesn't know if he would have felt that way at the time of the contract—but later—he wouldn't have cared. It was the lies that made him angry.”

“It's not your fault,” Lilliana says softly, and I swallow hard.

“Not all of it. Some of it is Nikolai's, and some is Theo's, some is Adrik's—but some of it *is* my fault.” I take another sip of the tea, feeling the sweetness and warmth ease the hurt, just a little. “He gave me a family heirloom for my ring.”

I tilt my hand, looking at it. Adrik hadn't removed it, and in the chaos of the aftermath of Adrik's death and the arrival of the cavalry, so to speak, I hadn't thought about it. I only just now realized that Theo didn't ask for it back, and it's still on my hand. “I should get it back to him,” I say softly. “It means a lot.”

Lilliana looks at the ring, shifting her teacup to one hand so she can reach for mine, turning it in the light. “It's not the kind of ring I would have expected him to give you,” she says quietly. “But it is lovely.” She pauses. “Maybe he wanted you to keep it.”

“I don't think I could feel right, doing that. It should stay in his family. It should—”

The words stick in my throat suddenly, thinking of what happens after the divorce that Theo promised me. He still needs a wife, an heir. I think of the ring on another woman's finger, of it being passed down to a daughter or to a son to give to his bride—children that Theo will have with another woman, and my throat closes over with a sudden, choking hurt.

“What are you thinking?” Lilliana asks softly. “What made you look like that?”

“I just—” I don't know what to say, how to explain it. “Nikolai was so wrong about him,” I whisper. “He was kind and gentle, and he was falling in love with me. I *believe* all of that. I believe everything he said and did was genuine—and I believe that's why he flew into such a rage when he found out that I lied to him...about Adrik and the birth control and everything else. He believed that what I showed him was as real as what he showed me. I

broke his heart, Lilliana.”

She sits there for a moment, still looking at my ring, considering. “Do you really believe that?” she asks quietly, and I let myself think for a few beats, remembering all of it, trying to decide if somewhere in there, Theo deceived me, or I deceived myself.

“I do,” I whisper, and I can hear my voice cracking. “I wish we could start over, without all of the lies and plotting and manipulation. I wish there was a second chance. But there’s not.”

“Are you sure?” Lilliana sets her cup aside. “Do you love him, Marika?”

“I don’t know.” But even as I say it, I know that’s not true. Somewhere in all of it, just as Theo fell for me, I fell for him. And I miss him in a way that I would never have believed was possible.

“Your brother did something similar.” Lilliana is looking down at her hands now, her expression thoughtful. “I don’t want to tell you too much that you might not want to hear about him,” she says with a wry smile. “But—I angered him very much, at one point, while we were on our honeymoon. He punished me with a belt—and...well, I hated it, but I also didn’t hate it as much as it should.”

A small shiver runs through me. I know what she means—I remember that all too well with Theo...and other things, too, that I shouldn’t have enjoyed the way I did.

“I ran away because of it,” Lilliana says softly. “There was a storm when Nikolai found me in the snow and brought me back. He stayed with me while I was sick. And when I woke up—” She breathes in slowly. “I didn’t know if I could forgive him for what he did. But he knew he’d reacted out of anger. He did everything he could to make it up to me. It took time—but we healed that rift, together.”

“Are you trying to say what I think you are?” I set my cup aside, twisting the ring on my finger. “That I should go back to Theo?”

“I wouldn’t tell you what choice to make,” Lilliana says gently. “But what I *am* saying is that if you truly believe Theo loves you, and you love him, and you think he’s genuine in admitting that he was wrong in how he acted—if

you truly think he regrets it...only you can say what *you* will regret.” She presses her lips together, looking at me. “There are plenty of people in this world who would say I was wrong to have stayed with Nikolai, after what he did. That I was wrong to forgive him, and keep loving him, and stay his wife. To let him try to atone—and he *has* atoned, over and over, until there’s no doubt in my mind that he would never repeat his mistakes. But only you know if you would regret not going back to Theo.”

I nod quietly. “I think I’d like to see Nikolai,” I tell Lilliana softly, and she smiles at me, picking up the tray and setting it aside on the desk.

“I’ll go and get him for you,” she says, reaching out and squeezing my hand.

When Nikolai comes up to my room, I see that same regret written on his face. “Oh god, Marika,” he murmurs, walking in and sitting at the edge of my bed. “If I could do it over—”

“I know,” I say quietly. “But you can’t, and neither can I, or Theo—and Adrik definitely can’t.” I take a deep breath, thinking of him—his dead body on the floor, staring at me. “What did you do with him?”

“I think you’d rather not know,” Nikolai tells me. “But I’ll give you the details, if you want.”

I shake my head, swallowing hard. “You really screwed up,” I say softly. “I did, too—not telling you the truth about Adrik. Maybe you and Theo could have worked something else out, if I had. Maybe he really would have married me anyway. Maybe all of this would have been different, if I’d just told the truth.”

“Maybe.” Nikolai looks pensive. “Or maybe it would have been just as bad, in a different way. If I hadn’t given so much credence to what our father said, if I’d been more skeptical, looked into it more—” he takes a deep breath. “I came so close to making the same mistakes our father did, *dorogaya sestra*.” He reaches for my hand, wrapping his broader one around it. “I nearly became him. If not for you shouting sense into me—”

He shakes his head slowly, and I can see he’s having a hard time meeting my eyes. “Our father’s shoes have been harder than I thought to step into,” he says quietly. “But that’s no excuse. My first time making the kind of moves a

pakhan should, and I nearly caused catastrophe for our family—for *you*. You can't take that burden on yourself over a choice that you should have had the right to make. It's made me think of things differently," he adds. "It will be different, if I have a daughter. And if I have a son, I will teach him to think of those things differently. Our world needs to change, in whatever ways I can manage. It will be slow—but it can't stay the way our fathers made it forever."

"No, it can't." I tighten my hand around his. "I forgive you, Nikolai. It will take time before things can be exactly the way they were before—but they will go back to that. I'm not angry with you. I'm—sad. That's all, really. Sad that it all turned out this way, especially—"

I break off, and Nikolai looks at me curiously. "Especially what, *dorogaya*?" he asks, and I give him a small, sorrowful smile.

"Theo and I were happy, for a little while," I whisper. "He wasn't lying about that. He made me happy for a brief time. And I think I did the same for him. If things had been different—"

Nikolai gets that quiet, pensive look on his face again. "I don't think I have the right to tell you what I'm thinking, *sestra*," he says in a muted voice. "But if you are thinking of—"

"Lilliana talked to me." I swallow hard. "I don't know what I'm going to do yet. But—I have things to think about. And if divorce papers come—"

Nikolai raises an eyebrow, and I feel a plan starting to take shape in my mind, slowly.

"If they come," I say, with more firmness than before, "put them somewhere safe. But I won't be signing them. Not yet."

And maybe, I thought as I glanced back at the tea set, thinking of the manor in Ireland, *maybe not at all*.

Theo



Once I knew Marika was safe, once Nikolai told me that the doctor had proclaimed her exhausted but otherwise mostly well, I fled back to Dublin.

It was a form of penance, more than anything else, I think. A way of flagellating myself, going back to the manor where Marika and I had shared some of our happiest moments. As soon as I stepped onto the private jet, I was flooded with memories of her—of what I'd done to the interior of it for our honeymoon, of the taste of champagne on my lips and hers, of her astride me in the seat as I slipped into her warmth and took her for my own, heedless of who else might see.

And I remember that who *did* see was what started the beginning of the end.

The moment I get out of the car in front of the manor, I'm assaulted by the memories. Marika standing here with me, seeing the home I'd built as a testament to my family's struggle and success, the soft wonder on her face as she'd taken it all in. The way that, in that moment, I'd immediately been able to see the future I wanted with her—here, and not in Chicago.

The manor is full of memories, both sweet and pleasurable. Marika's lips and hands and body, tangled with mine—just inside the door, in the living room, in the bed that was ours. I force myself to sleep in it, to lie there looking up at the ceiling and recounting every moment—both the good ones, and the ones where I made her hate me. The ones where I lost control of myself and ruined

everything. I punish myself the only way I know how, with memories and regret, walking the house like a ghost, remembering the things I told her when I showed her every inch of it, the conversations we had in the kitchen, the way I imagined our children running through it in every season. Holidays, summers, sunshine, and snow, I had pictured it all.

Now, I repay all the torment I gave her back to myself, forcing myself to relive all of it again and again.

I remember once I'm there that I didn't take the ring back. *It's better that way*, I tell myself—I can't imagine it on any other woman's finger. I wonder what she's done with it—thrown it away, I expect, a decades-old family heirloom lost, and I blame myself for that, too. I think of the woman I'll have to marry sooner rather than later, if I want to keep my seat, an unknown woman that will almost certainly be chosen for me by the Dublin table this time, and I feel a different sort of guilt, because whoever she is, she'll always be compared to what I've lost.

Marika was the closest I've ever come to what I've longed for, the only taste of love I've had. I won't be able to give it to anyone else, or feel it. I'll keep myself shuttered closed, distant, if only to not make the same mistakes again.

Whatever marriage I enter into next, it will be the most traditional sort. And that, too, is the punishment I've set for myself.

I had the divorce papers sent before I left, with instructions given to my attorney to call me as soon as they were signed. It was perhaps the hardest thing I'd ever had to do—but I made Marika a promise. I kept it to the letter, setting up an account that would transfer to her as soon as the papers were signed, with a considerable sum in it.

There will be no reason for her to speak to me ever again. I will likely never see her again. And every time I remember that, my heart shatters anew.

I told Finn that I didn't know when I would come back to Chicago. I left things in his hands for now—capable hands, although the rest of the table was less inclined to be pleased with my decision. I told them I was going to Dublin to consult with the table there about a new wife, and they believed me. I'll have to return home with some prospects, if I don't want to be deemed a liar—but that's a problem for later.

For now, I've hidden myself away. It's been days, though I haven't counted them. They're too long, without her, and the nights are sleepless.

All my life, I never believed someone could make me feel this way. I never considered the possibility. And I wonder how much of that is why, in the end, I lost it.

If there were anything I could do, any manner of atoning, any measure of groveling that would bring her back to me, I would do it. I would beg her, if need be.

But she was very clear that it would not matter. That nothing could make her forgive me—and I can understand why.

Of all the regrets I carry from our brief marriage, the fact that our last time together was a punishment is the worst. I want our last moments together to have been something different, but there's only that: the fight in the living room, and then that last time holding her, in the basement where she'd been hurt all over again.

I think it's been almost a week, when I venture out into the back garden. There's staff that keeps it landscaped and pruned, changing it with the seasons, and it looks as beautiful as it did when I was here with Marika. I walk down the stone path, feeling a sort of hazy numbness as I look at the shrubs and flowers, and I wonder if I'll ever be able to take the same joy in being here that I did before. If it will ever feel the same—and if it even should.

She can't forgive me—and I'm not sure I'll ever be able to forgive myself.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I almost don't hear the footsteps coming down the path. When I do, I don't think anything of it at first, assuming it's some member of my security coming to tell me something they think I need to know. But the footsteps aren't heavy enough, I realize. They're light, small—and I try to think if the housekeeping staff were meant to come today.

I don't think they were.

Slowly, I turn around. And when I see the figure walking towards me, I feel certain that I must be dreaming.

I see that familiar slender figure, the long blonde hair, the wide blue eyes in that delicate face that I remember the feeling of against my hands, and every part of me aches with a sudden, painful need that sweeps through me so quickly that it takes my breath away.

I feel sure that I'm imagining things. *I've lost my mind at last*, I think as I watch Marika walk towards me, her steps a little hesitant, her lips pressed together nervously. I stand there frozen to the spot, wondering if I'm actually dreaming this, that I'll wake up if I move—if that's the case, I'll stand right here forever.

"Theo." She whispers my name as she comes closer, stopping an arm's length away from me, and I look at her, still disbelieving what's in front of my eyes. I glance down at her left hand, seeing the absence of the ring there, and I feel a sudden, deep surety that this isn't a dream. It's real, and she's not here for any good reason.

"Did you come to deliver the divorce papers in person?" My voice is dry, catching in my throat, and Marika gives me a sad look.

"No," she says softly. "I haven't signed them yet."

I look sharply at her, confusion flooding through me. "Have you not gotten them? I told my lawyer before I left—"

"I did." Her voice is still soft, and I want to listen to it forever. "Your lawyer dropped them off. They're in Nikolai's office—well, our father's office, what used to be..." her voice trails off, and she swallows hard. "Theo—"

"Marika—"

"Let me say what I came here to say," she whispers, the words still catching as she tries to speak. "I flew all the way here, after all." There's that sad smile on her face, and she slowly takes a breath, looking at me with an expression that I can't entirely read.

"Alright," I murmur. If she came all this way to get something off of her chest, I more than owe her that. I won't say a word, until she's finished with whatever it is that she wants to say to me, no matter what it is, or how long it takes.

“I understand,” she says softly, her throat moving as she swallows again, her gaze fixed on mine. “I understand why you did all of it. It’s—it’s hard to forgive, and it’s hard for me not to be angry, sad, and hurt by turns, because of it. It’s hard not to be confused by how it made me feel. I still have things that I need to work through and figure out. But—I do understand. And I don’t deny that I played a part in it all—not that it was all my fault, because it wasn’t. But there were things that I did wrong. And you—”

She lets out a slow breath, her hands knotting in front of her. “You wanted to forgive me for all of it. I felt it—when you held me in that basement, you didn’t want to let me go. You would have taken me home, if I’d asked, and you would have forgiven me everything—or at least, you would have tried. I’m right, aren’t I?”

There’s that small, sad smile on her face again, and I nod slowly. “You are.”

“I thought so.” She takes a deep breath. “I didn’t make this decision lightly. I talked to Lilliana and Nikolai, and I thought, and I cried, and I tried to picture my life without you. It wasn’t easy. And then I tried to picture the one we talked about when we were here together, before—”

Marika closes her eyes briefly, her teeth sinking into her lower lip. “I imagined it, and it was easy,” she whispers, her eyes opening again. “So I got Finn’s number, and I called him, and I asked him where I could find you. He said you were here. So I borrowed Nikolai’s plane, and—” she laughs softly, a sort of rueful sound as she reaches into the pocket of her jeans. “It’s going to take time for me to forgive it all, Theo—and I would understand if it took you time, too. We’d have to rebuild trust in each other, and it won’t always be easy. But our marriage was never going to be, one way or another, and I think—” she hesitates. I can’t stop the sudden soaring of my heart, the hope flooding me that she’s going to finish with the words I’m hoping to hear.

“I think we can try together,” she says softly, and she holds out her hand, palm up.

The ring I gave her is lying there, the emerald glinting in the sunlight, and Marika’s eyes are glinting too as she looks at me, an expression on her face so soft and open that it breaks my heart all over again to see it.

“Ask me again,” she whispers.

It's as if clouds part and the sun comes out, when I hear her say that. I look at her, afraid for a moment that I really am dreaming—but it's real. Marika is standing in front of me, offering me a second chance.

I would be a fool to give it up.

“I don't deserve a second chance,” I tell her quietly, reaching for the ring. I sink down to one knee in front of her, the ring held in my fingers, looking up at the woman who once agreed to be my wife, and who I want to say yes to me again more than I've ever wanted anything in the world. “If you asked anything of me, Marika, I would do it. I would give anything up, walk away from everything I've worked for all my life, change anything you asked of me. I would do whatever it took, for your forgiveness. I won't ever be deserving of it. But if you will say yes to being my wife—”

I take a deep breath, my heart racing in my chest as I look up at her. “I love you, Marika. And I will spend all my life trying to be worthy of your love in return.”

She nods, her eyes filling with tears. “I'll spend my life trying to do the same,” she says softly, holding out her hand. “We'll figure this out together, Theo.”

I reach for her hand, my skin thrilling to the touch of hers, feeling the soft warmth of it again as I slide the ring onto her hand for a second time. It sparkles there on her finger as if it were meant to be there, and she reaches into her pocket again. She hands me the wedding band as I stand up, and I slide it onto her finger, too, the gold shimmering together in the sun.

“You're still wearing yours.” She reaches for my left hand. “I thought you would have taken it off.”

“If you'd signed the papers, I would have. But I think some part of me still hoped—” I take a step closer to her, my heart slamming against the walls of my chest as I look down at the woman that I want and love beyond anything I could have ever imagined, and I feel a deep, aching need spread through me.

I reach out, my fingers grazing over her cheek, stepping closer still, and I feel the shiver that goes through her, see the way her eyes flutter closed.

My other hand rests on her waist, bringing her into me, and I feel the way she

sways into my touch. “Can I kiss you?” I ask softly, and she sucks in a breath, her eyes opening, wide and luminous as she looks up into mine.

“Yes,” she says simply, and I don’t waste another second.

I never thought I would have the chance to kiss her again. I press my lips to hers, soft and slow, savoring every sensation, every brush of her mouth against mine, the sweet heat of her tongue in my mouth, the way my body rouses to hers, the way I can feel her doing the same. Her hands press against my chest, fingers wrapping in my shirt, pulling me closer, and I know she can feel the beat of my heart beneath her fingers.

“I want to take you right here,” I rasp against her mouth. “But I want you in a proper bed. In *our* bed.”

She nods, her lips never leaving mine, and I slide my hands into her hair, kissing her deeply as she arches into me.

I don’t know how we make it up to the bedroom. We’re hands and mouths the entire way there, stripping away clothing, leaving a trail of it, stopping in every room to kiss up against walls and furniture, on the stairs, all the way up to the double doors leading into the master suite, Marika down to nothing but the cream-colored lacy bralette and panties she’s wearing, me down to my underwear, and I push through the doors, lifting her up as we reach the bed, following her down onto it.

I want to be inside of her more than I want to breathe, but I make myself wait. I touch her slowly, replacing every harsh touch from before with soft fingertips and slow kisses, until Marika is arching and begging beneath me. I ask her to tell me yes again and again—as I drag my mouth down her body, as I spread her legs and slide her panties down her thighs, pressing my mouth to the warm wetness there until she gasps and writhes beneath me, hips bucking upwards as her fingers tangle in my hair, and I devour her. I want the sweet taste of her in my mouth forever, and I slide my tongue into her, over her, licking and sucking and tasting every inch of her sweet pussy until she cries out, her thighs trembling as she comes hard on my tongue. Only then, when she’s come for me, do I slide up her body and slide my thumb over her cheekbone gently, hovering over her as I guide my cock between her thighs.

“Tell me you want this,” I murmur softly. “Tell me you want me inside of

you, that you want my cum, that you want all of me. I want all of you, Marika. Forever.”

“I want you,” she whispers breathlessly, arching upwards, her legs wrapping around my hips to pull me closer, to pull me into her. “I want you inside of me—I want *everything*.” She runs her fingers over my chest. “There’s nothing stopping it from—” she takes a breath, looking up into my eyes. “I want you to come inside of me, Theo. And when you do—maybe that will be the start of our family. I—I haven’t taken the pills again. I promise.”

Her voice is soft, earnest, and I believe her. I’m gripped with a sudden, painful desire, and I arch forward as her legs pull me in, pushing myself into her as I feel the sweet velvet grip of her pussy around my length, wet and hot and tight, and I groan, my forehead against hers as I sink into her with a pleasure that’s almost too much, almost beyond bearing.

“I love you,” I whisper, thrusting more deeply into her, my fingers trailing through her hair, tipping her chin up as I kiss her again, groaning with pleasure as I feel her tighten around me, as I feel the hum of her soft moan against my mouth. “I love you—

“I love you.” She wraps her arms around my neck, arching against me, her breasts brushing against my chest. “I love you, and I love this place, and I—” She gasps as I thrust again, as deeply as I can go. “I want our life here. Our future here. I want everything we talked about before, Theo. I want—”

“I want you.” I thrust again, groaning, breathless with the pleasure. “I want it, too. I want all of this—”

“Yes. Yes, oh *god*, yes—” She moans, her words meaning something different now, her hips moving against mine as we both chase our pleasure, and I know we’re both so close, so very close to the edge of what we both need.

I feel her climax in the instant before I lose control, her back arching, her nails digging into my shoulders as she cries out my name. I drive into her, feeling that tight ripple around my length as I groan out her name, too, my lips against her shoulder as I feel my cock throb, the hot rush of my cum filling her as I grind into her, wanting to sink into her forever, for this to never end.

I can't bear the idea of being separated from her yet. When the orgasm ebbs, I roll onto my side, bringing her with me with her leg over mine so that I'm still inside of her, the two of us pressed together, her head on my shoulder.

"I want to stay right here for a while," Marika whispers. "I don't want to leave."

"We don't have to." I kiss her forehead, feeling the soft flutter of her around my cock, already waking my arousal up again, just from the closeness, her damp skin against mine, the scent of her, and the taste of her still on my tongue. "We can stay here as long as we want. Until we're ready to go back."

"And then, once everything is arranged, we'll come back here?" She looks up at me hopefully. "I want to be here, with you."

"Even after—" I don't want to talk about what happened here in this room, but I need to know that she truly wants this, that the good memories outweigh the bad.

"Yes," she says softly. "We'll make more good memories. Together. And the family we'll have together—"

A soft smile curls her lips, and she moves her hips against mine, feeling me already swelling again inside of her. "Maybe we'll start it today," she whispers against my lips, leaning in to kiss me.

That's all it takes. I feel myself go hard, filling her, and I reach for her hip, pulling her tightly against me as I start to move in slow, rocking strokes, taking our time as she kisses me, long and deep.

There's no hurry, and I plan to take my time.

After all, now we have forever.

Epilogue

Marika



Much like I had not all that long ago, I find myself sitting at my vanity table, getting ready for dinner with my family. I'm wearing a slim navy blue dress, belted at the waist with a narrow v-neckline that cuts just a *little* lower than it should, but I know that the eyes looking at me across the dinner table tonight will enjoy it. My long blonde hair is curled, my makeup lightly applied, and I look up at the clock as I reach for the pearl jewelry I plan on wearing tonight—earrings and a necklace gifted to me also not that long ago...but it feels like a different lifetime, now.

The door clicks open, and I look up just in time to see my husband walk in. Theo is already dressed, in light grey trousers and a cranberry button-down shirt, his hair a little messy. Seeing it leaves a small, secret smile on my face, because I know *exactly* why it's messy. A warm flush runs through me, thinking of earlier in his office, of him setting me on the desk and kneeling down between my thighs—

“What are you thinking about, hm?” Theo walks up behind me, his hands resting lightly on my shoulders as he bends to kiss my temple lightly. “You look like you're thinking something dirty, *cailín deas*.”

The nickname sends a shiver through me, and I swivel in my seat, turning to look up at him. “I'm just thinking that my husband insisted that he was too busy to let me reciprocate earlier.”

Theo's fingers stroke over my hair, just at the top, careful not to ruin the loose waves that I curled into it earlier. Tonight, I'm sure, he'll mess them up

in earnest, running his fingers through my hair as he—

“You have that look again.” A smirk twitches at the corners of his mouth—he knows *exactly* how much I want him...every bit as much as he wants me, and as often.

It’s been two months since we came back to Chicago and two and a half months since he and I rekindled our marriage, and while it hasn’t all been easy, I don’t regret the choice I made. Lilliana was right about that—to be sure that the choice I thought I was supposed to make wasn’t one I would regret, because it wasn’t what I wanted.

What I had wanted was to take a chance, to see if Theo and I could repair what had broken between us. To see if we could start over, on a new foundation of honesty, and find a way forward with what we’d found so briefly in each other.

There have been hard conversations and moments of hurt, on both sides. But I wasn’t wrong to believe that there was something there, and neither was he.

Now, we’re finding a way forward together. Tomorrow, we go back to Dublin, to stay there for the foreseeable future while Finn handles things here, and time together alone that we both need.

And I have a surprise for my husband before we leave—other than the one that’s on my mind right now.

My hands settle on his hips, bringing him closer, and Theo’s hand pauses on my hair, his gaze heating as he gets an idea of what’s on my mind. “You already put your lipstick on,” he says in a deceptively calm voice, and I feel my lips twitch in a smile.

“Maybe it was so I could leave some of it on your cock,” I murmur, reaching for his zipper, and I hear his low groan as I draw it down.

He’s already hard, hot and throbbing in my palm as I bend my head, brushing my lips over his cockhead. “You made me leave you like this earlier,” I murmur, flicking my tongue over the tip where a bead of pre-cum is already pearling, moaning softly at the taste on my tongue. “I’ve been thinking about this for the rest of the afternoon.”

“I should tease you—and myself—more often,” Theo groans, his fingers curling against the back of my head as I take him in my mouth, wrapping my lips around him as I slide my mouth down slowly, taking him inch by inch as I enjoy the way I feel him stiffen, the sounds he makes as I take him all the way back to my throat, hands braced on his hips.

I glance at the clock as I press my lips flush with his skin, hearing him moan as my throat muscles contract around him. We don’t have much time—but we have enough. And I’ve learned that Theo never lasts long when I take him into my throat.

I don’t get to suck my husband’s cock as often as I would like. Theo is always eager to please me instead, spending a long time with his mouth between my thighs—which I’ll never complain about—and by the time he’s made me come on his tongue over and over, he’s too impatient to be inside of me to let me use my mouth on him. But from time to time—like now, or when I manage to wake him up in the morning—I get to enjoy this.

We’ve both discovered all sorts of things we enjoy with each other, in the last few months. And soon, we’ll have so much more time, just the two of us, hidden away in the place where we fell in love.

Theo’s breath quickens as I slide off of his length, swirling my tongue around the tip before going down again, taking him as deeply as I can. “Oh god, Marika—” His fingers press against my head, his tipping back as his hips rock against my lips. “Fuck, I’m going to come—”

His cock stiffens in my mouth. “I’d come on your pretty face if it wouldn’t ruin your makeup—oh, *fuck*—”

I feel him throb, feel the hot rush over my tongue, and Theo’s hips jerk, another long moan spilling from his mouth as he thrusts between my lips, dragging his cock free at the last of his orgasm, his hand sliding quickly over his length as I open my mouth the way I know he likes, letting him see his cum spilled over my tongue as he adds to it with the last spurts, his eyes dark with lust.

“Fuck, you’re so fucking gorgeous—” His hand squeezes his cock, rubbing it against my tongue. “Swallow it all, *cailín deas*—”

I obey, looking up at him wide-eyed as I swallow every drop, enjoying his lingering moan as he rubs his cock once more over my lips, and then tucks himself away as I open my mouth again, letting him see that I did what he asked.

“Good girl,” he murmurs hoarsely. “I’m going to enjoy the thought of your lipstick on me while we’re sitting at dinner tonight.”

“That’s why I did it.” I flash him a coy smile, turning back to reapply my lipstick and finish putting on my jewelry before I stand up. Theo’s gaze rakes over me hotly, and I know he’s already thinking of what he’ll do to me tonight.

He steps closer, his hand settling just below my collarbone, looking at the teardrop pearl hanging from the gold chain. I feel a leap of my pulse at his hand so close to my throat, thinking of the filthy things he might do later.

I’ve learned, as we repaired our marriage, that I enjoy submitting to Theo, letting him be rough with me, “punishing” me, even, when it’s a game between us. He’s promised never to strike me in anger or take out his temper on me, and now the games are just games, power and pleasure in bed together—or wherever else the mood strikes.

There are more ways to enjoy each other than I could have ever imagined, and I’ve come to find that I like more of them than I would have thought.

“I should give you a different kind of pearl necklace tonight,” he murmurs, chuckling as he brushes his thumb over my collarbone. “But I can’t keep myself from coming inside of you. At least not until you’re pregnant,” he adds, leaning in to kiss me with a fresh heat in his eyes. “God, just the thought of knocking you up gets me hard—”

“Well—” I look up at him, a secret smile playing on my lips. “If you *really* had plans of coming somewhere other than inside of me tonight...I don’t think adding more can do anything you haven’t already accomplished.”

Theo blinks at me. “Marika—”

I lean up suddenly, my hands pressed to his shirt as I kiss him, overwhelmed with sudden emotion. “Yes,” I whisper against his mouth. “When we fly to Dublin tomorrow, it will be three of us. I wanted to tell you tonight, before

we left. I was going to say something at dinner—but I thought it would be better, just us two.”

Theo is staring down at me as if he’s never seen me before. “You’re sure?” he asks, his voice suddenly raspy. “I’m—you’re pregnant?”

“I’m very sure.” I press my hand to his cheek, and I think I’ve never seen him so happy, not even when I came back to Dublin, though it’s close. “We’re going to have a baby, Theo.”

“Marika.” He whispers my name, almost reverently, and then I’m in his arms, his lips hard on mine as he kisses me until I’m breathless, his forehead pressed to mine. “You’ve made me the happiest man in the world twice now,” he murmurs. “I’m luckier than I could ever deserve.”

“And with any luck, I’ll make you happy a few more times, too.” I smile against his lips. “After all, we have that manor house to fill up with the family you promised me.”

I don’t know if I’ve ever felt such unfettered joy as when Theo kisses me again, and we stand there in each other’s arms, savoring the moment. It makes me glad that I chose now, just the two of us, to tell him the secret I’ve been holding onto all day.

For a while, we both thought we’d lost everything. But now we have everything we could have ever wanted—and more than we could have ever dreamed.

“I’m yours forever,” I whisper against his lips, and like every time I’ve said it before, these are vows I mean. Vows that I plan to keep.

“And I’m yours.” His mouth finds mine again, his arms around me, and I know, all over again, that I made the right choice.

The love we found was unexpected—but it’s a love that will last. A love that we both chose, and that we come back to, again and again.

Forever.

Keep reading for a sneak peek of my next dark mafia romance, [Ruthless Vows](#)! Or [click here](#) to begin devouring your favorite tropes now!

✓ *Forced Marriage*

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Can't get enough of Theo and Marika? [Click here](#) for a bonus scene from Theo's POV.

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Preview of Ruthless Vows

Asha

The small, chiming ring of the bell that lets me know that someone is waiting downstairs cuts through the low moan of the man strapped to the leather bench, momentarily distracting me.

“Asha—*fuck*—” he moans again as I deliver one more stroke from the leather flogger in my hand, his hips jerking rhythmically against the padded leather beneath him, as I watch dispassionately. *Just in time*, I think, glancing at the clock. He had five minutes left before our hour is done, and if he hadn’t come, he’d have had to get dressed and leave while still hard and frustrated.

Not that there was much to stuff back into his boxers. He’d had the smallest cock I’d seen in a long time, and I see a few every night that I work. It made my job—humiliating him while I delivered the punishment he’d paid for—easy.

I give him those last four minutes to relax against the bench while I set the flogger aside—someone else will come in and clean up and sanitize everything before the next client—and undo the leather cuffs holding his wrists and ankles to sides. He shifts, letting out a satisfied, languorous sound as he slowly starts to peel himself away from it, and I turn away, giving him a little privacy. Three more minutes, and I can go and see what it is that I’m needed for downstairs.

“Thank you, Miss Asha,” the man says as he reaches for the robe on the hook near the door, slipping it on. “I’ll see you next week.”

I give him a small, tight smile and a brief nod. He hesitates briefly, as if to

say something else, but thankfully he slips out without another word, closing the door behind him with two minutes to spare. He'll be headed to the hot tub or sauna next, or maybe just to the showers to clean up and dress before going downstairs to leave a generous tip and book his next session. I've never seen him here before, but he was clearly pleased enough to return, which will make Nikolai happy.

The Ashen Rose, the club where I work, is one of the Vasilev family's handful of sex clubs. That handful includes everything from run-of-the-mill strip clubs to higher end versions of the same thing, but with girls that offer extras, and then the Rose itself, which is one of the most luxurious sex dungeons I've ever worked in—and I went through a few places of employment before being hired here. I've stayed ever since, mostly because this place allows me to be employed as a dominatrix, which I *far* prefer to working with a client as a submissive.

Here, unless someone *very* high-paying requests me to play that role, I generally refuse, and Nikolai has never said a word about it. Even when his father was the *pakhan* of the family, there were no issues, primarily since Nikolai has always been more hands-on with the businesses.

A good thing, since that meant when Egor passed, there was no real change in the day-to-day of the employees here.

With the session finished, I slip out of the room and down the hall to my dressing room, closing the door behind me and letting out a long breath, leaning against it for a moment as I close my eyes briefly. A *domme* session at least means I don't have to pander to the client—they're there to be degraded and talked down to—and I don't have to allow myself to be touched in any way, but it's still exhausting. And I haven't really taken pleasure in it in years.

There's a message on my phone from Nikolai, letting me know what that notification from the bell was—he needs me to come down and meet him in the office when I'm finished. *At least it's not a surprise client*, I think to myself as I unlace the latex bustier I'd worn for the session, rolling my shoulders and letting out a soft sigh as I feel the compression from the corset release. I have one more scheduled tonight, but occasionally if someone important shows up unexpectedly, I'll be asked if I mind taking them as an

extra client for the evening. I've been here the longest now of all the girls, and Nikolai trusts and relies on me more than anyone else here. There's an element of personal closeness in that too, or at least...there was.

Don't think about that. I set the corset aside, slipping out of the matching pencil skirt and heels, and slipping on a long silk robe. My last client of the night is one I've seen before, one who has specific requests, but I have time to dress and get ready before he shows up. I loosen the tight French braid I'd had my hair in, running my fingers through it and letting out another sigh as I massage my fingers over my scalp. I'd give just about anything to go home right now—it's been a long week, and it's felt longer than usual. I'm running out of steam faster than I usually do.

The job is starting to take a toll. There was a time when I couldn't see myself doing anything else, but and now more and more often, I find myself thinking about what might be next. What else I might do, if I managed to save enough to start over.

But I won't be starting a new life tonight, and Nikolai is waiting on me.

He's in the office when I knock and push the door open, going through a small stack of what are likely new-client applications. The Ashen Rose is member-only, and membership is prohibitively expensive. Occasionally it's possible to get a guest pass to the club, but only with a background check and a contract signed making the guest liable for the behavior of anyone else they bring with them. Membership here is a status symbol as much as anything else.

"Asha." Nikolai smiles at me, using my stage name. He knows my real name, of course, but I can't remember the last time I heard him use it. It's as much a means of keeping some professional distance between us as anything else, especially now.

He's as handsome as always, in his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows and the first two buttons of his shirt undone, his jacket and tie draped over a nearby chair, his hair slightly mussed from running his fingers through it. *He has a habit of doing that*, I think inadvertently, and feel a small pang in my chest at the reminder that it's only one of the handful of intimate things that I know about him. The kind of thing that someone can't help but pick up, when

they've become closer than just employer and employee with someone—even more than client and submissive, a role I was happy to play for him.

There were nights we spent together outside of the walls of this club, nights where we enjoyed each other without any of the power dynamics or kink—nights where I had, once upon a time, hoped that there might be something more to our relationship for brief moments when I forgot the difference in who we were.

But it was, of course, never, of course, going to happen.

Nikolai was always the heir to the Vasilev Bratva, and I was never going to be a *pakhan's* wife. My lack of innocence and inferior pedigree aside, I wasn't made for the life of a mob boss's wife. For one thing, that sort of woman needs to be malleable, and that's never been a word that could be applied to me.

"You called?" I flash him a smile, settling into one of the chairs across from the desk and tucking the heavy silk robe around my legs.

"I did." Nikolai glances up at me, and I feel a familiar flutter in my chest at those grey-blue eyes catching mine. I've seen plenty of expressions in those eyes—everything from stormy to soft—and though I came to terms with the fact that our days together were over after he told me about his sudden engagement, I can't help that he still makes my heart race a little.

It's hard to get over someone you once cared for. I knew that better than most even before Nikolai. And it's harder still to stop wanting someone. It doesn't help that so little arouses any kind of desire in me these days. Working in a place like this has a way of dulling the senses when it comes to sex, and it takes something special to make me *want*. Nikolai and I had that chemistry.

"Another client?" I glance at the stack of applications. "Someone specific you want me to take on?"

"Always perceptive." Nikolai chuckles, nudging the paperwork aside. "There's a new organization in town." He taps the fingers of one hand against the desk, looking pensive. "I'm concerned about it—I'm hearing things about them that make me think they're upstarts, looking to get a foothold in a city that has very little room for new blood. And I'm not fond of the rumors I'm

hearing about the leader.”

“What’s his name?” I try to summon some genuine curiosity, but I can’t. He’ll likely be the same as any other man who walks in these doors with either a power fantasy or the opposite—a need to shrug off the burden of power and be at someone else’s mercy for an hour or two. I can’t imagine there will be anything markedly different about him, anything to arouse either my interest or my desire.

“Matvei Kotov.” Nikolai opens a drawer and pulls out a file. “I approved his application, since I don’t want to make an enemy of him immediately. But—” he pauses, letting out a breath. “You need to be careful, Asha.”

“Me?” I raise an eyebrow. Nikolai leads differently than his father had—Egor wouldn’t have been concerned with making enemies, but he also wouldn’t have worried as much as Nikolai does about the handling of the girls who work for him. No one was ever allowed to be *really* harmed, of course, but Egor would have allowed the boundaries to be pushed if there was benefit in it for him.

“I’d like you to be the one who takes him on, when he comes in.” Nikolai pushes the file towards me. “You’re the most capable of making sure he doesn’t get out of hand while still pleasing him, and you might even learn something helpful for me.” He gives me another small smile. “If you’re willing, of course.”

I glance at him, flipping open the file. It’s not that I think Nikolai is playing on my feelings for him, exactly—I don’t even know that he knows the extent of the feelings I once had—but I can tell that he’s hoping that I’ll do him a favor and handle this. “He’s paying well, I assume?” I ask wryly. The membership is the same for everyone, of course, but different girls have different pricing structures, and Nikolai likely would have led with mine.

“He is,” Nikolai confirms, as I look over Matvei’s description and photo.

He’s not an unattractive man, not that it really matters to me. I can’t remember having been sexually excited by a client in years, not outside of Nikolai, and I don’t think he really counts. Matvei looks to be in his late twenties or early thirties, with short, close-cropped blond hair and dark blue eyes, leanly built. More attractive than the last client I saw tonight, certainly—

but nothing stirs in me when I look at him.

I'm honestly starting to wonder what it would take to make me really want someone again.

I let my gaze drift down the form he filled out, scanning along the lines, and I wince when I see that he's requesting a submissive only. "You know I don't really like this." I tap the form. "Especially for a man you already have reservations about? I don't want to get on my knees for him while he calls me a good girl."

Nikolai chuckles. "I know." He takes the file back from me as I hand it over, letting out a breath. "I was hoping you might make an exception for me, though."

I did make an exception for you, for a long time. I know that's not what he means, though—that he wasn't referring to the nights we spent in the room upstairs, me lashed to a St. Andrew's cross or cuffed to a spanking bench while he took out his frustrations on my flesh until we were both desperate, every session ending with him fucking me until we were also both thoroughly satisfied. He's asking me to make a *work* exception, not a personal one, and I shove away memories of his fingers hooking into a ring on a collar around my neck, dragging my mouth to his hard cock as he told me to open my mouth for him.

I miss those nights more than I should—especially when there's no chance of them ever happening again. I shouldn't feel that he was my last shot at actually being with someone who arouses me—I'm only twenty-six, for fuck's sake, not exactly an old lady—but lately it's felt as if I'm never going to experience that kind of desire again. I don't even see anyone out in public anymore who stirs me. For a while I even wondered if years of this work had caused my desires to shift towards women—it's rare for women to apply for access to the Ashen Rose—but a few dates proved that wasn't the problem.

It feels like something has gone to sleep inside of me, and just won't wake up.

"I have two exceptions already," I remind him. "They each show up here once a month, and I put on the pretty lingerie and pretend that I like being told what to do, because they pay you a *lot* of money and they tip me well. I

really don't want to add a third, Nikolai. Especially one who you seem to think is going to be difficult to keep from getting out of hand. I like the ones that pay me to keep them in line, not ones who are trying to push my boundaries from the moment they step into the room."

"I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to do," he says quietly, slipping the file back into the drawer. "That's not my style, you know that--"

Except in the bedroom. I keep that thought to myself. It isn't going to help either one of us in this conversation.

--and I've learned my lesson recently in involving others in my business when I'm not sure of the outcome." His lips press together against some thought that I can tell he's not going to share. I'm not sure what it is he's referring to, but whatever it is, it's a memory he doesn't like to think about. "It will be worth your while, financially, to do this. And I would greatly appreciate it. I'm not sure which of our usual submissives will be able to handle a man like this."

"Like what?" I frown. "I know you better than to think you'd allow someone in here that you truly thought would hurt us--"

"According to rumor--" Nikolai shrugs. "Like me, but more reckless, more careless. A man who enjoys bloodshed, but unlike me, doesn't think about the consequences. I think the rules of the club will be needed to keep him in line. And you know how difficult it is, sometimes, for our submissives to remember that the rules are there for their protection."

I know what he's saying--that as a natural *domme*, I don't have that issue. I'll stop a session in its tracks, no question, if a client steps out of line. I don't care about their disappointment or their pleasure. They agreed to the rules when they walked in the door, and they're expected to abide by them.

Not every girl here has that kind of backbone.

I let out a long, slow breath. *Wasn't I just thinking, earlier, that if I could bring in more income I could set myself up for a different life?* More money means more independence, more choices, and that's all I've ever wanted for myself. My life has never been easy, and for all of it, I've sought ways to

make certain that I didn't need to depend on anyone other than myself. That was part of the reason why, even if Nikolai had ever asked, I wouldn't have married him. My life wouldn't have been my own any longer, if we'd *really* been together. My choices wouldn't have been my own. And I could no longer have been wholly myself.

That has always mattered to me more than anything.

If I have to put up with whatever bullshit Matvei Kotov wants from me an hour or two a couple of times a month or so, isn't it worth what I'll get from it? I don't want to do this forever. If I please him, there's no telling how much profit I might be able to squeeze from him before he gets bored.

"Fine." I narrow my eyes at Nikolai. "But if he takes one step out of line—"

"Absolutely," Nikolai assures me. I don't even have to finish my sentence for him to know what I mean. "I approved his application to try and start off on the right foot, but I'll be quick to terminate that relationship if he causes problems. He needs to prove himself to me, not the other way around."

I nod, letting out a slow breath. "Does he have a session booked yet?"

"He's already bought in to the poker game this weekend," Nikolai says. "I intended to set you up as the prize this time. If he wins, that will be his first night with you. If he doesn't, you being there will whet his appetite enough that he'll be eager to book one. If it goes well, perhaps there's a business relationship to be negotiated between his organization and mine. If not—"

This time it's Nikolai who doesn't need to finish his sentence for me to know where he's going with it.

"Alright." I shrug. "I suppose we'll see how the game goes, then."

"We'll see." Nikolai gives me another small smile. "That's all. Go enjoy your break before the next client shows up."

Back in my dressing room, I sink into the chair across from my vanity, leaning my head back and briefly closing my eyes. I know what game Nikolai was referring to—there's a high-stakes poker game run every few months at the club. The prize is always a session with one of the girls, a different one chosen for each game, until we've all done a rotation. It's been

some time since it's been me. It'll be just another night at work, except I'll be expected to put on a show for the men as they play, a distraction to throw them off and make the game more difficult. A throwback to the days when I danced on stage, except far more lewd.

And at the end of the night, I might be spending time with Matvei. *If I'm lucky, he'll step a little out of line but not too much, and Nikolai will rescind his membership.* I feel guilty for thinking it—Nikolai will benefit more from a good working relationship with this man—and it's just another sign, as far as I'm concerned, that I need to start thinking about what my life looks like with a different career path. This one is wearing on me more than I should.

My phone goes off, the alarm reminding me that it's time to start getting ready for my last session of the night, and I get up reluctantly, shedding the robe. *Two more hours, and you can clock out, Asha.*

Just like any other night at work.

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