

Fateful
SEDUCTION

IVANKOV BRATVA BOOK THREE
MYA GREY

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Blurb

She played me, spied on me, plotted my downfall.

But instead of breaking her,

I pulled her in, her lips meeting mine in a searing kiss.

Hell of a move, Luka Ivankov, the infamous mobster king.

Love, that sly bastard, softens me, and I find myself wrestling with feelings I should suppress.

Cross paths with a guy like me, and you'll pay the price.

She's caught up in my dangerous world now, a pawn in my ruthless game.

A slip that's gonna cost her. But not before I let her taste my brand of justice. The imprint of my hands will mark her, the heat between us flaring out of control.

As I grapple with my own feelings,

I smirk at the irony.

Will love be my downfall or my redemption?

Note from Author

Big thanks for diving into the Ivankov Bratva Series, from 'Twisted Seduction' to the wild end with 'Fateful Seduction'. If you skipped Book 1, go check it out – you'll want all parts of this crazy ride!

Sophia and Luka's story is a wild mix of danger, love, and surprises. Not just thrilling moments but the whole dark mafia romance vibe. Heads up: This series has some intense stuff. So, hop in with care and a dash of daring.

Done with this ride?

Jump into the Brutal Kings Series next. More drama, romance, and nail-biting scenes are waiting! Have a blast, and keep enjoying the reads!

Enjoy, and as always, happy reading!

Xoxo,

Mya

*I will never abandon you, even in the depths of our
shared stories. - Mya*

Prologue

“Let’s do this,” I whisper, gripping the pipe like it’s my damn lifeline. A rush of exhilaration pulses through my veins, raw and potent. I’m ready to raise some hell.

A glimmer of hope ignites within me as I eye the old, rusting doorknob. I’ve seen enough action movies to know a thing or two about breaking locks. All I need is one good swing, one good fucking hit, and that damn knob will fly right off. Picture the cool rush of freedom, right?

But then, fucking typical, I hear the murmur of voices outside. My heart plummets, ice-cold dread pooling in my gut.

“Cock-blocking bastards,” I grumble, my gaze darting to the locked door. I shove the pipe back under the old cloth, concealing it as best as I can. Can’t risk those fuckers finding my ticket out of this shithole. Not when Nilo’s life hangs by a thread.

Crossing the room, I kneel next to Nilo, his face as pale as a ghost’s. Each breath he takes is shaky and labored. He needs the drugs. Now.

Then the door creaks open, revealing two of Aleks’s goons, their smug faces setting my teeth on edge. I force a false smile, my heart hammering an erratic tattoo in my chest.

“Hey, assholes,” I call out, injecting a bubbly note into my voice. “Nice timing.”

Seeing the two meatheads, my lip curls in disgust. One of them eyes me up and down, a grotesque smile playing on his lips. His gaze lingers far too long on my boobs, and it takes every ounce of my self-control not to gouge his fucking eyes out right then and there.

“Like what you see?” I quip, forcing a flirty grin. Inside, I’m seething. But right now, I need them comfortable, distracted, their guard down. So, I swallow my pride and play along.

“Aw, look at you two,” I coo, leaning against the wall as the goons move toward Nilo. “Doing your jobs and everything. Your shithead boss would be so proud.”

I eye them both, assessing. One’s built like a fucking bear, broad and hulking, while the other is wiry, his eyes mean. I figure he’s the one I have to watch out for.

I start to walk, my every move calculated. Slow, casual, like I’m just bored and not planning to bash their skulls in.

The wiry one grunts, yanking out a syringe. I watch as he thrusts the needle into Nilo’s arm. My stomach clenches.

“Easy there, Doc,” I taunt. “I think you missed his vein.”

He sneers at me over his shoulder. “Shut up, bitch. One more word, and I’ll make sure you regret it.”

I chuckle, feigning nonchalance. “Promises, promises.”

My eyes flicker over to Nilo. The sight of him like that...it’s a jolt to my core. He was always the light in the room, back in the day when we went to the same high school. Nilo was that kind of guy who’d give you the shirt off his back if he thought you needed it more than he did.

We’re the same age, both twenty-six now, but while I was learning the art of pole dancing and how to kick ass, he was charming the entire high school with his damn infectious laugh and goofball antics.

Now, look at him – slumped in a grimy corner, life ebbing away with every second. It’s a fucking tragedy.

Man, Sophia’s got it rough. I still remember when I first ran into her back when she was just a kid trying to keep up with the morning rush at The Morning Brew.

But she’s got fire in her eyes, the same spark I see in the mirror every morning. I’ve never met anyone as stubbornly determined. There she was, barely out of high school, her life a whirlwind of responsibility. She reminded me of, well, me. It was like looking at my own damned reflection. We were two peas in a pod, each dealing with our own brand of hell. No wonder we clicked.

There's a pang in my chest, a tug of shared history, but I don't have time for sentiment; right now, I just need the right fucking moment.

The wiry one backhands Nilo, snapping his head to the side. Nilo doesn't even flinch, already too far gone in his drug-induced haze.

The other shithead lets out a mean laugh. It's a nasty, disgusting sound.

My fingers brush the rough cloth that's hiding my weapon. I'm so close. Just need to time this right.

"I gotta say, it's kinda laughable, you two gorillas walloping a twig of a guy who's out cold," I shoot back, letting my voice drip with sarcasm. "But let's cut the crap. The only scary thing about you two is your stank. Seriously, you take a dive in a septic tank or something?"

The bear-like one growls, turning toward me. And that's when I strike. With a swift motion, I pull the pipe from its hiding place, gripping it tightly.

"You two fuckers are about to have a very bad day," I say, a vicious grin spreading across my face. "Just thought you should know."

I swing, putting all my strength behind the pipe. It connects with his knee, and he goes down with a roar, clutching at his leg. "Still feeling smug, big guy?"

"Take her down!" he howls, but I'm already moving, stepping into the wiry one's space. He steps back, surprise flashing across his face. It's cute that he thought I wouldn't fight back.

I was just biding my time.

I swing again, but he's quick. He sidesteps, the pipe whistling past his face. He lunges forward, but I meet him with a knee to the stomach. He doubles over, gasping for air. I use the momentum to bring the pipe down on his back, hearing the gratifying thud of metal against flesh.

The room erupts into chaos. The bear-like one is back on his feet, but he's hobbling, his face twisted in pain. The wiry one is trying to get up, his back arching.

"Get up, you fucker!" I taunt, dancing out of the bear-like goon's reach. "Come on, show me what you got."

He lunges, but I dodge, the pipe singing through the air as I smack him right in the gut. He stumbles, his eyes going wide, and I take my chance.

With a grunt, I swing the pipe one more time, the metallic thud echoing in the room as it connects with the side of his head. He crumples to the ground, out cold.

Grinning triumphantly, I turn to the remaining one. "Your turn. Ready for a dance, twiggy?" I challenge, grinning at the wiry goon who's managed to stagger back onto his feet.

He growls, launching himself at me. I pivot, bringing up the pipe to block his attack. He's fast, but I'm faster. I've danced around men much bigger, much stronger, for a living.

Our fight is a messy, brutal dance. He swings, I duck. I jab, he blocks. We're a whirl of flying fists and clashing metal. Each hit I land is a symphony, each block a well-rehearsed dance move.

"Is that all you've got?" I taunt, my smile never leaving my face. I've taken harder hits from slobbering drunks. This guy's a joke.

In response, he flings himself at me, aiming for my stomach. I twist, letting his fist pass harmlessly by before I ram my elbow into his jaw. There's a satisfying crunch, and he reels back, clutching his face.

I laugh, a wild, fierce sound. "Poor baby," I mock, winding up for the knockout blow.

This is going to be good.

But then, there's a moment of white-hot pain.

Fuckballs!

A pair of hands close around my throat, lifting me off the ground. I kick, thrashing against the hold, but it's useless. The bear-like goon has got me in a vice-like grip.

“Night-night, little bitch,” he grunts in my ear, his hot breath reeking of cheap vodka and cigarettes.

My world fades to black.

Chapter 1

Sophia

Two damn days.

It's like Luka's fallen off the face of the Earth since that weird phone call at the lake house. That night, we connected. There was something real between us. He was more than just a mob boss; he was a man. And I am falling for him...hard. But spilling my guts to him? Hell, that would be like painting a target on my back.

Shit, I was about to confess everything to him.

I'm fucking insane!

After the call, it was like someone flipped a switch in him. The warmth, the openness...all gone. He was cold, distant. We packed up and left the lake house like we were running from a damn ghost.

I chew on my lower lip. But then I paste on a bright smile.

Gotta keep up the act for Yulia.

"Miss Maria, is Ms. Ivankov ready for her lesson?" calls a man from the stables, his voice rich and deep.

I spin around, coming face to face with a pair of smoky eyes set in a ruggedly handsome face. Dark hair. Dark eyes. A killer smile. Great, the horseback riding coach. Just what I needed.

"I'm sorry. I'm Sophia," I correct him, my tone polite but firm. "Maria no longer works here."

"Miss Sophia..." His eyebrows shoot up. "Apologies for the mix-up. I'm Mikhail."

"Just Sophia," I reply, forcing nonchalance into my voice. "Drop the 'Miss.'"

He chuckles, the sound warm and inviting. "Sophia it is." He takes a beat, his gaze a bit too intense as he studies me. "Nice to meet you, Sophia."

“Well, nice to meet you too, Mikhail,” I say quickly, aiming to steer the conversation away from personal territory. “Ms. Ivankov is ready for her class now.”

He glances over at Yulia, then back at me. A knowing smile curls his lips, but he simply nods. “Right, let’s get to it then.”

What the hell is he so smug about?

“Ms. Ivankov, did you pick a horse for today?” Mikhail’s attention shifts, his voice more formal as he addresses Yulia.

“Chestnut, of course!” Yulia skips excitedly towards one of the stables.

“Absolutely; let’s get you saddled up.” Mikhail flashes a Hollywood-worthy smile, then winks at me.

I plaster on a polite smile in response, my mind going a hundred miles an hour.

Where the fuck are you, Luka?

My mind feels like it’s stuck on replay.

But who could blame me? Luka’s like catnip to my inner kitten. He’s got this presence. This unmissable, unignorable presence that’s like a shot of vodka – sharp and intoxicating. And despite myself, I’ve started to...

Started to what, Sophia?

I miss him. *God*, I miss him.

My eyes scan the joint, half expecting Luka to just pop up out of nowhere. Instead, I get a full view of this Ivankov playland.

I can’t help but stare.

Sure. Why not?

Horse stables, lawns that stretch forever, and a mansion that could probably house half of Chicago – it’s like some wild fantasy someone dreamed up.

Probably hides a dragon or two.

I snort at my own stupid joke.

“Hey, Sophia, this is Chestnut!” Yulia’s voice rips me out of my head. She’s got this handsome horse by the reins, and his coat’s as shiny as a freshly polished boot.

“I see. Chestnut is a real stunner!” I holler back, my heart going all soft seeing her happy little face. For such a little squirt, she has more spunk than half the adults I know. And now she proves it by clambering fearlessly into the saddle as if she was born to be there.

I’m watching her head off to her lesson when I get that eerie feeling like somebody’s staring holes in my back. I wheel around, and there she is. This petite woman, not much more than five feet tall, dressed in a maid’s outfit that’s two sizes too big. Brown hair scraped back into a bun, glasses perched on the edge of her nose.

She’s gaping at me, wide-eyed and frozen.

“Oh! Hello there,” I say, throwing my hands up. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

My reassurance doesn’t seem to help. She stumbles back, trips on thin air, and lands ass-first in a pile of hay.

“Oh, damn! You okay?” I can’t help the laugh that slips out. She’s like a cartoon character come to life.

“I...I...” she sputters, her cheeks flaming up.

“Let’s start over. I’m Sophia.” I smile.

She blinks up at me, still sitting in the hay. “I’m...I’m Anya.”

“Nice to meet ya, Anya,” I grin, offering her a hand up. She takes it, her fingers trembling a bit.

I straighten up, dusting off the front of my shirt. “You new here too, Anya?”

She nods, biting her lower lip. “Been here for six months,” she says quietly.

“Six months? Huh.” I scratch at my chin, pretending to ponder. “I’ve been here for, what, less than a week? Guess I just broke your record for ‘newest kid on the block.’”

Anya blinks, then giggles nervously. The sound is quiet, almost lost in the distant whinnying of horses.

“Just messing with you,” I respond, my chuckle coming out a little huskier than intended. “My first day? Nearly did a death-defying tumble down the stairs. But Luka – I mean, Mr. Ivankov – he—”

A sudden rush of warmth floods through me, the memory of Luka’s solid form beside me, saving me from the epic plunge. I shake my head, shoving that memory back down where it belongs.

Not now, Sophia.

“I mean, lucky for me, I didn’t turn into a pancake on my first day of work,” I correct quickly, my voice breezy.

She gives a hesitant giggle, and I take it as a victory.

“Guess we’re the newbies, huh?” I say, grinning at her. “Let’s be friends.”

She gives a hesitant smile back. “Friends?”

“Sure,” I say, clapping her on the shoulder. “Welcome to the club. You, me, and the rest of the outcasts.”

There’s a momentary shift in her eyes then, a quick flicker of something darker, more desperate before she masks it with a forced smile.

What was that?

“So...got any insider info on sidestepping the dragon lady?” I ask, quickly switching gears as I lean closer, my voice low and tinged with playful sarcasm.

She gives me a confused look. “Dragon lady?”

“Svetlana,” I explain. “Head maid. You know – tall, scary, could probably kill a man with her glare.”

Anya’s gaze flickers at the mention of Svetlana, like she’s battling an inner demon. Then she morphs back into her usual shy self.

Guessing we probably need another change of subject, I try something else. “Can I ask you something?” I throw in casually.

“Ask what?” she responds.

“Your age. You look...pretty young. Are you from one of the colleges nearby?”

After a moment’s hesitation, she reveals, “Me, I’m twenty. But not from here.”

“I kind of figured that from your accent,” I admit.

“I am from Kosova,” she discloses, her voice matter-of-fact. “My mama, she...sell me to work here.”

“Sold you?” I sputter, feeling a chill creep up my spine. “You mean, like...human trafficking?”

She nods, her expression remaining calm, as if she’s discussing the weather and not her life-shattering ordeal. “Yes. It’s quite normal where I come from. Many girls...they are taken away.”

“But why are you here, then? If you were sold, I mean,” I stammer out, my brain whirling with the reality of Anya’s casual confession.

“They thought I could be a...how do you say...courtesan?” She struggles with the word, her accent thickening. I don’t correct her by saying “prostitute.” If “courtesan” makes her feel better, that’s her business. Still...what the hell? Seeing my appalled expression, she hurriedly adds, “But I was not...attractive enough for them.”

I feel a flush of anger coloring my cheeks. “Not attractive enough? That’s...that’s sickening!”

Not as sickening as human trafficking, but I’m not going to rub her nose in that.

Anya shrugs, a touch of bitterness in her eyes. “I was *lucky*, in a way. Less...desirable meant less danger. The Ivankov household needed a maid. I was...spared.”

“Spared?” I echo, my mind struggling to process what I’m hearing.

Anya only gives me a sad, almost apologetic smile. “I know it is hard to understand, Sophia. For you, it is horror. For many of us, it is just...life.”

I press my lips together, but I feel my eyes soften. I’m not so different from Anya here, not when I’m neck-deep in my own mess. Forced into nannying and lying to spy for a monster, my brother and best friends’ lives are hanging by a thread.

“Fuck,” I curse under my breath, causing Anya to blink in confusion. For two whole days, I’ve heard jack shit from those bastards. My secret burner phone’s been as quiet as a church on a Monday.

Then, out of nowhere, two men in sharp suits pass by. They’re big, their eyes moving over everything, serious and ready.

“Do you notice there are more guards around here?” I ask Anya as I eye them. They’re built like brick shithouses, their eyes scanning the area, alert and watchful. The air around them is charged, the silent command they carry clearly stating they mean business.

She nods. “Yes. There is something happening...” Anya’s voice trails off, turning into a whisper. She moves closer and whispers in my ear, “They found spy stuff in the mansion.”

My heart freezes.

“Who...? When?”

“Few days ago, I guess. Don’t know much. They do not tell us maids.” Anya shrugs. “I heard from Polina – some of the staff, they have...gone missing.”

My blood runs cold.

Holy crap!

“Missing? What do you mean?”

She shrugs again, looking uncomfortable. “Like, they are not here anymore. Some say they got in trouble. Others think... Well, they might be...dead.”

Dead?

The word echoes in my head, a cold chill snaking down my spine. Fear barrels into me like a sucker punch to the gut.

Shit!

My stomach twists and turns, ready to revolt.

I can't get caught. I can't! I won't let them end me.

Nana, Wren, Nilo... They're all depending on me.

“Excuse me. I- I need to go...” My voice is a croak, barely audible. I feel the clench in my stomach, trying to ignore the way it lurches. Without waiting for a response, I bolt towards the nearest bathroom.

I don't even manage to lock the door before I'm over the toilet, hurling out my breakfast.

Chapter 2

Luka

“Blyat,” I curse, holding the remains of the spyware we found scattered throughout the house. “Fucking six of them.”

Dimitri snorts, tossing another piece onto the table. “Make it seven.”

Fucking rats.

“Spy shit in our house, Luka. Stabbed in the back in our own damn home.”

My hand tightens around the piece of spyware, the metal edges biting into my flesh. The pain is a welcome distraction from the blinding rage simmering beneath the surface. If I could get my hands on Aleks and his rats, I would tear them apart with my bare hands. No mercy.

“I don’t fucking believe this,” I snarl, grinding my teeth together so hard I can taste iron on my tongue.

A guttural scream tears through the silence, coming from the depths of the compound. It barely makes me flinch; I’m too wrapped up in the fucking spyware that’s invaded my home.

“They’re not holding up well,” Dimitri observes, a dark amusement dancing in his eyes as another scream rips through the air. The sound, though dull, still manages to bounce around the large expanse of our base.

“They can fucking choke on their own screams for all I care,” I spit out, my knuckles white around the shard of spyware.

Our rats, Aleks’s rats, squealing their guts out in our cells. They’re nothing more than a distraction I don’t need. A distraction I can’t afford. Not when there’s a seven-year-old and a nanny upstairs who shouldn’t have to listen to this shit.

“What’s the plan?” Dimitri asks, his usual casual demeanor replaced by a tension that’s evident in the set of his jaw.

“Make ‘em talk and find every fucking bug in this place. And then, we’re going after Aleks. He’s not going to see it coming.”

Suddenly, the door slams open. Grisha staggers in, sweat dripping from his forehead.

“Janitor’s almost done,” he reports. “All fingers are busted. He’s on the edge.”

I look at him sharply, my heart hammering against my ribs. The janitor’s screams have been ringing in my ears, the sound of bones snapping under pressure becoming an unwelcome familiarity.

“Good,” I grit out, my fists clenching, “then finish it. We need that info.”

Grisha nods, turning back toward the door. He knows what’s at stake. We’re on the edge, and it’s only a matter of time before we tip over.

I throw a glance at Dimitri. His expression doesn’t flicker. It seems as if he’s watching a rerun of a dull TV show.

“We’ll crack him open, Luka,” he assures me. “Aleks won’t know what hit him.”

As if on cue, Erik walks in. His eyes are focused, determination etched into the lines of his face. “I’ve got news,” he says, tossing me a small device. “We’ve got some problems.”

I nod, catching the device in my hand. It’s a burner phone, one of many we use to communicate without risking our lines being tapped.

“What’s the news?” I ask.

“He’s expanding, Luka,” Erik says, his voice grim. “The fucker took over the Chicago Outfit’s territory.”

My blood runs cold at his words. Angeli di Fuoco. The Chicago Outfit – the most powerful Italian-American crime family, its roots dating back to the Prohibition era. The fact that Aleks was able to take them down... It’s unsettling. Not to mention the strategic advantage he now holds.

“And Armando di Fuoco?” I ask, dreading the answer.

Erik’s silence is like a slap, harsh and full of undisguised contempt.

“Dead,” he spits out, a nasty expression spreading across his face. “Aleks didn’t just off him; he slaughtered the sons, too.”

My grip tightens on the burner phone, the plastic creaking under the pressure. Aleks has made his move. Now, it’s time for us to make ours.

“The only one left now is Lucia,” Erik grunts, his fingers tracing the rough stubble on his chin.

“Lucia?” Dimitri asks, a frown creasing his brow.

“Armando’s youngest,” I clarify, bitterness biting at my words.

“Her old man and brothers are six feet under, thanks to Aleks and his fucking rats,” Erik continues. “She’s the only one holding the reins now.” He shifts uneasily before adding, “But she’s not cut out for this life. She’s a jewelry designer. Runs her own brand. Just turned 29, and she probably knows fuck all about our line of work.”

“Jesus,” Dimitri mutters.

“It’s all going to shit, quick,” Erik continues his grim update. “They’re scrapping among themselves; Aleks is pulling their boys to his side. ‘Cause Lucia, she’s a woman. Now that they’re on the ropes, other gangs are circling for the kill.”

“Fuck!” I spit. “She needs our help, Erik,” I command, “Tell her we’re offering it.”

“She may not trust us.” Dimitri frowns as he states the obvious.

“We’re not after trust, D.” Irritation lines my words. “We’re offering assistance. Her old man was indebted to ours. It’s time she steps up.”

Realization makes its way into Dimitri’s eyes. “We’ve got no choice but to wade through the shitty maze Aleks threw us

headfirst into. It's the only damn way."

"All the more reason to speed things up here," I growl, turning toward Erik and giving a nod that I know he'll understand.

Erik exits; no bullshit goodbyes, just the thud of his boots echoing away. I pivot, brandishing the device at Dimitri, my jaw clenched so tight it could shatter teeth.

"Where's Aleks holing up?" I ask.

Dimitri's got that raw, ruthless look today, like a weapon ready to fire. His jacket hangs open, shirt half-unbuttoned, showing off a mess of tattoos. Each one is a crude testament to some fight, some shit he's survived. He doesn't give a damn as he tosses his boots up on the table, looking every bit the defiant bastard he is.

Pulling hard on his cigarette, he gives a grimace, a display of anger that barely conceals the storm brewing in him. His eyes lock onto mine, cold and hard, promising nothing but trouble.

"That Aleks, he's one slick son of a bitch," he says. "We've located three of his main spots, but his muscle's thick on the ground." He leans in, crushing out his cigarette. "Got one place he just picked up buzzing with more of his boys than usual. There's something he's keeping under wraps there, no doubt about it."

His gaze drills into mine, practically a blazing forge; I sense an unspoken strategy forming in the dark depths. "I'm gonna get a closer look at this shithole. Aleks can't sit still, the slippery fuck. We'll catch him with his pants down."

"Good idea." I nod as I mull this over. I'm glad my team is proactive.

"So, what's the deal, Luka? Gonna hide in the bunker like a damn hermit?" The change comes without warning, his posture retracting. He's assessing me with a sharp, piercing look that shifts the ground beneath us, a question that sideswipes me.

“I’m not fucking hiding,” I spit out, the words leaving a sour taste in my mouth. Since my return from the lake house, if anything, I’ve been too fucking focused. I’ve been *working* non-stop.

My mind is spinning, replaying the messed-up scene at the lake house over and over. It wasn’t just a one-off; it was a damn ticking time bomb ready to blow everything apart. Sophia... She gets to me in ways I can’t even explain. Makes me feel things I shouldn’t, nice things. And it scares the hell out of me, like I’m trapped, sinking deeper and deeper every time I’m with her. It’s fucked up, that’s what it is.

I’ve gotta put some distance between us. Before it’s too late. Before I lose my fucking mind.

“Sure you’re not,” Dimitri drawls, his eyes shifting to a monitor off to the side.

Blyat.

There, in soft grays and blacks, is the feed from Yulia’s room. Sophia’s there too, of course. She’s wearing some kind of white nightdress that’s far too revealing for my liking. Her hair falls around her shoulders as she leans over to press a kiss to Yulia’s forehead after gently placing a cover over the child. My heart clenches a little as I watch her.

Fuck. She’s doing something to me.

“Tell me you’re not thinking about her,” Dimitri challenges, nodding toward the screen.

Dammit.

My lips seal tight, almost white with the force of holding back a volcano of frustration and pure desire. Every ounce of self-control is stopping me from storming into Yulia’s room, grabbing Sophia with a force that says she’s mine, and dragging her into my bed, a place she damn well should be. The images playing in my head of her beneath me, willing and wanting, are driving me to the edge of reason. They’re practically screaming at me to take what I damn well want, consequences be damned. It’s sick, this intense, gnawing need,

a kind of madness that doesn't give a shit about right or wrong.

"I guess our little nanny doesn't count as a distraction."

"Fuck off, D. I'm trying to work on taking down Aleks once and for all," I grind out, doing my best to keep my eyes off the screen.

He ignores me and presses on. "So, you don't have feelings for her?"

"I say fuck off, D!" I growl, my hands clenching into fists. But does the bastard listen? *No*.

"Didn't you also ask me to check up on her grandmother, hmm?" he retorts, smirking like a Cheshire cat. "Even bought her one of those fancy-ass hospital beds."

"Her grandmother was sick, and I didn't want Sophia distracted from Yulia," I respond, grinding my teeth. The less Sophia worries, the better she can focus on Yulia. It's as simple as that.

He lets out a mocking laugh. "Sure, sure. And paying off her entire year's rent? I suppose that was also so she could focus on Yulia? Yeah, right," he snorts.

I shoot him a glare that could freeze hell over, but he just chuckles, clearly not buying it.

I roll my eyes. "Get out, D." Fucking bastard.

Dimitri's chuckles cut off like he's been slapped, the room going dead silent. He leans in, his voice urgent and carrying a dark hint of menace. "Got more shit to spill, Luka. It's about Nilo Williams. Bastard's been ghosting everyone like he dropped off the face of the earth."

"Vanished?" I shoot back, my brows pulling together in a tight frown, the weight of his words hitting me square in the chest.

Dimitri gives a sharp nod, flicking non-existent cigarette ash onto the floor, lowering his voice to a grave rumble. "Yeah, word on the street is, the guy's knee-deep in crap so nasty he ain't ever crawling back out."

I stare at him silently as I process this new information.

What the fuck does this mean?

Chapter 3

Sophia

I walk into the maid's quarters – a palace in its own right. It's larger than the house I grew up in, decorated with Russian luxury. Gold accents, ornate fixtures, the works. The room's abuzz with quiet whispers. Svetlana's meeting is about to start.

Holy hell. I eye the horde of maids gathered in the room. Do the Ivankovs employ the entire female population of Russia?

I keep my gaze low, avoiding the intensity of the curious stares boring into me. It feels like walking onto a stage in the middle of a performance – all spotlights and hushed anticipation. I keep my face blank, trying to exude a calm I don't feel. My heart thuds in my chest, a wild drumbeat against the quiet whispers around me.

I head toward a corner where the least number of gossipy hens are huddled. The room hushes down, and I feel eyes on my back like ants on a sugar trail.

I don't have to be a genius to know what's going through their minds. I can almost hear their whispers.

“There goes the ‘special’ one,” they whisper loud enough for me to hear, their glances sharp enough to cut glass.

Why wouldn't they talk? In a place where rules are as hard as iron, I'm the anomaly, the special case. I can see their curiosity, their envy, and even their disdain mixed in those sideways glances.

“She's got her own phone,” a voice whispers a little too loudly from my left, a note of resentment lacing her words.

“Even eats with the young miss,” another voice chimes in. The room fills with a murmur of agreement.

“Bet she's screwing the boss,” yet another voice cuts through the whispers, a toxic blend of curiosity and spite. “Gotta be. Why else would she get all this special treatment?”

The room buzzes with laughter, and more than a few agreeing hums.

I don't show any emotions, walking past the hushed voices and veiled glances. It's not like I asked for any of this. But they don't know that. They only see the exceptions, the privileges.

Two days back, Svetlana blasted into my room like a hurricane. My heart was pounding, thinking it was Luka. Dumb, I know, but I couldn't help it. I'm always waiting, hoping he'll show up unannounced. That night was no different. Yet it was Svetlana in the doorway, eyes on me like I'd just stabbed her favorite doll or something.

She threw my phone on my bed with a thud. "Use it," she snapped; her eyes were ice. Cold. Calculating.

"What—?"

"But...why?" I asked.

"It's an order from Mr.Ivankov, nothing more," she snapped.

Before I could ask her more questions, she interrupted me again. "You know why." Her icy stare made me want to jump up and slap her face.

Of course, I knew why. It's because I'm good at my job. Because Yulia likes me. Because I'm not just another maid in the Ivankov household, I'm Yulia's friend. Or at least, that's how Yulia sees me.

"And from now on, you're to have meals with Ms. Ivankov. That's also an order from Mr. Ivankov," Svetlana added.

Focusing back on the women gathered in the room, I swallow hard, trying to piece together what's happening. I haven't seen Luka in what feels like an eternity, and Yulia's starting to worry. He could at least— My thoughts break off as I feel eyes on me.

Turning, I spot Anya in the corner, the worry lines etched on her face. I try to give her a reassuring nod, but she just frowns and looks away.

Okay. Anya and I aren't quite buddy-buddy yet. I get it.

The chattering dies down, replaced by a chilling silence. And then, like a general entering a war room, Svetlana strides in. Her icy glare could freeze vodka.

Her eyes land on me, and my heart stops dead in its tracks.

Fuck me, this is it.

Suddenly, my mind starts racing. Scenarios flying through my head like bats out of hell. Anya had mentioned something about spyware, about people disappearing. Could it be?

Are they onto me?

I can feel paranoia creeping up my spine, a prickle of fear that threatens to consume me whole. Getting busted as a spy in a place like this isn't just a slap on the wrist; it's a one-way ticket to a hellhole. Or worse.

Just as I'm mentally preparing my last will and testament, Svetlana's voice rings out, cold and clear. "This Saturday," she announces, "we are hosting a birthday party for Miss Yulia."

Wait, what?

An explosion of relief. Over a party announcement? I let out a chuckle, uncontrolled and loud. I instantly wish I could grab that laugh and stuff it back into my mouth. Too late. Every maid in the room has spun around to stare at me. Guess it's my debut as the court jester.

"I...I," I stammer, caught in the merciless glare of Svetlana. "I apologize. I thought...I just... Yeah."

Svetlana's stare is turning frostier than Siberia in the winter. "We're not here for a comedy show, Miss Williams," she bites out. The air in the room drops a few degrees. Ignoring me with a vengeance, she commands everyone's attention. "We are celebrating Ms. Ivankov's birthday this Saturday. The venue is the Sunset Pavilion. We're catering for a hundred guests."

A hundred people? I blink, taken aback. Who the hell knows a hundred people, let alone wants them all at their birthday? Especially a little kid. The questions whirl in my mind, but I stay quiet.

“Chef Antonio,” Svetlana directs her gaze towards a burly man with a chef’s hat, “I need a carnival feast from your team. Something grand, something extravagant, and something absolutely delicious. You have free rein; just make it unforgettable.”

“And the tasting?” Antonio, with his thick Italian accent, sounds more like he’s confirming than asking.

“Mr. Ivankov would like to have a tasting by tomorrow,” she replies crisply.

Antonio nods and turns to his crew – an eclectic mix of tattooed, muscular men who look more suited to a mobster movie than a kitchen. A tattooed giant with a butcher’s apron starts discussing meat cuts animatedly with a skinny guy in a toque. I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing. The Godfather meets Hell’s Kitchen – that should be a reality TV show.

Turning toward two women, Svetlana continues, “For the decorators, Tatiana and Olga, we’re going for ‘Lavish Grandeur.’ I want every inch of the Sunset Pavilion to sparkle. Be creative, be lavish.”

Ten thousand questions are popping into my head at once.

Then she sweeps her gaze across the room, landing on me for a second before continuing, “And we’re bringing in a circus crew for Yulia.”

I almost swallow my tongue.

A circus? For Yulia? Who decided that? Luka?

Suddenly, a phantom touch ghosts over my shoulder. I flinch. Turning, I find Anya right there, looking as inscrutable as ever.

“Geez, Anya. You scared me. You’re like a ghost.” I chuckle, trying to lighten the mood.

Ignoring my quip, Anya leans in, her voice barely above a whisper. “It’s not just a party, Sophia.” Her words are an ice-cold splash of water. The amusement seeping out of me just a moment ago freezes in its tracks.

“Wh-What do you mean, not just a party?” My voice is hushed, matching hers. My brow furrows, my mind whirring with a thousand possibilities. What kind of other “party” are we talking about here?

For a split second, an evil grin flickers across Anya’s face, like a glimmer of moonlight on a dark pond. But it’s gone as quickly as it came, leaving me wondering if I’d imagined it. Her eyes, though, are a different story – hard, cold, devoid of any semblance of warmth or humanity. It’s like staring into the eyes of a shark.

In a voice so low, it’s practically a breath of wind, she mutters, “Aleks wants you to get ready.”

The name hits me like a sucker punch, knocking all the air out of me. “Anya...you’re...” The rest of the words stick in my throat as if my vocal cords have gone on strike.

My heart skips a beat. Aleks. She’s on his side. Anya, the aloof maid, is also Aleks’s spy.

“Quiet!” Anya hisses, making me snap my mouth shut faster than a mousetrap. That chilling smile she wore moments ago vanishes as if it was never there, replaced by the usual wallflower act I’d expected from her.

I watch, flabbergasted, as she recedes back into the crowd, a chameleon in human clothing. It’s like witnessing a two-faced monster shed its skin, transforming back into a harmless bunny.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!



“Sophia!” Yulia cups her hands, small and warm, gently turning my face toward her. I can see the concern in her wide, innocent eyes.

“Sorry, Yulia,” I mumble, my mind spiraling elsewhere. It’s like I’m trapped in a storm of unanswerable questions, each one more menacing than the last.

What the hell does Aleks want me ready for?

Are there others lurking in the shadows of the Ivankov household, spies just like me?

Like Anya? Who the hell is she, anyway?

And where is Luka in all of this? Part of me is screaming to spill every nagging worry – every dark thought bubbling in my gut – to him. But can I really add to his already sky-high pile of shit to deal with?

Don't be nuts, Sophia!

That would be like committing suicide. Yet I'm itching for a chat with Luka just to spill all the chaotic thoughts swirling in my head. It feels like I'm navigating a minefield alone, without a clue or a strategy.

Ugh! I must be crazy. Luka would kill me on the spot.

“Sophia,” Yulia tugs at my sleeve, pulling me back to reality again, “look at this.” She thrusts a crumpled piece of paper into my hands.

As my eyes adjust to the flurry of colors on the page, I can't help but force out a smile.

“Aw, now this is a masterpiece!” I exclaim, my eyes tracing over the carefully scribbled drawing clutched in Yulia's small hands.

A bright grin splits her face. “You think so?”

“Definitely!” I affirm, pointing at the tall, imposing figure in the center of the page. “This is Luka, right?”

Yulia giggles, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “Yeah, that's him. But I made him smile. He should do that more.”

I join in her laughter, charmed by her depiction. “Couldn't agree more, Yulia.”

“And that,” Yulia's tiny finger guides mine to the figure beside Luka, “is Dima. I drew a chef's hat on him because he's always so serious.”

Her innocent humor has me laughing again. “I bet Dima would whip up some very serious pancakes.”

We share a giggle before my attention shifts to the third man in the picture. “This must be Erik?”

“Uh-huh!” Yulia nods, an enthusiastic bob of curls. “His tattoos were hard to draw.”

“You’ve done an amazing job,” I assure her, utterly charmed. “And...is this me?”

Her smile broadens, nearly lighting up the room. “Yep! And I put a heart around us because you’re my best friend.”

A warmth fills my chest, spreading outwards like the rays of the sun. “And you’re my best friend too, Yulia.”

My eyes drop to the small, fluffy blob near the depicted Luka’s feet. “And this cutie here must be Max?”

Yulia giggles, nodding so hard I fear she might strain something. “Yeah! I wanted to show him as the cute puppy he is, not like a big, scary dog. Do you like it?”

Looking into her eager eyes, I can’t help but mirror her smile. “Yulia, I love it. This is the best art I’ve ever seen.” Because it is. It’s a window to her pure, innocent world amid our complicated lives.

God, I’m so sorry, my sweet Yulia.

“Hey, Sophia,” Yulia’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. There’s an unmistakable hint of worry in her tone that makes my heart clench.

“Yes, sweetie?”

“Do you...do you know where Luka is?” Her voice is small, a whisper of the cheerful tone it was moments ago.

I force a smile, meeting her questioning gaze head-on, my heart aching at the worry clouding her bright blue eyes. “No, I don’t, darling. But I promise you, Luka will be back soon,” I reassure her, infusing as much conviction into my voice as I can muster. “And when he does, he’ll give you the biggest, squishiest hug ever,” I say with added enthusiasm,

remembering Svetlana's words about the food-tasting scheduled for tomorrow. That means Luka will surely be back by then. He wouldn't miss it.

This assurance brings a tentative nod from her. "Okay, Sophia."

I squeeze her hand gently, leaning closer with a conspiratorial grin. "You do know that Luka loves you heaps and heaps and heaps, right?" My voice escalates in pitch with each "heaps," and I finish off with a tickle attack on her little belly.

"Yes, I know!" Yulia squeals through her giggles, squirming under my tickling fingers. In the chaos, Max starts barking, his tail wagging wildly as he joins in our merriment.

We cackle like hyenas, letting the noise drown out the buzz of chaos that's pretty much become our backdrop lately. It's just me and Yulia here, in this pocket of joy we've managed to carve out, holding the crap at bay, at least for a little while.

As I tuck Yulia into bed later, I pin her beautiful drawing above her bed where she can see it.

"Sweet dreams, Yulia," I whisper, brushing a kiss over her forehead. Max, who had been curled up at the foot of the bed, jumps up to lick my cheek, making both Yulia and I giggle.

But as I close her door behind me, the laughter fades, replaced by the unsettling silence of the mansion. It's strange. I haven't seen Luka, Dimitri, or Erik since – forever? It's as if they've vanished into thin air.

Fucking dickheads! They should've called, at least!

Frustrated, I step into my room and quickly close the door behind me. My eyes dart to the loose floorboard under the rug near my bed. Lifting it, I retrieve the burner phone that I've hidden there. It's my lifeline, my connection to the world outside this mansion.

A single message glares at me from the screen. It's from Aleks. "Follow her instructions. Get rid of the phone."

Nothing more, nothing less.

Her?

Is he talking about Anya? Now he wants me to get rid of the phone?

Why?

Could it be because of the increasing security at the house? My fingers hover over the keyboard, my stomach twisting in knots of anxiety.

I manage to punch out my reply: “When can I see Nilo and Wren?” I pause, holding my breath in anticipation, eyes glued to the screen, yearning for a response. But the screen remains stubbornly silent, void of any comforting words.

Come on, you fuckhead!

The lack of response gnaws at me, setting off a bitter ache in my belly. The silence from the phone is a mocking echo of my own desperation. It’s just me and this damned screen, the universe’s cruel joke. God, it’s infuriating.

My heart pounds a rhythm of frustration as each second passes with no reply. In a fit of irritation, I hurl the phone onto the bed.

This is just fucking great!

Chapter 4

Luka

My towel hits the hamper, still heavy with sweat from my workout. My gym's the only place where I can get Sophia out of my fucking head. Been pounding the punching bag for the last hour. Anything to keep my mind from spiraling.

The desire's eating at me, gnawing away like a constant itch I can't scratch.

Sophia.

Just the thought of her name makes my cock twitch. I've been avoiding her, burying myself in work, burying myself in anything to distract from the hunger. But it's there, always there, lurking just beneath the surface.

Anyone could be a fucking rat for Aleks, even Sophia.

I scold myself, my internal voice raw with warning.

Shit, I need to get a grip. but right now, it's not my head that's doing the thinking – it's my cock.

I tell myself I can stay away, that I can resist her. But who am I kidding? The need's too strong, too raw.

Dammit, I want her. And I know, deep down, that it's a craving I won't be able to fight much longer.

Coming out of the shower, the cool air pricks at my overheated skin. Fog clings to the bathroom mirror from the heat. My senses snap alert at the sight of a shadow from the corner of my eye.

Blyat! Someone's here!

Without thinking, my hand reaches out to the top drawer. The familiar cold steel of my gun sits there waiting for me. My heart pounds against my rib cage, anxiety clawing its way up my throat.

Then, the shadow clarifies. A form, a figure, a woman.

“Sophia?” I grunt, my voice filled with disbelief and a hint of annoyance. Her eyes are as big as saucers, her mouth open. Just standing there in my sanctuary, looking like a ghost.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I demand, lowering my gun slowly. She’s the last person I expected to see. Not after spending days cooped up in my bunker avoiding her, interrogating those bastards who dared to spy on my house. All the while, the thought of her burned at the back of my mind, fueling my rage, my obsession.

“I-I...” Sophia stammers, her eyes wide as they rake over my body. I feel a bolt of heat where her gaze lands – my abs, my chest, the trail of hair leading further down.

My skin tingles under her stare. I can almost feel her touch, as if she’s tracing the path of her gaze with her fingers. It sets my blood on fire. My cock twitches; the towel around my waist is the only thing that shields her from my reaction.

Her cheeks flush a deep shade of red, as if she’s suddenly aware of where her eyes have wandered. It’s a sight that twists something in my gut, a mix of satisfaction and an insatiable desire to see more of that color on her.

Sophia swallows hard, her eyes flicking back up to my face. “I-I came to... I mean,” she stutters, then her eyes snap away, her anger suddenly flaring. “You’re not even decent!” she practically spits out.

I let out a snort, seeing her cheeks reddening even more, her eyes unwillingly darting toward the bulge in my towel.

“Well, *krasotka*,” I reply, my voice a low rumble. “You are the one who walked in on me.” My gaze drops to her clothes, the conservative nanny outfit that does nothing to hide her tantalizing curves.

I’d much rather see her in something...less.

“Jesus,” I mutter under my breath, raking a hand through my damp hair as I try to control my raging hormones. She’s making it harder.

“I-I am here because you’ve been gone for a long time,” she starts, clearly flustered, her gaze bouncing around the room.

“And that makes it fine to barge into my bathroom?” I shoot back, my eyes aflame with a mix of irritation and desire.

“I... Sorry, they said you were here, and I...” She’s visibly struggling to keep her gaze fixed anywhere but on the rigid tent in my towel.

“And what?” I growl, cutting her off with a smirk. “You thought you would just walk in here while I was showering?”

She stammers again, “I... Yulia’s been...she’s been asking for her brother. Her birthday is this Saturday, and she hasn’t...”

I feel my heart clench at the mention of my sister, but it doesn’t change the situation. My gaze hardens on Sophia. “So, you decided to waltz into my private gym, into my shower? You must have known what you were getting into. This needs some...consequences, wouldn’t you agree, Sophia?”

“I... I didn’t...” she stutters, her face flushes a deeper shade of red.

But before she can finish her lame excuse, I close the distance between us, slamming my lips onto hers.

Christ, I need her.

It’s a primal hunger, a need that’s been gnawing at me since I first laid eyes on her. She gasps into the kiss, her soft body melting against mine. It’s as if every nerve in my body is on fire. I grab her waist, pulling her closer. I want to taste every inch of her, every sweet spot that makes her moan and squirm. My cock throbs at the thought, begging for release.

She returns my kiss, her breaths deep, her desire just as wild as mine.

That’s my girl.

With a swift tug, I pull at the towel around my waist, and it drops to the floor, freeing my cock. Her hand instinctively snakes down my body, making its way to my now-exposed erection. The moment she grips it, a surge of pleasure shoots through me, making me groan. *Damn*, she has no clue of the effect she’s having on me.

Moving quickly, I pin her against the cool, slick tiles of the wall behind her, my free hand lost in the silk of her hair, my cock rock-hard and pressing into her lower belly. She's all heat and curves and innocence under my touch, and her soft gasp sends a thrill through me.

"Luka, please," she breathes, her hand wrapping around my cock. I have to grit my teeth to hold back the growl of pleasure.

"Jesus, Sophia," I grunt, my hips bucking into her touch. Along with the heat of her hand and the sight of her blushing while touching me – it's a heady mix. Too goddamn much.

My towel's on the floor, forgotten, my need for her making any pretense of modesty pointless. Her eyes are wide as they flick between my face and my cock, and the innocence there only ratchets up my desire.

As my body grinds against hers, her breath hitches, and she releases a choked sound, half-moan, half-whimper, that sends a wave of heat through me.

"Oh God, Luka," she gasps, her blush spreading from her face to the neckline of her nanny uniform.

She's a wet dream come to life.

I can't hold back the growl of pleasure that slips from my lips. She's mine, and a primal part of me wants to mark her, claim her in the most primitive way possible.

"You really looking to mess with trouble, *krasotka*?" I growl, my tone thick with need. "If you are not ready for the burn, you should have stayed the hell away from me."

Chapter 5

Sophia

“I came here for Yulia,” I snap, though my voice quivers, betraying the lie. “Not to...to...”

Fuck you. God knows I am so horny right now.

I’ve got no business in Luka’s private gym, I know it, but I can’t help myself. Word around the house is that he’s been cooped up here for days. Yulia’s been asking for her big brother, her face going all teary-eyed at night.

Or maybe I’m just trying to fool myself. Maybe it’s me who can’t stand his absence anymore.

Yes, I fucking miss him.

The truth is, I want him. I want all of him.

And here he is. Fresh out of the shower, muscles rippling, water dripping down his goddamn perfect body. His hard cock pressing against me.

His hands are on me, pulling at the buttons of my uniform, stripping it away with no niceties. His fingertips trace the edge of my bra, then it’s gone, and I’m standing there topless, my nipples hardening under his intense gaze. Heat pools in my lower belly, my pussy clenching in anticipation.

“You—”

He silences me with a rough kiss, his hand tangling in my hair as he pulls my head back to look at him. His eyes are ablaze, a mix of lust and something else, something darker.

“Do you like pain, *krasotka?*” he repeats, his voice a low growl.

I swallow hard, unsure of how to respond. It’s an intimate question, and it feels raw and exposed to discuss it here, in his private sanctuary, with his naked body pressing against mine.

“I...I don’t know,” I finally confess, feeling a blush heat my cheeks.

He lets out a chuckle, low and wicked. “Well, *krasotka*, I think it’s high time we find out.”

He bites my lower lip, the sting of it sending another jolt of pleasure through my body. “Does it hurt?” he growls in my ear, his breath hot against my skin.

“Fuck yes,” I breathe out. It hurts alright, the pleasurable kind of pain, the one that blurs the line between ecstasy and agony.

Without warning, he spins me around, slamming me face-forward against the cold, hard wall. My tits press against the cool surface, my nipples hardening instantly. The throbbing in my pussy intensifies, matching the erratic beat of my heart. His muscular body molds against my back, his thick cock grinding into my ass, promising sheer, unfiltered pleasure. His hands are rough, one manhandling my wrists above my head while the other roams my body, trailing down to my dripping wet pussy.

“Asshole!” I spit out, the word tumbling out of my lips before I can stop it. The venom in my voice would’ve shocked me if I wasn’t so damn angry.

“What- what did you say?” His voice is a low growl in my ear, thunderous and ominous. I can practically feel his anger vibrating against my back.

“I said, you are an asshole, jerk!” It’s the purest form of my anger, breaking through the surface after simmering beneath for so long. It feels liberating, like releasing a scream after a long silence.

“You want to be a wildcat?” Luka hisses at me, his voice filled with challenge. The anger in his tone is unmistakable, and I can tell it’s been building for a while. It’s unnerving, and I’m not sure how to respond. His intensity is palpable, and it’s clear he’s not playing games.

His hand lands with a sharp smack on my ass, the stinging sensation jolting through me. I can’t help but yelp, the sting morphing into a pulse of pleasure that rolls up my spine, turning my moan raunchier.

“Fuck you!” Annoyance bubbles in my chest. I want to tell this prick about Aleks’s scheme and Anya’s double-dealing shit, but even if I was brave enough, he’s not going to let me get a word in. Just as I try to spin around to yell in his stubborn face, he shoves me up against the wall with a growl.

His body is like a frigging iron statue, trapping me against the cold, unsympathetic tiles. His cock, hard as steel, presses into my ass, rubbing against my soaked pussy.

Ignoring the anger gnawing at me, I grind my hips back into his dick. The pleasure that zaps through me is like lightning, lighting up my nerves, drowning out the noisy thoughts in my head. My body heats up, my breath comes out in quick pants, and suddenly, all my complaints seem less important than the primal lust coursing through my veins.

“You’re fucking mine,” he rasps in my ear, his voice laced with crude possession. His grip tightens on my thigh, hoisting me up and grinding me against the cold wall. My heart hammers in my chest, each beat echoing his crude declaration.

Then he thrusts. His cock is relentless, burying deep into my soaked pussy. His hand dives between my thighs, his rough fingers grazing my swollen clit. His movements are savage, every thrust an assertion of his dominance.

Each plunge of his cock drags a guttural groan from my lips, the sensation base and primal. My pussy clenches around him, matching the rhythm of his brutal thrusts. The friction of my hard nipples against the wall sends jolts of pleasure down to my core.

He pulls out abruptly, leaving me gasping at the emptiness. But before I can voice my protest, his cock is back, filling me up again, slamming into me with a force that has me seeing stars. Pleasure spikes through me, mad and untamed, spiraling me towards the edge.

“Fuck!” My screams echo off the walls, drowned only by the sound of our bodies colliding.

His release follows shortly after, his cum filling me up, trickling down my thighs as a primal reminder of the rough

fucking we just shared. I collapse under his weight, gasping for breath, the gritty reality of the encounter seeping in.

And then, without a word, he leaves. The door slams shut behind him, echoing through the silent room like a gavel declaring a verdict.

I'm left alone, naked and used in the empty shower. It feels like a thousand knives are slicing my heart apart.

Picking myself up, I turn on the shower. The hot water washes over me, attempting to cleanse away the grimy aftermath of our rough encounter. My hand reaches down between my legs, rinsing off the traces of him that he's left behind. His cum trickles down my thighs with the water, each contraction of my spent pussy sending a fresh wave from me.

But nothing can wash away the taste of betrayal that lingers in my mouth. As I scrub angrily at my skin, silent tears mingle with the water. All I can think about is how I let myself be used. The raw reality of the situation is a harsh pill to swallow. I wrap my arms around myself, shaking quietly under the cascade of water.

I start sobbing.

The hot water pummeling my body is the only thing grounding me. My body is wracked with violent shudders, each one ripping through me like a shockwave.

My chest tightens. But my lungs are contracting inwards. It hurts.

The hurt and betrayal constrict around my heart like a vise. It feels like it's going to explode, to burst out of my chest, and all the pain and betrayal and guilt will spill out in a messy, ugly wave.

It's too much. It's all too fucking much.

The weight of the deception, the shame, the guilt – it's suffocating me. I sink to my knees, the cold tiles a sharp contrast to the warm water washing over me. The pain is overwhelming, the silence deafening.

I try to scream, but all that comes out is a choked sob.

Chapter 6

Luka

Emerging from the gym, my muscles hot and my mind still a jumble of fresh release and my frustration, I barely notice Svetlana reprimanding one of the maids. My focus is elsewhere. I need to find Yulia.

“Svetlana, where’s Yulia?”

The maid scurries away, and Svetlana turns her steely gaze to me. “Miss Ivankov is in the garden, sir.”

“Good. *Spasibo.*” I’m already moving, but Svetlana isn’t finished.

“Mr. Ivankov, if I may, the arrangements for the party on Saturday need your attention. There are some decisions that require your approval.”

I stop, glancing back at her, irritation flaring. “Can’t it wait, Svetlana? I will go over it with you later.”

She nods, her face betraying nothing. “Very well, sir. I will have everything ready for your review.”

I don’t bother with a reply, already striding toward the garden. My mind’s filled with Yulia, my little sister, all alone out there. The garden’s filled with our muscle-bound soldiers, always on guard, but it doesn’t change the ache in my chest at the sight of her. She looks so damned lonely.

Sophia should’ve been there. She’s supposed to glue herself to Yulia.

But no, she went off hunting for me.

That thought chews at me, gets my blood boiling. Is that why I was a dick to her earlier?

Because I was so goddamn pissed?

Guilt floods me, but I swallow it back into my gut.

Sophia doesn’t get it. She can’t know the shitstorm I’m in. Something’s up. I can sense it. It’s like the day my old man got

whacked. Right outside our damn home...by that prick Aleks. I should've been there. But I was out, wheeling and dealing, and that cost me big time.

I start to lumber toward Yulia, her hushed whispers hitting my ears.

“Do you think Luka’s forgotten us?” she says to Max, her voice choked with longing. Max whips his head up, his tail wagging like a crazy windmill as he makes a beeline for me. Yulia’s face lights up at the sight of me, then it crumbles into a tear-streaked mess.

“I missed you, Luka!” she blurts, tears choking her words.

I pull Yulia into a tight hug, lifting her as if she’s as light as a feather. I brush a gentle kiss against her tear-soaked cheeks.

“*Malyška*, I’ve been caught up in a whole lot of grown-up stuff. You know how it is.”

Her little body quakes against mine as a sob breaks free. “Sophia and I...we’ve been scared, Luka.”

“Well, Sophia doesn’t need to worry. I’m here, am I not?” I rumble, my heart constricting at the sight of her so broken. “Did Sophia say anything else?”

A small nod from her. “She said...said you loved me. That you’d give me the biggest hug when you saw me.” She sniffs, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

“Well, she’s not wrong,” I grin, squeezing her tighter for good measure.

She lets out a shaky giggle, burying her face into my shirt. “She also said she was going to find you. That’s why she left.”

Fuck!

A jolt of guilt hits me harder. I let out a sigh, tousling her hair. “Well, look at that. She was right again. I’m here, aren’t I?”

Her head bobs in understanding, like a tiny sparrow pecking at the ground. In an instant, she’s clinging onto me, her arms

wrapped around me so tight it's as if she's afraid I'll disappear again.

“Hey, *malyška*,” I murmur, ruffling her soft hair, “How about we head out for some shopping right now? Got some birthday presents to snag, don't we?”

“Shopping?” Yulia gasps, her hands gripping onto my shirt tightly. “Right now?”

“You bet.” I chuckle, feeling Yulia's excitement as she squirms in my arms. Her eyes widen, and the solemn mood that had settled over her earlier lifts instantly. “Anything you want, *malyška*. It's all yours today.”

Damn, I really screwed things up this time. Hiding like a damn coward while Yulia faces the shitstorm alone? Pathetic. Now I'm here, trying to paste a happy smile on her with a pathetic shopping spree, as if new toys could just erase the nightmare she's been thrown into because of me.

“Really?” she asks, her voice small but hopeful. “Can I get the huge dollhouse? The one with the elevator?”

I glance down at her, and the spark in her eyes pulls at something in my chest.

How could I say no?

“If you want the dollhouse, you'll get the dollhouse,” I confirm, her squeal of joy music to my ears.

The sound of paws scrabbling against the pavement makes us all turn. Max has spotted Sophia and is making a beeline toward her.

“Hey buddy,” Sophia murmurs, bending to pet the bouncy bundle of fur. “Yulia, didn't I tell you I'll find Luka?”

“Yes! And we're going shopping now!”

I drag in a rough breath. There's something about her eyes – darting, avoiding my gaze. And shit, they're red, haunted with shadows that were never there before. Goddamn, she's been crying.

Blyat!

“Are we now?” Sophia finally mutters, her eyes flicking up to meet mine. The contact lasts a fraction of a second before she looks away. Can’t say I blame her.

I did this. I’m the fucking reason she’s upset.

“Yes, and you will be coming with us,” I respond, trying to make it sound like a casual invite.

“Yes, sir. Whatever you say, sir,” she retorts, her voice dripping with frost. The chill in her tone cuts me, and not for the first time, I realize just how royally I’ve fucked up.

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“Why the hell do I have to go, too?” Dimitri groans from the passenger seat as I bring the Rolls to life. A soft purr hums from the engine, echoing Dimitri’s begrudging tone.

Behind us, Grisha, Boris, and Ivan are tailing close in two black SUVs, their stern faces hidden behind tinted windows.

“Well, someone’s gotta carry the bags, D.” I chuckle, pulling out into the bustling Chicago streets. In the rearview mirror, I can see Sophia, her eyes flicking over to Yulia, who’s safely strapped into her car seat.

“Just because you’re in charge doesn’t mean you get to play dictator,” Dimitri fires back, crossing his arms over his chest in a huff.

“Cheer up, D. We’re heading to Patrick’s. Who knows, you might find yourself a nice teddy bear.” I grin at him.

Dimitri, as usual, is on high alert, his eyes scanning the street like he’s expecting an ambush any second. It’s one of the reasons he’s so damn good at his job. And why I tolerate his constant whining.

Glancing in the rearview mirror, Sophia sits quietly next to Yulia. She’s gorgeous, those plump lips of hers still carrying the mark of my teeth. The sight stirs a familiar heat within me.

Meanwhile, Yulia is safe and sound in the back seat, the soft light of her iPad illuminating her focused face. She’s plugged

into her little world, bobbing her head and singing some song from her favorite YouTube channel. She's in her own universe, oblivious to Dimitri's complaining.

Returning my focus to Dimitri, I switch gears.

"Got anything new on Aleks's hangout?" I toss the question at Dimitri, eyes locked on the road ahead.

"Just the usual. His men scattered around, looking busy. We're getting there, Luka," Dimitri's gaze remains fixed on the cityscape sliding past. "Just a matter of time."

"Time we don't have," I grumble, gripping the steering wheel tighter. Aleks has been a step ahead for too long.

From the backseat, Yulia's bubbly voice punctures our grave conversation. "Luka, can we have ice cream after shopping?" Her enthusiasm is infectious.

"We sure can, *malyška*," I manage a chuckle, easing up on the tense atmosphere. "The biggest one you can find."

Her giggles fill the car, temporarily diffusing the underlying tension. She retreats back into her iPad world, humming along with her tunes.

I catch a glimpse of Sophia's face in the mirror, her complexion pale and her eyes darting from one side to another; she looks like she is about to puke.

What the hell is going on with her?

"Sophia," I snap, irritation and concern mingling in my voice. "You okay?" I growl, waiting for an answer.

She doesn't respond, just worries her lower lip, her gaze fixed firmly on the window.

She's angry.

Of course she is. You're a dickhead.

"We're here," Dimitri announces as I pull the Rolls up to the front of the Toy Extravaganza store. The vibrant window displays scream fun and joy, a stark contrast to the storm brewing in our car.

No sooner do I kill the engine than the doors of the vehicles behind us swing open. Grisha, Boris, and Ivan step out, eyes scanning the surroundings. Even on a routine shopping trip, they're wired for danger.

Ivan approaches our car, giving me a nod as I hand him the keys. He'll take care of parking while we head in. Bodyguard and valet – Ivan wears many hats.

From the backseat, Yulia's excitement is almost tangible. "Sophia!" she exclaims, her voice high with enthusiasm. "You've never been to Patrick's store, have you? It's the best!"

Sophia looks down at Yulia. She smiles widely at the child's excitement.

"No, Yulia," she answers. "This is my first time. Can you show me around?"

Yulia practically bounces in her seat, clapping with joy. "Oh yes, yes, yes! I'll show you everything. Especially the teddy bear aisle. You'll love it!"

Yulia's delight somehow spreads through the tension-filled vehicle like a ray of sunshine. As we step out of the car, Yulia grabs Sophia's hand, tugging her along toward the entrance of the store.

Yulia's face lights up the moment she spots the teddy bear aisle, scampering toward the towering stacks. Dimitri, the man who loves her like a brother, follows closely, keeping a protective eye on her.

"Mr. Ivankov," Patrick greets, a formal nod punctuating his words. His large hands are clasped together in front of him as if he's praying. His face is weathered, age and stress carving deep lines into his skin.

"Patrick." I nod in return, the corners of my mouth lifting in a half-hearted attempt at a smile. "Your father would have been proud. You have kept this place running smoothly."

His face softens at the mention of his father, a nostalgic glimmer in his eyes.

“Well, we try to keep up the tradition, just like your father did with you, Mr. Ivankov.”

“Yeah, tradition,” I grunt, a sour note in my voice as memories flood back. I glance around the old toy shop, each shelf and corner a reminder of a past I can’t escape. When I was a kid, this place was a haven, a rare escape from the harsh realities of our world.

“One toy, Luka, and not more than that,” my mother would tell me, her soft eyes filled with a love and kindness I’ve long since abandoned. *“One is enough. We mustn’t be greedy. There are others who have less than we do.”*

Greedy.

The word stings even now. She was always teaching me about compassion, about understanding, about not being the very thing I’ve become. How she’d hate the man standing here now. A ruthless, cold-hearted bastard who’s long forgotten her gentle lessons.

“So, Yulia’s turning eight.” Patrick’s words pull me back.

“Yeah,” I reply, my voice as cold as my thoughts.

Eight.

The word hangs in the air, heavy with meaning. It seems so long. And Patrick has seen the change, the hardening, the shift from that wide-eyed boy to the monster I’ve become.

I don’t try to hide it. It’s who I am now.

Chapter 7

Sophia

I don't feel well.

My heart's pounding like a drum in my chest. The toy shop around me seems to blur, the edges of my vision getting fuzzy.

What's happening to me?

This can't be happening now. Not here, not with Yulia.

Think, Sophia, think. What's Aleks planning?

My mind returns to Anya, her evil smirk, and her cold, deadly eyes.

Should I come clean with Luka?

No! He'll kill me. Bloody Aleks!

He's left me in the dark. I have no idea if Nilo or Wren are alive.

Oh God, breathe, just breathe.

"Look, Sophia!" Yulia's voice rings through the haze, and I turn to see her eyes shining with excitement. She's pointing at the dollhouses lined up on a shelf, each one more elaborate than the next. "See this one?" she chirps, pulling me closer. "It's got a little garden and a swing. And this one here's got tiny rooms, and you can even see the little dishes in the kitchen!"

"Yeah, Yulia, they're beautiful," I manage to say, my voice sounding distant even to my own ears. I try to focus on the details she's showing me, but my head's spinning, and I can't quite catch my breath.

Was it because I skipped breakfast?

My eyes dart to Luka, who's in conversation with Patrick, the owner, but everything's getting more and more blurry.

"Sophia, are you listening?" Yulia asks, tugging at my arm, her voice filled with concern. "Sophia!" I hear Yulia's

shouting.

My eyes close, and I'm falling. But before I can hit the ground, I feel a strong arm grab me. There's an energy I can't place.

Then everything goes black.



“I think she's coming to.”

Voices, distant and muffled, slowly reach me. My eyes feel heavy, and it takes all my strength to pry them open.

“Can someone call her husband?” a voice says, worry clear in its tone.

Husband? Whose husband?

I try to respond, but the words won't come. I try to sit up, but a wave of nausea hits me, and I fall back onto the bed.

What on earth is going on here?

The smell is what hits me first, something familiar that I can't quite place. It's sterile but not harsh, mixed with a comforting hint of essential oils.

Nana's favorite lavender, maybe?

A pang of longing hits me, and I miss her suddenly, achingly.

As my eyes start to clear and I slowly sit up, the surroundings begin to make sense. Fresh flowers rest on the nightstand next to unfamiliar medical equipment. Pleasant prints of rolling meadow landscapes line the walls, and soothing nature scenes play on a TV in the corner. The bronze light fixtures and the well-crafted furniture add a touch of elegance.

“Where am I?” I croak, my voice sounding foreign to my own ears.

“Stay still,” an unfamiliar voice commands, firm but gentle. “You’re at Riverdale Private Hospital.”

I’m in a hospital.

But why? What happened?

I rub my eyes, trying to make sense of it all. The memory is fuzzy, and everything feels like a jumbled mess.

“You’re okay. Just hold on a moment. I’ll get your husband.”

There’s that word again. *Husband*. What is she talking about?

“Wait!” I call out, my voice catching in my throat. “I- I don’t have a husband. What’s going on?”

The nurse pauses, looking back at me, confusion in her eyes. “I- Sorry, a man carried you in earlier. We thought he was your...husband because he...” She trails off, biting her lip, clearly unsure how to put it into words.

“Because he what?” I’m on edge now, frustration mixing with confusion. “What did he do?” Who is this “*he*” she’s talking about?

“He was...furious,” she finally says, her voice quivering slightly. “Demanding the best doctors, yelling at everyone, acting like he owned the place. Honestly, he seemed like he was about to start a war in the hospital. He told us you’re his wife—”

“Who are you talking about?”

“He said his name is Lu-Luka Ivankov?” she stammers, looking at me as though she’s expecting a reaction. “He said he is your husband. And from the way he was acting... I mean, he was so concerned, so intense. I’ve never seen anyone act like that. Not for someone they didn’t care deeply about.”

Luka did what?

Memories come rushing back. The toy shop. The dollhouses. Yulia. I try to make sense of it all.

“Where is he?” I manage to choke out.

“He’s arranging some paperwork,” the nurse replies, still looking a bit bewildered by the whole situation. “Nurse Lisa has gone to get him.”

My mind is racing. I need some time to myself. Some space to think.

“How- how long was I out?” I finally ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Four hours,” she replies, her voice flat. “Straight out for four hours.”

Four fucking hours?

I can hardly believe it.

The nurse looks at me, her eyes wide. “Mr. Ivankov...he was here with you the whole time. Didn’t move an inch. He was calling your name, kissing your hands, and everything.”

“Luka did what?” I blurt out, my mind reeling. “No way. Luka wouldn’t do that, he...” I stop, realizing I don’t know what to say.

The image of Luka sitting by my side, holding my hand, just doesn’t fit with the guy I know. It’s all too weird.

My stomach suddenly tightens, a wave of nausea hitting me hard. “Must be the stress,” I mumble, clutching my belly.

“You don’t look too good...let me get you some water,” the nurse says, her voice laced with concern.

But I’m already on my feet, dashing into the bathroom. I barely make it to the toilet before I’m vomiting, tears streaming down my face.

Why is this happening to me?

There’s a gentle knock on the door, followed by the nurse’s soothing voice. “May I come in?”

I don’t answer, too focused on the taste of bile in my mouth.

She walks in anyway. “Here, this should help. When you’re pregnant, it’s pretty normal to have morning sickness during

your first trimester.” She’s holding a towel soaked in peppermint essential oil.

I freeze, the towel halfway to my face. “Pregnant? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Oh, congratulations. The test results came back half an hour ago. Your blood sugar’s low, you’re over-exhausted, and...pregnant.”

The room starts to spin, and I clutch the sink for support. *Pregnant?* It can’t be. There must be a mistake.

The nurse’s voice fades into the background, but her last words echo in my head, growing louder and louder until they’re all I can hear.

Pregnant.

Pregnant.

Pregnant?

Chapter 8

Luka

A few hours before

I'm standing with Patrick, but my eyes betray me, drifting over to Sophia. Damn it all to hell, she looks off. Pale.

Is she okay?

"Sophia!" Yulia's shriek makes me snap to attention. My head whips around. Yulia's face is a twisted mask of terror as she clings to Sophia, but it's no use. Sophia's falling, her face pale, and her eyes shut.

I'm moving before I know it, muscles working on autopilot. My arms reach out, and I catch Sophia just before she hits the ground. Yulia's crying like her heart's breaking. Dimitri's there, picking her up.

"It's okay, Yulia," I grunt, feeling something twist in my gut. "Sophia's gonna be fine. I am going to take her to the doctor."

Yulia nods without question, her blind faith in me setting the guilt surging again.

Dimitri's reaching for Sophia, concern etched on his face. "Hand her over, Luka."

"No." The word is harsh, and it's out before I can stop it. "I've got her."

Dimitri's eyes narrow, and there's a moment where I think he's going to argue. But he backs down.

"I'll handle Yulia," Dimitri says. I nod. I am glad he seems to always know what I'm thinking.

I glance at Yulia, and she's watching us, her face still streaked with tears. I smile at her, giving her the only comfort I can. I've got Sophia, and I'll take care of her.

Because I have to.

Because I want to.

Because for some fucked-up reason, she's too important to me.

I haul ass out of the toy shop with Sophia's limp body cradled in my arms.

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Sitting In the doctor's office now, that damn piece of paper clutched in my hand, everything grinds to a halt. Breathing, talking, thinking – it all stops. All I can see is that one word, printed so neatly, like it's some sort of polite invitation: POSITIVE. It's screaming at me, but all I can do is stare.

“Congratulations, Mr. Ivankov,” the doctor beams, her eyes crinkling at the corners as I catch a glimpse of her name tag – Dr. Sarah Johnson. She's got those damn laugh lines like she's spent a lifetime celebrating things like this.

“Your wife is pregnant. It's wonderful news!”

I just stare at her, still unable to process it.

Wonderful news? Since when?

I'm in a fucking war right now!

“Your wife really needs to rest...and eat! Her blood sugar is low. That is why she fainted.”

She's not my wife. That damn word stings. But it was easier this way; fewer questions, less judgment.

“Are you sure?” I finally manage to croak out. “I mean, this has to be a mistake. Sophia...she can't be pregnant.”

“Yes,” she replies, nodding, her eyes wide with sincerity. “The HCG level confirms it. She's with child, perhaps two weeks along.”

“But she can't get pregnant,” I hear myself saying again, my voice breaking. “An accident damaged her fallopian tubes. She told me herself.”

Dr. Johnson's smile fades, replaced by a look of concern. She leans forward, her eyes probing mine.

“It’s not uncommon for women to believe they can’t conceive after such trauma, especially if they were told so in the past,” she says, her voice soft, comforting in a way that only irritates me more. “But medical science advances. Perhaps the damage wasn’t as extensive as thought, or her body healed in a way that allowed for conception. It’s rare, but it happens.”

Rare, but happens. Like a damn fairy tale.

Only this isn’t a *story*.

This is real life, and it’s screwing with me in ways I can’t even begin to understand.

“Mr. Ivankov, this is a miracle,” she says.

Miracle?

“It’s a mistake,” I hear myself say.

The doctor is not smiling anymore, her eyes narrowing slightly as she looks at me. “Mr. Ivankov, I assure you the tests are accurate. Perhaps this is unexpected, but it’s certainly not a mistake.”

Unexpected? That’s a fucking understatement.

I shake my head, trying to clear it.

This is not happening. But it is.

And there’s no going back. Damn it all to hell.

Sophia’s pregnant.

A *father*. Me, Luka Ivankov, about to become a *father*.

A knock on the door interrupts my spiraling thoughts. A nurse pops her head in, her face as cheerful as the doctor’s. “Mr. Ivankov, your wife is awake now.”

My wife.

My heart does a strange thing, a beat too hard, too fast. Sophia’s pale face appears in my mind, the way she collapsed suddenly, her body limp. We head toward her room, the pit in my stomach growing with every step.

Pull yourself together!

I halt outside her door, hearing her voice even before I step in.

“But...I can't be pregnant. I just can't.”

I pause, my hand frozen on the door handle, every muscle in my body tight.

She knows. And she doesn't believe it, just like me.

Pushing the door open, I step inside. Her eyes find mine immediately, wide and filled with uncertainty, confusion. I can't help but notice how vulnerable she looks lying there, the hospital gown swallowing her frame.

“Luka,” she whispers, her voice breaking.

“Seems we're in for a surprise,” I start, trying to mask the chaos in my mind with a casual tone.

She looks at me, her eyes narrowing, “A surprise? Is that what you're calling it?” She shakes her head, tears brimming in her eyes. “It's not possible. You know it's not possible. After the accident, they told me I couldn't—”

“I know what they told you,” I cut her off, anger and frustration building in me. “But it's happened. It's a damn miracle or something. You're pregnant, and we have to deal with it.”

Her eyes flash, anger replacing the vulnerability. “Deal with it? Deal with it how, Luka? How do you expect me to deal with this?”

I grasp at the anger because it's easier than dealing with the fear.

A baby in my world?

Anger, violence, and hate. Those are things I can fight, things I can challenge. But the fear in her eyes, the uncertainty in her voice; those are things I can't push aside.

Sophia's attention snaps to the doctor, her eyes wide and desperate. “Are you sure? You must be wrong. Check again! I can't be pregnant!”

The doctor's face softens, and she places a reassuring hand on Sophia's shoulder. "I understand your shock, my dear, but the tests are conclusive. The accident was a long time ago, and the human body has a way of healing. Sometimes, when we least expect it, life has a way of surprising us."

"I didn't think I could get pregnant, Luka," she says finally, her voice low and husky. "After the accident, after what they told me, I didn't think it was possible."

I ignore her feelings, and the asshole in me snorts. "Yeah, well, apparently, life's full of fucking surprises."

Her eyes flare with anger, hurt.

Blyat!

The doctor interjects; her face says it all: this isn't the joyful surprise announcement she's used to making. "Mr. Ivankov, Sophia, I understand this is shocking news. It might be considered miraculous, given your medical history. But if this is not welcome news, you should be aware of your...options."

"Options?"

She hesitates, her voice dropping as she chooses her words carefully. "Perhaps...the situation warrants you both to consider...whether or not you want to keep the baby?"

I nearly snarl, my voice dripping with contempt. "No one's getting rid of my kid. There are no fucking options."

Sophia's eyes widen, and the doctor takes a step back, clearly startled by my outburst.

The room falls into a silence so sudden it's almost violent. The soft chirping of birds from the TV seems to mock the storm brewing inside me.

"Excuse me," the doctor says, her voice neutral but professional. "I'll give you two some time to talk." She gathers her papers and quietly exits the room, closing the door behind her with a soft click.

"I want to keep the baby, Luka." Sophia looks at me, her voice muted after the doctor leaves. "But...you don't have to be involved." She looks so fucking lost.

“Did you not hear me earlier?” I choke on my words. “I do not abandon my responsibilities, Sophia, and I sure as hell won’t start now. Not with this.”

“But...what do we do now?” She looks up at me, worry in her eyes, and I feel a sudden urge to kiss those worries away.

“You really have to ask?” I say, a cold edge to my voice in spite of it. “We are keeping the baby. And you and me? We’re getting married.”

Her face goes white, shock written all over it. There’s guilt there, too, in the way she avoids my eyes.

“Married?” she finally husks out.

“Yes, married. You think I’m gonna let my kid grow up without a father?”

She finally meets my eyes, and the shock’s replaced by something else, something I can’t quite place.

“Luka...” she starts, then hesitates, “I have something to confess.”

Chapter 9

Sophia

Today's the day I'll die.

With my baby.

My baby!

I still can't believe it...

I'm lying in a big, uncomfortable bed, not like the one I'm lying in now...and the room smells like medicine. A man in a white coat is talking to Nana, and he's using words I don't understand.

"I'm sorry to inform you that Sophia will not be able to conceive as the impact of the accident had caused significant damage to her fallopian tubes," he says. His voice is all serious and grown-up, and I can't make sense of what he's talking about. But it must be something bad because Nana starts crying really hard. She's making noises like she's in pain.

I remember the screech of tires, the loud crash, and then everything went dark.

Mommy and Daddy were with me, but now they're not. I'm scared, and I just want to go home.

I turn around to see Nilo's face is a blank slate, frozen in shock. He's just standing there, unable to speak, unable to move, unable to cry.

Later, I found out that our parents were gone. Forever.

That guilt settled in Nilo's bones that day, and he's carried it ever since. Because we were supposed to pick him up from a ball game. But we didn't, and now it's too late, and nothing will ever be the same again.

I was too young to understand what it meant then. It was only when I was older, when Nana reminded me about the situation, that it hit me. I'd never have children. I'd never hold

my own baby in my arms, never experience the joy of motherhood.

But now, all this is just way too much.

The walls of my life are closing in.

There is a baby in me.

Our baby.

The realization hits me hard, and I feel a sharp pain in my gut as I understand that I've been living a lie. Spying for Aleks, feeding him information, putting Yulia at risk – all the while telling myself that I was doing it for the right reasons. That I had no choice.

But now, facing the truth, I'm torn apart by guilt and shame. I've betrayed those who trusted me, those who cared for me. And for what? Aleks's promises? His manipulation?

I thought I was strong, that I was doing what I had to do to survive. But I see now that I was weak, that I allowed myself to be used, to be a pawn in Aleks's twisted game.

I don't care anymore if Luka is going to kill me today.

The thought sits heavy in my chest, a cold, hard reality. There's no way around it, no way to avoid the inevitable. I know what I've done, and I know the price I have to pay.

Because I am going to tell him the truth.

I will confess my betrayal, lay bare my lies, expose the ugly truth of who I really am.

And he will kill me.

Chapter 10

Luka

There are a few things that I am not.

I am not a good guy.

I am not a forgiving guy.

I am not a sentimental sucker for romantic movies.

I am not someone who enjoys a surprise, especially the kind involving diapers.

But most definitely, I enjoy torturing and killing people who betray me.

Now, I'm sitting across from Sophia as she spills out her deepest secret.

"I was sent to spy on you...by Aleks," she chokes out, her voice breaking. "He has Nilo and Wren, and I don't know... Luka, I don't know if they're still alive."

My world shifts.

The room spins, and I feel like the floor is falling out from under me. My vision narrows, focusing only on her.

"I-I am sorry," she sobs, clutching her belly as if to protect the secret inside.

Sorry.

I've heard that word many times. From the spineless fuckers who betrayed the Ivankov Bratva, who caused the death of my father, who stole my freedom.

Sorry.

It doesn't mean anything.

I breathe in, then breathe out. Slowly. My mind races. I'm processing. Contemplating. Should I kill her? She betrayed me, and in my world, that's a death sentence.

Sorry.

It doesn't change the fact she lied to me.

Sorry.

It doesn't bring back the trust I thought we had.

I'm quiet at first, the words not processing. Then, with a jolt, I stand up, knocking the chair over. I start to pace, then stop and sit down again, only to leap back up. The truth, the damn truth, is like a punch to the gut. Sophia watches me, tears in her eyes, her body trembling in fear.

"Luka, please," she whispers. "I had no choice. He threatened to kill them."

"Choice?" I snap, my voice dripping with venom. "You chose to lie. You chose to betray me."

"I had to," she cries, desperation in her voice. "I had to protect them. I had to do what he wanted. Or he'd kill Nilo and Wren. Please, you have to understand."

Understand?

The warning Dimitri gave me echoes in my mind, haunting me. He knew. He saw this coming. And now it's here, crashing down on me.

Fuck. No one betrays Luka Ivankov.

I look at Sophia, really look at her.

The fear in her eyes, the despair. She's not lying now.

This is the truth, and it's ugly and painful. But it's real.

Slowly, I walk over to her, my heart pounding in my chest. I sit beside her, my hand reaching out to touch her cheek. She flinches, but I don't pull away.

"You should have told me," I say softly, my voice cracking. "You should have trusted me to help you."

"I was scared," she whispers. "I was so scared, Luka."

Sophia's sobs grow louder, and I pull her closer, my embrace becoming more tense. It's hard, almost desperate, a clash of emotions that I can't put into words. My arms are like

steel bands around her, and I can feel her heartbeat against my chest, as fast and frantic as my own.

Slowly, her body starts to relax, her sobs turn into whimpers, and I feel her melt into me. It's as if she finally realizes that in all the chaos, in all the betrayal and hurt, this is what she needs.

She's beautiful, even now, with her eyes red from crying, her body trembling. *Blyat*, she's gorgeous, and I can't help but appreciate that. A natural beauty, no frills, no artificial shit, just pure, unfiltered Sophia. My heart's pounding, and I've got a feeling in the pit of my stomach that's a strange mix of desire and anger.

Her eyes, wide and filled with tears, look up at me. "So, are you going to kill me now?" she asks.

"Kill you?" I bark out a laugh. I lean in so close that I can feel her breath on my skin. My voice is low, a growl, a promise, a damn possession. "*Krasotka*, from now on, you belong to me," I say. Her eyes widen, and she swallows hard, but she doesn't look away. She knows I mean it, every fucking word. "And I'll kill anyone who dares to hurt you. That's my promise to you," I say, planting a gentle kiss on her forehead before moving down to her tear-streaked cheek.

"But why?" She whispers.

"Because despite this fucked-up world I'm in," my voice breaks, "you've become my anchor, Sophia. "You're the one thing I didn't know I needed."

A tear rolls down her cheek, and I brush it away with my thumb. "I'm terrified, Luka. Of this world, of the pain, of losing myself."

"Promise me *Krasotka*, no more lies or hiding anything from me, understand?" As I gently touches her cheeks, tracing my thumb over her lips, I can feel myself growing hard.

I want her- bad.

"I- I promise.." Her words stop abruptly as my lips crash against hers. Her hands quickly move to my chest, gripping my shirt tightly.

“You make me lose control,” I murmur, feeling her lips quiver against mine. “Damn, I’ve been dying for this,” I say, the desire in my voice as clear as day.

She pulls back slightly, gasping for air. “I... I can feel that.” Her eyes locked onto mine.

Fuck. I am rubbing my cock in my pants.

Running my fingers along the cotton neckline of her dress, feeling the cool fabric and the curves of her body underneath. With a gentle tug, I loosen the belt at her waist and let it fall open. Her full, soft tits were now on display, eager for my touch.

Her tits are perfect, perfect size, perfect shape, perfect swelling, perfect areolas, perfect looking.

Perfect. oh fuck, perfect.

I greedily grasped them with my hands, squeezing her nipples with my finger.

“Luka!” she whimpers timidly. “We shouldn’t...”

“Shouldn’t what?” Ignoring her protests, my rough hands trail lower, tugging her dress up to reveal her glistening pussy, ready for me.

“Ah..” Her eyes flutters close and a soft moan escape her lips.

I press two fingers inside her, drawing a throaty moan from her delicate lips.

“Fuck..” she begs urgently, her beautiful body trembling slightly as I thrust my fingers deeper.

“Oh.. what if someone... comes back in?” She glances nervously towards the door, but her eyes widening in desire.

I reach down and unzip my pants. The leather folds back and my cock springs from under the fabric, like a jack-in-the-box.

I growl, “No chance of that.”

I don’t wait for an argument.

I plunge into her warmth and we both moan. I grip her hips, savoring the candy of her lips as I fuck her slow and deep.

We've just checked out of the hospital.

My black Lamborghini Urus is waiting where Grisha had dropped it off earlier, and I unlock it, holding open the passenger door for Sophia.

I look at her fumbling with the seatbelt, her fingers trembling. It gives me the excuse I need.

"Need help there, *krasotka*?" I ask, leaning over. Her eyes lock onto mine, surprised. I can't resist; I kiss her, quick and demanding.

She kisses me back, her hand reaching down, and everything inside me is on fire. She is teasing me, tracing the outline of my cock. It hardens instantly, and I groan, lost in the sensation, the tantalizing promise of what could be. I pull her close, her body warm and inviting, her touch driving me insane.

"You're playing with fire," I breathe, pulling back, but not before she manages a final, wicked stroke that has me gasping. She smirks, and the look in her eye promises so much more.

"I've never wanted anyone like this," I confess, my voice rough with desire. She looks at me with eyes like emeralds. "The fact that I don't want to kill you, despite everything...it feels good, *krasotka*. Too good."

She takes my hand and kisses it.

"I want you too," she whispers, her voice a husky promise filled with all the dark, twisted longing that mirrors mine.

I smile.

"What we just did," I murmur, the raw edge in my voice is unmistakable, "I crave more of it."

"What? The quick romp before we get busted in a hospital bed?" she retorts, a teasing smirk on her face.

“No, this...connection. The unity,” I clarify, but I’m wading through uncharted emotions here.

“But why?” I find myself admitting the confusion swirling within me.

“Maybe...you love me?” She slaps a hand over her mouth, eyes wide. “Why did I even say that? What the hell! I-I mean...” Her face flushes a deep red.

Love?

Is this what love feels like?

“I don’t know what this is, *krasotka*,” I say, my voice low and rough. Her hand trembles in mine, and I grip it, willing my strength into her. “But I do know that we’re at war now.”

For a moment, she’s silent, her beautiful green eyes wide and filled with something I can’t quite name. Fear, yes, but something more. Something raw and visceral that cuts to the very core.

Finally, she breaks, her voice cracking as she chokes out the words. “Luka, please tell me you think Nilo and Wren are alive.” Her eyes are desperate and pleading.

I pull her close, my arms wrapping around her as I try to shield her from the brutal truth. “I don’t fucking know,” I admit, my voice a ragged whisper. “But I promise you, I’ll find them. I’ll bring them back. No matter what it takes.”

I don’t tell Sophia that I know what Aleks is capable of, that fucking piece of shit. To him, Nilo and Wren are nothing but trash, human garbage he’ll toss aside without a second thought the moment they stop serving his sick needs.

She places her hand on her belly, a gesture so tender that it’s almost as if she’s whispering to the tiny life growing inside her. The thought of our child, still unseen yet already loved, fills me with an emotion I’ve never felt before.

“*Glazah ba-yat-sa, a ruki dye-layut*,” I murmur, my voice catching as I lay my hand next to hers.

She looks up, her eyes wet but curious. “What does that mean?”

“It means ‘Feel the fear and do it, anyway.’” My grin’s a little shaky as I pull her close. “My father used to say it to me. Now I’m telling it to you and my son.”

“Your son?” She arches an eyebrow, her lips quirking in a playful smile. “I think it’s my daughter.”

“Daughter, son, doesn’t matter. Our child.”

“Our child.” She repeats the words, and her smile grows. It’s a concept we’re both still getting used to, but it feels right.

“Your dad must have been a wise man,” she says, her voice thoughtful.

But he wasn’t wise enough.

My father trusted Aleks, trusted him like a brother, and what did it get him? A bullet in the skull, that’s what. All that talk about loyalty, family, sticking together – it’s all a load of crap. He believed in it, and now he’s six feet under.

Instead, I hear myself saying, “He was.” A pang of loss hits me, but I push it aside. “He knew what it was to face fear. He knew that family mattered, that sticking together, being a pack, that’s what got you through.”

“I wish I’d met him.”

“Me too, *krasotka*. Me too.”

She reaches up, her fingers gentle on my face. “We’ll get through this, won’t we?”

“We will.” The words are a vow. “We’re a pack now. You, me, our son. We’ll face the fear. We’ll do it, anyway.”

As I say the words, I feel that old, familiar ache, the same foolish trust that doomed my father. I look into Sophia’s eyes, and I think of the love she has for Yulia, the fear of what might happen. I know she betrayed me once, but there’s something there, something real. It gnaws at me, pulling at something deep inside.

And as much as I hate to admit it, I recognize that pull. It’s the same damn thing that got my father killed.

Trust, love?

The need to protect those close to you, even when you know you shouldn't.

I'm a fool, just like my old man.

I want to keep her close, want to protect her, even though I know she betrayed me. It's that nasty, rotten trust again, rearing its ugly head.

I should have learned from my father's mistakes, should have seen the betrayal coming, but here I am, looking into her eyes, and I know I'm going to do it, anyway.

Because I am my father's son.

I have trust for this woman. That very trust might be my downfall, but I can't help it. I can't help but hope that my instinct is right. About her. Even when I know it's a risk and it might be the death of me.

She pulls me to her lips; we seal the promise with a kiss, one that's not about lust or need but something deeper.

Trust. Commitment. Love. Whatever the fuck it is.

I finally start the engine of the Lambo, its purr a growl of anticipation. Pushing my phone out at the same time, I hit the number "1" on the keypad, and Dimitri's number pops up. It rings twice, then I hear his voice, always ready, always on alert.

"D," I say, no need for pleasantries. "It's time."

I can hear him straighten on the other end, the shuffling of papers, the intake of breath. He knows what my words mean. He knows what must be done.

"What do you need from me, Luka?" he asks, voice steady, loyal to the end.

"We'll need to strike tonight," I say, my words heavy with unspoken fury and determination.

"No delays, no second thoughts. Aleks won't see us coming."

There's a pause, a heartbeat of time when the world hangs in the balance. Then Dimitri's voice comes back, resolute and

unyielding.

“We’ll be ready.”

Chapter 11

Luka

The cold takes its grip on the evening, yet here I am, drenched in sweat beneath layers of Kevlar and tactical gear. One would think being a mafia boss prepped for an assault would mean luxury suits and polished shoes.

But tonight? It's all about armor and readiness.

Looking around, most of the guys are in position, ready to strike.

"You good?" I nod.

We're deep in Alek's warehouse, and the air is thick with the foul stench of his sins. Decay, piss, and a darker odor that speaks of forbidden acts and broken souls permeate the place. Dimitri's gaze is like a knife, slicing through the darkness, never settling, always searching.

Erik...he looks like he's one wrong word away from snapping someone's neck. As for me? Every fiber of my being screams for violence, a raw, unbridled need to unleash chaos. Yet Aleks is nowhere to be found. The slimy fucker is probably hiding in some hole, like the rat he is.

Tonight, however, Aleks isn't the priority.

We're here for Sophia's worthless junkie brother and her dear friend. That's the mission. That's the fucking goal.

I keep my promise, always.

Beside us stands an army – the culmination of Mafia unity. Families that once spilled each other's blood now stand shoulder to shoulder, a force of vengeance, ready to rain hell on Aleks and his goons.

"Ready?" I ask, my voice low.

Dimitri's smirk is deadly, his voice dripping with menace. "Born ready. We grab the targets, and once they're safe, we're turning this shitshow into a bloodbath."

Erik cracks his knuckles, a sound like gunshots in the tense air. “And when we find Aleks,” he murmurs, a wicked glint in his eyes, “I’ll personally ensure he begs for death before we’re done.”

We move deeper into the warehouse, blades glinting, guns at the ready. The halls are quiet, the silence shattered only by our footfalls and the occasional whimper from behind locked doors. We’ve already sliced the throats of a few of Aleks’s goons; their blood still clings to my knife, warm and slick.

The smell hits us first, a sickening combination of sweat, blood, and fear. It’s a stench I know all too well. We kick open door after door, each room a new horror.

Fuck.

This place is hell on Earth, filled with women and children from all over the world. They’re chained, beaten, used for pleasure. Their eyes are hollow, bodies scarred.

Dimitri’s face twists into a snarl, his eyes aflame with rage. “Fucking animals,” he spits, voice low and enraged.

The main door slams open, and Aleks’s goons come rushing in, guns blazing. They think they’ve got the upper hand. They’re wrong.

We move as one, a deadly dance of violence and bloodshed. Erik’s gun roars, taking down two in rapid succession. Dimitri’s blade is a flash of steel, slicing through flesh and bone, painting the walls red.

I feel alive, the rage inside me turning into a cold, focused fury. I plunge my knife into one goon’s throat, twist, and pull. He falls, choking on his own blood, and I move on to the next.

Bullets fly, screams echo, blood pools on the floor. This is hell, and we’re the demons coming to claim our due. One by one, Aleks’s men fall, their bodies broken and twisted, their eyes wide with terror as they realize they’re done for.

A goon rushes me, knife raised. I parry, slash, and his hand hits the floor, still clutching the blade. He howls in pain, but I don’t care. I kick him in the gut, and he falls, gasping. I finish him off with a bullet to the head.

Erik's beside me, his face a mask of fury. "That's the last of them," he says, his voice rough. I nod, looking around at the carnage we've wrought.

Dimitri's eyes are dark with anger as he surveys the room. "We're not done here," he growls.

"We need to get these people out. Get them out now," I command onto my mouthpiece, my voice cold. "And D, make sure none of these bastards are left breathing."

We move through the warehouse, methodical and ruthless. No one's left alive. No one deserves to be.

The women behind the doors are crying, screaming, their voices colored with terror.

"D, you bring the men upstairs. Erik and I'll handle the lower part," I bark.

Dimitri nods, his face set in a grim line. "Got it." He signals to some of our men; a quick flick of his hand, and they fall into line behind him, faces hard, guns ready.

They move quickly, finding a staircase that leads upwards, hidden in the shadows. The sounds of their footfalls echo through the empty halls.

I hear shouts in my mother tongue, rough voices filled with terror and pain. I don't need to see what's happening to know what it means.

The dying screams still echo in the air.

"Sounds like D's having fun." Erik grins.

"Music to my ears," I snarl, the joy of the kill tingling in my blood. "Three less pieces of shit in the world."

We shove forward, forcing our way deeper into this fucked-up den of misery. As we move, we're throwing open more doors; behind them are women and children, faces etched with fear and exhaustion. We just gesture wildly for them to get the hell out, to run, and not look back.

Another door jerks open, and a half-naked shitstain stumbles out, his eyes a fucked-up swirl of confusion and

dope, a needle hanging limply from his vein. Guy's so far gone he's practically in another dimension, but that doesn't mean he isn't a threat.

"Look at this fucking junkie," Erik spits, disgust twisting his face.

"Pathetic," I agree, my voice dripping with contempt. "End him."

Erik's blade flashes, and the fucker's throat opens, blood spraying like a fountain. He collapses, gurgling, choking on his own life.

"Nice." I nod, stepping over the body.

Erik wipes his blade on the dead man's clothes, a satisfied smile on his face. "On to the next one."

I kick in the smaller door, the lock splintering under the force. Inside, a young man is slumped against the wall, as thin as a stick, eyes glazed with terror and pain. His face is familiar, but it's changed, twisted into a living corpse.

It's him. It's Nilo Williams.

My heart aches for Sophia. But thank fuck he is alive.

Erik steps in beside me, his eyes widening. "Shit, that's him? He's a fucking mess."

"Yeah," I agree, my voice rough. "Aleks is probably going to get rid of him."

Nilo looks up, his eyes meeting mine, something like recognition flickering in their depths. "Help me," he rasps, the sound hardly audible.

"You're safe now, kid," I say, but my words sound hollow even to me. "We're getting you out of here."

Erik's already on the radio.

"D, we have him." He grins in delight. "Time to burn this hellhole down."

Chapter 12

Wren

The minute my brain pulls me from the dark, I know something's off. There's a rank stench in the air, like a mix of sweat and stale beer. Beneath me is a mattress that's as thin as a pancake and twice as lumpy. Not the stinking tile floor I was on.

Fucking hell, where am I?

Nilo!

I hope that scrappy little shit is okay. My last memory is of two Russian gorillas closing in, hands itching to choke me out. I hope Nilo ran. But I doubt it; he was high as fuck.

Right now, I've got my own shitstorm to weather. Testing my bonds, I find my wrists and ankles tied tight. I'm spread out, my bare skin kissed by the chill of the room.

Goddammit, not again.

My mind starts replaying past nightmares, but I push them down, force myself to stay in the here and now.

Duct tape smothers any cries for help, reducing me to desperate, muffled whimpers. I tried to break free earlier, but all I got for my troubles was a swift kick to the ribs. It's hard to tell how long it's been – too long, that's for sure.

Where the hell did these bastards dump me?

As soon as I get free, I'm gonna paint the walls with their brains. I should be out there, finding Sophia. She's got herself in a deep shit.

I stay quiet and listen. The chatter from outside is my only clue to reality. A voice rumbles through the night, deep and full of sick joy. It's a brute, laughing like he just hit the jackpot.

"Ivankov Bratva's gonna fuckin' drop like a stack of bullshit cards," he sneers, spewing out words coated in harsh

Russian accents. His grating cough follows, each sound hitting my eardrums like a punch.

Ivankov Bratva. No clue who the hell they are, but the name keeps gnawing at the edges of my mind.

A memory flashes by. Granddad, rocking in his old armchair, spouting off in Russian. He was a mean drunk, but he never forgot his mother tongue. Even when I was a little girl, curled up in a corner, trying to be invisible, I'd hear him. The Russian lullabies he sang when he was sober, the slurred curses when he wasn't.

I guess you can say I'm half Russian, a quarter American, and a quarter walking disaster. I remember how Granddad once told me, right before he passed out on the kitchen floor, that knowing your roots can save your life. I never knew what he meant until now.

Another voice chimes in, smoother but laced with a malice that sets my nerves on edge. "Those Ivankov pricks won't know what hit 'em come Saturday."

What the hell's going down on Saturday?

Urgh! I can't be bothered right now. Gotta think.

"Aleks has got a nice little 'welcome home' gift for that Ivankov shithead...right in his own damn nest," the bear-like voice grunts, perverse satisfaction oozing from his words.

"But screw that, let's get to the good part," the smoother one chimes in, his voice now sharpened with a cruel excitement. "It's been three damn days since I've had a good fuck," he groans, his voice echoing with a depraved kind of eagerness. "And we got us a feisty one today." A grin creeps into his tone as he continues, "She's hot as hell. I heard she took down Vlad and Yuri with a rusty old pipe downstairs. Lucky for us, she's in our territory now."

Oh, how nice of them to talk about me.

A bitter laugh threatens to break free. They don't have a clue what they're dealing with.

Bring it on, you fuckers.

The stench assaults me first. A cocktail of cheap cigarette smoke and stale vodka, the kind of smell that crawls up your nose and sits there festering. I can hear sounds through the thin walls – sobs, moaning, and screams. It’s the soundtrack to hell, and I’m smack-dab in the middle.

Then, the door creaks open, and in they stroll. Two Russian assholes, laughing and joking in their bastard language.

“*Dobryy vecher, suka,*” the bigger one leers, looking me up and down like I’m a piece of meat. “Good evening, bitch,” his greeting translates to.

Stupid fucks. They’re talking to me like I can’t understand them. Little do they know, I’ve got a front-row seat to their twisted show, and I’m taking notes. Every vile word, every disgusting joke. It’s all fuel, and when the time’s right, I’m gonna burn these assholes to the ground.

In response, I give them a glare that should’ve set them on fire. Behind the tape, I grin, making a soundless laugh. Something about it pisses them off, and that’s my win for the night.

“You think this is funny, *suka?*” the big one snarls, his laughter gone. The smaller one smirks, his eyes scanning me with a hunger that makes my skin crawl.

“Can’t wait to feel your cunt, *kurva,*” he leers, licking his lips. He’s touching himself as if it’s a sexy tease.

Gritting my teeth, I let the rage fuel me, keeping the fear at bay. Their words are vile, their intentions clear, but they don’t know who they’re dealing with. I’ve fought back from worse, and I swear on everything holy, I’m gonna make these pricks pay. I’m not one to break so easily. I have plans, too, and theirs doesn’t factor into mine.

I’m gonna burn their godforsaken world to the ground. Let’s see who’s laughing, then.

The puny bastard edges closer, his grimy fingers clamping around my tit, circling my nipple. He grins like he’s hit the jackpot, but he doesn’t know shit.

My laughter bounces off the walls, muffled by the duct tape but clear in my eyes. He isn't laughing anymore.

He peels the tape off my mouth, recoiling at my derisive smirk. "You two big cocks," I rasp, my voice rough from the tape. I flick my tongue over my lips, suggestive, crude. "Bet you're aching to get a piece of this."

His brows climb up his forehead, but I plow on, "Just look at me, all trussed up." I roll my eyes toward my bound hands. "Ain't gonna be a good ride, is it?"

The stunned silence that meets my crude provocation is priceless. They expected a scared little mouse. Instead, they've got a wildcat. They're about to find out how deep the claws go.

"I can do better than this," I continue, my voice a low purr. I tilt my head to the side, regarding them with a wicked glint in my eyes. "Bet you boys haven't been properly taken care of in a while. Let me do that for you."

The Russian men are eyeing each other now, disbelief creeping onto their faces.

"I've got a mouth that can do wonders. I can suck you so good, you'll see stars," I say, licking my lips with a carnal smile. "And these hands," I flex my fingers as much as the bindings allow, "they can stroke you until you explode. But you gotta let me free, hun."

The vulgar invitation hangs in the air, a dirty promise. They're floundering now, their expectations and plans for me all twisted up. They expected a victim, not a viper.

The sick grins on their faces tell me they're falling for it. The smaller one saunters over, pulling out a knife that gleams in the dim light. He's excited, panting almost as he drags the edge of the blade from my cheek down to my neck. Pressing hard enough to score my skin, a slight sting trailing in its wake. I chuckle low and throaty, letting them believe I'm relishing in the pain.

"Yes, baby. I like that," I tease.

You are going to fucking die.

He proceeds to cut the ropes binding my wrists. The sudden freedom has me flexing my fingers discreetly, allowing blood to flow back into my numb hands.

He's not done. The knife continues its slow, torturous journey downward, the cold metal skirting past my breasts, down my stomach, right to the hem of my panties. I let out a deliberate moan, the sound hollow in my ears, but the Russian bastards lap it up like starved dogs. It's all about stroking their massive egos. He then moves the blade to the ropes at my ankles, cutting me free.

I cast a sidelong glance at the larger man as he unzips his filthy jeans, revealing his painfully erect cock. It's a revolting sight, but I don't let my disgust show.

"Get over here, big boy," I purr, struggling to sit up. The ropes around my wrists have left their harsh imprint, but I'm free now – naked, but free. "Let me take care of that for you."

The men stare at me, hunger in their eyes. I smile, running my tongue over my dry lips. "Look at those big, hard cocks of yours," I taunt, my eyes flicking between their dicks. "I bet they'd feel damn good in my tight cunt, filling me up."

The bigger man steps closer, his giant, rock-hard cock looming before my face. I feign admiration, lapping at the leaking head, tasting the salty pre-cum. "Mmm, tasty," I lie, steadying my voice. "Can't wait to have you pumping in me."

Off to the side, the little shit is fondling his own rod, his greedy eyes fixed on my tits. He's lost in his own dirty fantasies, oblivious to the knife he used to cut my ropes lying close by.

I shift on the mattress, writhing in feigned pleasure as I stroke their cocks, bringing my hands up and down their shafts. The lewd sounds they make only fuel my determination. I'm so close now, so close to the knife. One wrong move, and I'm done.

"You boys like this?" I purr, my gaze flitting between them. Their replies are incoherent groans, their eyes shut tight, their focus entirely on the sensation.

The small goon's eyes squeeze tighter as he pushes into my grip, his hands pinching my tits. And that's my chance. My hand flicks behind me, fingers brushing cold steel.

Two seconds – that's all I need.

I clasp the knife, swinging it around in a sharp arc, slicing through the smaller goon's cock in one swift movement. He doesn't even have time to scream. I'm onto the next one, the bigger bastard. I cut him down just as quickly, his dick severed, too.

Blood sprays, staining the cheap sheets. Their screams echo, piercing through the grimy room. Outside, I hear footsteps pounding, voices shouting, and then gunshots. My heart beats against my chest like a war drum, adrenaline pulsing through my veins. I'm ready to fight.

The door bursts open, revealing a large, muscular man holding a gun. He freezes, eyes wide. "What the fuck," he utters, taking in the bloody scene.

"Fuck off!" I warn him.

"D!" a voice calls out over a radio. "We've got him."

Chapter 13

Luka

“What the fuck is this?” I bark, eyes locked on the girl lying unconscious on the bed, barely covered by Dimitri’s jacket. Her face is stained with blood, but something tells me it isn’t her own.

Dimitri scowls, rubbing a bruise on his jaw. “This crazy bitch cut off two of Aleks’s men’s dicks. She came charging at me with the same knife when I tried to talk to her. So, I had to knock her out a bit.” Dimitri speaks with guilt.

“You mean you punched her lights out.” Erik laughs, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Well, at least you could have told her we’re the ‘good guys,’” he adds.

Dimitri’s face turns red, his anger rising. “You think this is funny? She’s dangerous.”

I raise an eyebrow, trying not to laugh. “She’s a wild one.” Has to be. She petrified Dimitri, for fuck’s sake. “Must’ve scared the shit out of you,” I taunt.

“Yeah, fucking hilarious,” Dimitri snaps, but there’s a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. “You try talking to a naked, blood-soaked woman wielding a knife.”

“I’d rather not.” I move closer, studying the girl’s face, the determination in her features, even in unconsciousness. “Dangerous or not, she fought back. That’s more than most would do.”

No mistake, this is Wren – we’d run the details earlier. Sophia is damn clueless about her best friend. She described Wren as the sweetest, kindest girl she’s ever known. “Sweet and kind” don’t usually involve slicing off dicks and attacking Dimitri, of all people.

Erik grins, eyeing the girl. “I bet she’s a wild one in bed, too.”

Dimitri rolls his eyes at him. “That’s not what this is about. We need to figure out what she knows.”

She wakes up suddenly, clutching her jaw where Dimitri’s punch must’ve landed. She jumps to her feet, rage all over her face.

The fact that she doesn’t even bother to cover herself up tells me she’s not like most girls.

“Fuck, that hurt,” she snaps, her eyes fixed on Dimitri like she’s ready to murder him with her stare alone. “What’s the big idea, asshole? Didn’t your mother teach you not to hit a lady?”

“Lady?” Dimitri snarls, clearly unimpressed. “You attacked me with a knife.”

She rolls her eyes, still holding her jaw. “Oh, boo hoo. Big man’s scared of a little knife.”

“You’re not exactly in a position to make fun of me,” Dimitri growls, his face turning red with anger.

She smirks, her pain momentarily forgotten. “And yet, here I am.”

I toss her a blanket, and she wraps it around herself, never taking her eyes off Dimitri. “Got a cigarette?” she asks, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “I need something to take the edge off after being manhandled by Captain Caveman over there.”

Erik chokes on a laugh, and even I can’t help but smile at her audacity. Dimitri, however, looks like he’s ready to punch something.

“You’re not getting anything from us until you tell us what we want to know,” he snaps, his voice dangerously low.

Raising an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed, she says, “That’s not how this works, sweetheart. You want information, you treat me with a little respect.”

“Respect?” Dimitri repeats, his voice dripping with disbelief. “We just saved your ass!”

She shrugs, her eyes filled with defiance. “Well, I didn’t ask you to.”

The room goes silent for a moment as we all take in her sheer gall. She’s not scared, not even a little, and her courage is both infuriating and fascinating.

Finally, I nod at Erik, who tosses her a pack of cigarettes from a nearby drawer. She lights one, takes a deep drag, and then blows the smoke in Dimitri’s direction.

“Thanks,” she says, her voice heavy with fake sweetness.

She takes another drag of the cigarette as she looks around the room, taking in the cots and medical equipment. She’s like a caged animal, her body tense, ready to strike.

I study her, intrigued by her courage, her fight. “So, what made you kill Aleks’s men?”

“Apart from the obvious?” Her lips curl into a sneer. “It’s none of your fucking business.”

“Watch your mouth,” Dimitri snaps, his patience wearing thin.

I chuckle, enjoying her fire. “Let her speak. I want to hear what she has to say.”

The room goes quiet, all eyes on the girl.

“I was taken,” she finally says, her voice low, filled with rage. “I killed those fuckers because they deserved to die. And I’ll kill you too if I have to.”

I lean in close, feeling her hot breath on my face. “You’re not going to kill anyone here. We’re not your enemies.”

She looks me in the eye, searching for truth, for trust. “Who the fuck are you guys?”

Dimitri’s face is set in a hard line, his patience clearly wearing thin. “We’re the ones who are going to help you if you stop being a pain in the ass and cooperate.”

A noise from the next room startles her, and I see recognition in her eyes. “Nilo?” she breathes, a note of

desperation in her voice. Her entire demeanor changes, and suddenly, she's moving, lunging toward the door.

Erik reacts first, blocking her path. "Hold on, wildcat. We're not here to harm you or your friend."

"Let me out!" she snaps, aiming a swift kick at Erik's balls, but he just sidesteps and laughs.

"You lying pieces of shit!" She's screaming now.

Dimitri takes a step closer. I can tell he is furious by now. "We saved him. And you! He's safe, and he's calling out for someone. Is that you?"

She hesitates, a flicker of doubt crossing her face. "You're lying," she accuses.

"Why would we lie?" I ask, keeping my voice calm and even. "We're on the same side here."

"Same side?" she spits, her voice colored with disbelief. "What side is that?"

"The side that doesn't want to see you or your friend hurt," I reply, hoping my sincerity comes through.

She doesn't respond, just stands there, her body wound tight, and her eyes narrowed. After a moment, she takes a harsh drag of the cigarette, puffing it out in a cloud of disdain. Then, with a nasty flick of her wrist, she throws the cigarette onto the floor as if it's an annoyance. Her decision is made.

"Alright," she says, her voice steady. "If you're telling the truth, you'll let me see Nilo."

I glance at Dimitri, who gives a reluctant nod. "Fine. But no funny business. One wrong move, and we'll take you down."

Her eyes flash, but she doesn't argue. "Deal."

We lead her to the next room, where Nilo is lying on a bed, his eyes wide with shock and relief when he sees her. They embrace, and the tension in the room finally seems to ease.

"Nilo! Are you okay?" Wren's voice trembles slightly as she examines him, her eyes wide and filled with concern. Her fingers hover over his face, tracing unseen wounds.

“Where are we?” Nilo asks, his voice weak, his eyes darting around the unfamiliar room, clearly disoriented.

“Yeah, where are we?” Wren echoes, her brows furrowing, eyes locking onto mine, demanding an explanation.

“You’re in the Ivankov’s safehouse,” I reply, attempting to sound reassuring. “We’ve rescued you from Aleks.” I pause, watching her reaction closely.

“Ivankov...” she mutters, her eyes widening for just a fraction of a second before she quickly hides her reaction. But it’s too late. I’ve seen it, and I know there’s something more.

“You know something, don’t you?” I press, leaning in closer, my voice a mix of curiosity and challenge.

“Why should I tell you?” she shoots back, her voice defiant, her body tensing, fists clenched.

I lean back, my eyes narrowing as I study her for a moment. She’s not going to make this easy. The mistrust in her eyes is evident. The next words need to be chosen carefully.

“Because,” I say slowly, “we’re not your enemies. I told you we’re on the same side.” I pause for emphasis, letting the words sink in. “And...we...need your help.”

“You...need my help?” She frowns and looks at me suspiciously. Searching for something. Truth, perhaps. Trust, most definitely. Then her gaze shifts to Nilo, and I can see her weighing the risks, the doubts clearly playing across her face.

“Why should I believe you?” she finally asks, her voice softer now but still filled with suspicion.

“Because,” I begin, leaning forward, my voice filled with sincerity, “like I say, we’re on the same side.”

“And which fucking side is that?” she spits, her eyes ablaze with defiance.

I hold her stare, letting the silence stretch tautly before I answer, “Sophia’s side.”

Chapter 14

Sophia

The soft light from the lamp in my room casts a warm glow around us. “I’ll call you,” Luka said, his voice rough but his eyes soft.

I pull him back, my heart screaming that it’s too risky; he could get killed. I couldn’t bear that pain. The pain of losing a loved one.

Not again.

“I’ll be okay, *krasotka*,” he says, as if reading my mind. He kisses me, and I can feel the urgency and the passion. “I’ll bring Nilo and Wren back. Safe. Trust me.”

I cling to him, tears threatening to spill. “Promise me, Luka. Promise me you’ll come back.”

He smiles that bad boy smile I love so much and whispers in my ear, “I promise, *krasotka*.”

I don’t want to let go. I can’t. But I do, and he leaves. The door closes behind him, and I’m left alone, his promise echoing in my head.

Sleep is impossible. I pace around my room, restless, anxious. I check on Yulia. She’s asleep, peaceful, unaware of the danger. Max wags his tail, happy to see me.

“Everything will be okay, Max,” I say, but I’m not sure I believe it.

Heading back to my room, I check my phone. Nothing from Luka. No messages, no calls.

It’s only twenty minutes. But it feels like forever since he walked out.

I kneel down, hands clasped.

“God, I don’t know if you’re listening, but please hear me now,” I choke out. “Keep Luka safe, the father of my unborn child. Protect Nilo, my brother, and Wren, my best friend. I

don't know how to live without them. Please, bring them home to me, safe and sound. I trust you, but I'm so scared. Amen."

Sinking onto the floor, I rest my head on my arms.

Suddenly, a loud sound, like a gunshot, rings out. Screams follow. My heart leaps into my throat. Panic sets in. I rush to the door and yank it open. The world outside my room has turned into a nightmare.

The entire floor is on fire. Flames are everywhere. A man's scream reaches my ears, filled with pain. He's walking toward me, on fire. It's Luka. My world stops.

"Luka!" I scream, unable to believe what I'm seeing. "No, no, NO!" I want to run to him, to save him, but my legs refuse to move.

"Ms. Williams!" I hear a voice calling my name, and my eyes peel open to see a face looming close. I almost punch the person in front of me. "Svet...Svetlana?" I stammer, disoriented and confused.

A dream! Thank God it was a dream!

That nightmare's got my heart racing like crazy. Dammit.

"Shhh," Svetlana whispers, her voice as stern as I remember. "You need to get to the safehouse. Immediately."

"Safe-Safehouse?" I echo, confusion evident in my voice. "What's happening?"

"You need to leave. Now," she urges. "Go with Grisha."

Oh God, please, please. Tell me Luka is okay.

The night is a blur. I find myself ushered into a car. The clock on the dashboard reads two a.m. Damn! Five hours have passed.

Grisha, in his usual silent manner, navigates through the city. He takes turn after turn, and with each one, the roads become less familiar, more discreet. Eventually, we pull up to a nondescript building, looking as ordinary as any dry cleaning and laundry service.

Grisha steps out and assists me, guiding me toward what seems like an electrical box on the wall. But when he opens it, it's a keypad. After punching in a code, a hidden door to the side creaks open. My pulse quickens.

I freeze at the door.

No, I can't go with him.

My legs won't move. Please, God...

What-what if Luka... Is he...dead?

"Ms. Williams," Grisha's voice breaks through my spiraling thoughts. "We need to keep moving. Mr. Ivankov will explain."

The name seizes my heart. "Luka," I whisper, my voice breaking, "is he...?"

Grisha's face remains impassive. "I can't tell you more. But now, you must follow me."

I'm led through the safehouse, a maze of hidden passages, reinforced rooms, and surveillance monitors. Grisha finally stops outside a room. "Mr. Ivankov is waiting."

The door creaks open, and I step inside, my eyes widening at the sight before me.

I glance at Luka, relief washing over me as I see he's okay. Then I see two familiar faces – Nilo lying on a bed, pale and drawn, while Wren's sitting beside him, her dark hair wild and eyes glittering with relief when she sees me at the door.

"Soph?"

"Nilo!" I rush over, my heart pounding. Tears blur my vision as I grab his hands, needing to feel that he's real. "Wren! Are you both alright?" I look at her.

"Soph!" Nilo's voice trembles, his eyes filled with relief and regret. "I-I am so sorry." His voice breaking. "I never meant for any of this to happen."

My heart aches for him, and without thinking, I pull him into a tight hug. A long, desperate hug that says all the things I

can't put into words. Wren, watching us, suddenly moves forward to join in, her arms encircling us both.

"It's okay, Nilo," I reassure him, brushing his hair from his forehead. "You're safe now. We'll get through this," I whisper into Nilo's ear, tears streaming down my face. "We'll fight this together."

I pull back, hastily wiping my tears with the back of my hand, and turn toward Wren, hugging her intensely. My best friend. "Wren, I'm so, so sorry for getting you into this mess." I'm crying and laughing at the same time.

"It's not your fault, Soph," Wren insists, her voice steady even as she returns my embrace. "It's that motherfucker Aleks."

Pulling back, I suddenly realize that Wren is only wrapped up in a thin white blanket. No clothes, nothing else. I blink, confusion written all over my face. "What on earth...? What the hell happened to your clothes?"

She shrugs, a wicked gleam in her eye, all casual nonchalance. "Lost 'em in a bet. But don't worry, this blanket's doing the job."

"Wha-what bet?"

"I'm just kidding, Soph. But like I said, everything's under control."

I can't help but feel the anger building. "Someone find Wren some damn clothes!" I snap, my eyes flitting around the room.

Wren laughs that wild, uncontrolled laugh of hers. "Oh, come on, Soph, this is nothing new." I want to strangle her and hug her at the same time.

Then, with a swift motion, Dimitri pulls off his shirt, muscles and scars bared. He throws it to Wren.

"Thanks," Wren says, snatching the shirt out of the air with a quick movement. She pulls it on. Dimitri's massive shirt transforms on her – big enough to be a dress, hanging loosely and draping over her curvaceous figure.

“Well, don’t I look ravishing?” Wren quips, giving a playful twirl. “I should wear men’s clothing more often.”

With a wink, she gives Dimitri her signature seductive smile, the one that’s been known to bring most men to their knees. Caught off guard, Dimitri quickly turns his head away.

I never thought I’d see Dimitri reacting this way to anyone.

“Enough playing around,” Erik drawls, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms, a teasing glint in his eye. He levels his gaze at Wren. “Your turn, Missy. Time to spill what you know.”

Chapter 15

Luka

A ping. I glance at the phone. “Sophia’s back home. Safe.” Damn, it feels good to exhale. But the tension doesn’t stay gone for long.

Erik leans forward, adjusting the collar of his impeccable shirt. Guy always looks like he stepped straight out of a damned magazine shoot. “Remember that little nugget Wren spilled earlier? About Aleks planning some sort of ‘housewarming’ gift on our turf?”

Gritting my teeth, I nod. “Bastard’s planning to hit us at home.”

“I know when it’s gonna happen.” He glances at me.

“Sophia got word from this Anya.” I forcefully set my phone on the table. “She gave a hint about something brewing for Yulia’s birthday.”

“Bullseye.” Without a word, Erik takes a dart from the side table. With controlled anger, he hurls it straight into a dartboard across the room, hitting dead center.

I squeeze my brow together. “This Anya bitch, we knew about her?”

Dimitri’s face twists in disgust. “Yup, that bloody janitor finally confessed that he was on Aleks’s payroll and got Anya onto our turf.”

“How much did he get paid?” I am curious.

“Eh...fifty grand.” Eric shrugs.

“Is that all it takes to betray us?” Dimitri’s voice is cold, deadly.

“Well, some people kill for less,” Erik reminds him.

“Of course, and the reward for his betrayal? Bleeding to death,” Dimitri says, his voice emotionless. “Grisha made certain of that.”

Erik smirks, flipping through his laptop, adding more surprises, “Oh, speaking of that, you know they tried to sell her into the US as a whore? The girl didn’t even make it to the brothel,” he continues, “And, her real name is Katerina Vasiliev. Twenty-five years old.”

Dimitri raises an eyebrow, intrigued. “Katerina Vasiliev? You mean Aleks’s lover?”

Erik’s chuckle cuts through the air, dark and ugly. “Love’s a dangerous game, especially when you’re playing it with the likes of Aleks.”

Dimitri leans forward, examining the file Erik has spread out. “She’s deep in this. Willing to die for him?”

“That’s what it seems,” Erik replies, tapping on a particular page in the file.

“It’s madness,” Dimitri says, disgust evident in his tone. “All this risk, and not even a dime in return?”

I shake my head. “Some people chase after things more intoxicating than money. She’s in it for the love, or whatever twisted version of it she thinks she’s getting.”

I stare hard at the photos, anger bubbling up again. “Love or not, she’s chosen her side.”

Dimitri taps the map laid out before us. “Speaking of sides, this is where we’ll find them.”

I glance down, my gaze zeroing in on the marked area. “So, that’s where he’s been hiding out?” I trace the map with my finger, looking up at Dimitri.

Dimitri nods. “After months of searching, we hit the jackpot just a few hours ago. They are on the east side. Clever spot, tucked away among those old, rotting warehouses. Who’d think?”

Erik, leaning against the wall, chimes in, “Yeah, from the look of it, it’s been abandoned for a while. Makes a perfect hideout. Especially with its location – direct access to main routes and still manages to stay off the radar.”

Dimitri's face darkens, his voice edged with frustration. "Exactly. All those rundown buildings around? They've been using them as a shield."

I shake my head, the gravity of the situation sinking in. "No wonder we couldn't find them. Right under our noses. Fuck, if we knew this earlier, we wouldn't have let that bastard even breathe near our turf," I growl, thinking about Yulia.

"Better late than never, huh?" Erik twirls a sleek, black pistol between his fingers, eyes gleaming. "So, ready for more surprises?" he asks, his smirk widening.

Dimitri and I exchange glances.

Before either of us can reply, Erik shoots a sly smirk our way and calls out, "Hey, Ollie!"

The door creaks open, and a lanky, geeky-looking dude with thick glasses shuffles in. It's evident he's uncomfortable, out of his element in this grim setting.

I raise an eyebrow. "Who the hell is this?"

Erik chuckles. "Meet Ollie. Our very own tech whiz."

Ollie nods shyly, gripping his laptop like a shield. "Hi."

Dimitri smirks, clearly amused. "Didn't know you had a nerd in your pocket, Erik."

Ignoring Dimitri, Erik nudges Ollie forward. "Show them."

With a few rapid clicks, Ollie brings up a live feed on his laptop. The footage shows the interior of what looks like a warehouse. I can hear muffled voices, the echoey sound of plans being made.

Erik leans in close, whispering, "Got a few bugs placed inside. Money makes people sing, my friends."

Ollie cranks up the volume, and the noises from the warehouse become crisper. The video is slightly grainy but clear enough to provide an idea of what's going on. I examine the inside of the rundown warehouse. The ceiling is high, and most of the place is dim, with a few bulbs lighting up specific areas.

The first thing that catches my attention is the descent – a staircase that leads to a subterranean level. The footage shifts as one of the bugs seems to be planted lower. Now, the view reveals Aleks’s real arsenal. Walls mounted with weapons, machine guns, pistols, and rifles, all organized with military precision. It’s like stumbling upon a lion’s den, only instead of teeth and claws, there’s cold steel. There’s a corner with monitors showcasing live feeds from various locations. A makeshift command center.

Then, Aleks’s voice cuts through the quiet hum of the warehouse, the sneer in his tone unmistakable. “We kill them all,” he growls.

“Yes, *Pakhan!*” a chorus of voices respond, enthusiasm oozing from them. The men gathered around Aleks murmur in agreement.

A tall, brutish thug with a scar tracing down his cheek speaks up, “Everything’s in place, *Pakhan*. The Ivankovs won’t know what hit them.”

Aleks sneers, looking around his assembled group. “You know the best time to strike, don’t you?”

One of the men chuckles, rubbing his hands together. “During their precious party, *Pakhan?*”

Aleks’s lips stretch into a malicious grin. “Precisely. We’ll shower them with bullets instead of confetti. Killing the Ivankovs is going to be my play time.”

Fucking idiots.

Erik snorts softly beside me, a look of derision clear on his face.

“Big talk,” he murmurs, so only I can hear.

Another stooge, with a nervous twitch in his eye, steps forward. “*Pakhan*, the other warehouse...it’s been torched. They got the girl and that punk out, too.”

Aleks laughs, the sound echoing in the chilly warehouse. “Let ‘em think they’re winning. Makes it all the sweeter when we come out on top.”

The scarred muscle adds, “For our guys they took out, we’ll make the Ivankovs pay.”

Aleks leans in, cold fury in his eyes. “I’ll personally put a round in each of their heads, just like I did with their last pathetic *pakhan*.”

My blood boils. This piece of shit is talking about my father.

A deeper, gravelly voice cuts in, probably the big thug I’ve had the displeasure of meeting before. “Once everything’s in place, Katerina will signal. Then we hit them hard and fast.”

Dimitri’s grip on the table tightens, his face an unreadable mask, but I can sense the storm brewing inside him.

Aleks’s laugh grates on my nerves. “Strike at the heart, and the rest will crumble.”

Fucking traitors, the lot of them.

That disgusting piece of shit, Aleks, scheming to butcher everyone at Yulia’s birthday celebration. His own niece, damn him. His unquenchable thirst for control, his perverted craving for domination, his utter void of morals – he’s no better than a rabid animal, and even that’s giving him too much credit.

My gaze locks on Ollie. “Keep monitoring that feed. If anything significant comes up, get Erik on it. Don’t miss a beat, alright?”

Ollie adjusts his glasses nervously, eyes darting between the screen and me. “Y-yes, sir. I got it. I’ll, um, keep tabs on every pixel.”

Erik gives Ollie an encouraging pat on the shoulder, clearly understanding the weight the tech whiz is shouldering.

I stare down at the piece of paper in my hand.

A birthday schedule, Yulia’s name written in elegant script, the details of the celebration planned meticulously. I take a deep breath, trying to control the anger that’s boiling inside me, a rage so fierce it threatens to consume everything.

My jaw clenches, the fury within me churning like a storm. How the hell does a man fall so far? He’s a parasite, feeding

off others' pain, selling out his own flesh and blood for what? Another taste of power? Another sliver of territory?

That bastard's greed has turned him into a monster, and I'm going to relish tearing him apart, piece by piece. He thinks he can play with lives, toy with family? He's going to learn just how wrong he is, and I'll enjoy every second of his suffering.

Breathing deep into my core, I feel the burning rage anchor me. "We need more firepower. More men," I hiss through gritted teeth. I lock eyes with Dimitri, unyielding.

"Dimitri, reach out to the DeMarcos. We might butt heads over territory, but one thing's for sure – Aleks is a thorn in their side, too. It's time to call in some favors."

"I'll get on it." Dimitri nods. "We've got to make everything look like business as usual, no hints of what's coming. That Katerina bitch better stay in the dark, or she'll find herself in a grave."

"Who's watching that bitch right now?" I snap, my voice ice-cold.

"No need to worry, Svetlana's got eyes on the rat," Dimitri sneers, his face twisted in contempt. He pulls out a cigarette and lights it. "He won't back down. We burned his building, killed his men, but that bastard will keep coming."

"But we'll need a fucking plan to protect Yulia at all costs," Erik says quietly.

Fuck!

Dimitri's face twists as he considers the danger to my baby sister.

I glance at the itinerary again, pausing at the grand finale for the plans of the day. Something about the delivery catches my eye.

"Glitz and Blaze Pyrotechnics," I read out the company name. We all look at each other, our eyes wide. It's a name that echoes Aleks's cunning, and in that moment, it's clear to all of us. That's how he's planning to get in, masking himself as a delivery man and worker for the fireworks setup.

Dimitri's jaw clenches as he bangs his hand against the wall. "The crafty bastard's going to waltz right into our party."

Erik's eyes narrow, deep in thought. "We'll be waiting for him. Let's turn his trick against him."

Dimitri paces, his eyes glinting with fury as he considers the options. "We'll put our own guys with the circus crew. Blades, guns, anything we need, hidden in plain sight. He won't even see it coming."

"Don't forget about Yulia," Erik says.

I clench my fists, my voice a low growl. "I'd rather die than put Yulia at risk, but there's no other way. She's an Ivankov, and that bastard Aleks won't resist the bait."

"We'll guard her like a pack of wolves. If that mad dog Aleks thinks he can touch her, he'll find our teeth tearing his throat out," Erik vows, his words a savage promise.

Dimitri looks at me, his eyes intense. "We love Yulia more than life itself. But to kill that devil, we need to use her."

Erik's fist clenches at the reminder of what's at stake. "I'll get the men ready." He stands abruptly, his movement decisive. "Aleks won't know what hit him."

"Don't go soft on me, *bratan*," I warn, my eyes on Erik.

Erik laughs, a harsh, bitter sound. "No chance in hell." And with that, he leaves the room.

Dimitri doesn't leave. I know what he's going to ask me next.

"What's happening to Nilo, that fucking crackhead?" Dimitri asks, his tone cutting. "He's lucky he's not dead."

I lean back, my eyes cold as I consider his fate. "Rehab. A private center. He'll clean up, or he won't be breathing much longer."

"And Wren?" The change in Dimitri's voice is hard to miss, almost dripping with something more. A softness? Concern? The way he lingers on her name gives away more than he probably intends.

“She’s bunkering down until everything’s settled,” I say, fixing him with a piercing look.

“Good.” He’s quick with that reply, too damn quick. Trying to mask something, but it’s like a neon sign in a dark alley, glaring and obvious. Seems he’s caught a little “feeling bug,” the damned fool.

I smirk internally. Fucking emotions, always tripping up the best of us at the worst times. I’d have half a mind to call him out on it but now’s not the time. With Aleks on our doorstep, we’ve got bigger fires to extinguish.

He inhales deeply from his cigarette, then grinds it out on the floor.

“You didn’t kill Sophia,” Dimitri finally states, his voice probing. “Even after she told you about the bugs she planted. You forget our rules about betrayal? It’s death, Luka.”

I keep quiet for a long moment, my mind racing. The words are there, but saying them out loud makes it real.

Finally, I meet his eyes. “I will not kill my woman and the *mother of my child.*”

Chapter 16

Dimitri

I slept.

But the moment I wake up, it hits me again like a ton of bricks.

“I will not kill my woman , the mother of my child.”

My eyes had nearly popped out of my head. “You... You’re going to be a father?”

“Yeah,” Luka had answered, his voice solid, like he’d carved it in stone.

That’s it. My best friend, my brother-in-arms, is going to be a dad. And what am I? Stuck in the same shithole, playing the same twisted games.

A sick feeling settles in my stomach. Is it jealousy? Maybe. Sadness? Yeah, a bit of that too. It’s like Luka’s moving on to something big, something life-changing. And me? I’m still here, getting my hands dirty, fighting the same old fights.

I shake my head, trying to get rid of the thoughts, but they stick with me, nagging like a damn itch I can’t reach.

So, what do I do? The only thing I know how to do.

I fight.

That’s why I’m here. The underground fight club smells like shit. Sweat, blood, and whatever dreams have died there. I’m tearing into some poor bastard like I want to kill him. The crowd is going nuts, screaming like a bunch of lunatics.

This place, hidden deep under the city, is a playground for sick fucks who get their kicks from watching men beat each other to a pulp. Money flows like water, all stained with pain and suffering.

Erik and I, we’ve been coming here for years. But tonight, it feels different. It’s like there’s something missing, something off. Or maybe it’s just me. Maybe I’m the one who’s off.

Luka's moving on, and here I am, stuck in the same damn place.

Fuck!

I land a punch, and the guy's face explodes in a spray of blood. The crowd goes wild, but I don't give a shit.

I fucking need the pain.

I fucking need someone to bleed.

It's one day till I finally get to end Aleks's miserable life.

And then it hits me like a kick in the belly. Little Yulia's birthday. Supposed to be her day. But it's all fucked up, and it's driving me insane.

"Fucking kill him, Dimitri!" Erik yells, his eyes wild.

I slam my fist into the guy's face again, feeling his nose break. Blood goes everywhere, and I don't care.

Aleks's face flashes in my mind, and I see red. How the fuck does he always know? How does he keep fucking everything up?

Yulia's birthday. Her sweet face, her laughter. It's all getting buried in this shitstorm, and it's tearing me apart.

Everything's fucked. Aleks, Yulia, Luka, my life. All of it.

Tomorrow's her day, but all I can think about is killing. Tearing Aleks apart.

The crowd's roaring, the blood's flowing, but all I feel is rage.

The guy swings at me, but I dodge and return with a knee to his gut. He doubles over, gasping for air, but I don't give him a chance to recover. I grab his head and slam it into my rising knee. Teeth scatter across the floor.

I roar, yanking my opponent up by the hair and unleashing a barrage of punches. I can feel his face cave under my fists, but I don't stop. I can't stop. Not until Aleks's smug smile is wiped off the face of this earth.

With one final, thunderous punch, the guy's body goes limp in my arms. I toss him aside like trash, my chest heaving, my blood singing in my veins.

I don't feel bad for the guy; he chose this life.

That's the fucking truth of choosing to be a fighter. There's no room for sympathy here.

Not in this hellhole.

A fleeting memory sears through my mind – me, at the age of sixteen, fists bloodied, teeth clenched, fighting older boys in grimy alleys for a handful of cash. Cash that would buy food for another night, alcohol to keep my father's rages at bay, drugs to numb my mother's despair.

Fighting to survive, always fighting.

The crowds are chanting now.

“More!”

“More!”

“More!” they howl, hungering for blood like a pack of wild animals.

They want more. Fucking cowards – all of them.

I look up, a sneer on my face, and show them a middle finger.

“Boooo!” they shout back, voices dripping with disappointment and anger.

“That was fucking brutal, man. You sure you're alright?” Erik is there, slapping me on the back, his face flushed with the thrill of the fight.

I wipe the blood from my mouth, my eyes dark. “I'm fine. Just thinking about that son of a bitch Aleks. I want to do the same to him.”

Erik's smile fades, and he looks at me seriously. “We'll get him tomorrow. But we have to be smart. And you need to cool down.”

“Cool down? He’s fucking with us, Erik! Someone’s feeding him information; I know it. I’ll rip their fucking throat out when I find them.”

And then, she comes strutting out. This woman with a dress so tight it looks like it’s painted on. Half her fake tits spilling out, and her lips so big and shiny they look like they could be popped with a pin. She licks those fake lips, thinking it’s sexy, but it makes my stomach turn.

I’m thinking of that girl – Wren. My mind goes to her lips. Real, plump, sexy lips like Angelina Jolie’s. Those eyes, though...wild and fierce, they ignite something in me that I’ve never felt before. I’ve never seen anything like it – her, naked, blood splattered all over her body, a knife in her hand, ready to fight to the death. She’s ferocious, untamed, and something in me desires that wildness, that fire.

The fighter in me wants to battle her, to dominate her, but the man in me wants to possess her, to claim her as mine.

What the fuck?

I shake the thoughts away, knowing they’re dangerous. But they linger, like the scent of blood in the air, taunting me, challenging me.

I chuckle, a dark sound, at the memory of those bastards on the ground, both dickless and lifeless. Pathetic. She’d been terrifying, and goddamn, it’s attractive.

Never in my life have I seen anyone like her.

Suddenly, the annoying voice of the fake-lipped woman brings me back to the present. “Congratulations, handsome. Here’s your prize.” She’s trying so hard, batting those ridiculous fake lashes at me. She thinks she’s got my attention, but all I see is the rawness of that other woman, the fire. The realness in the face of danger.

She presses the \$10,000 cardboard to my chest, her nails like talons on my skin. I shove it back at her, feeling a flare of disgust.

“Give it to that dude.” I jerk my thumb at my beaten opponent, bloodied and moaning on the floor. “I’m not here

for the money.”

Her eyes widen, her lips forming an exaggerated “O.” She shakes her head. “But darling, it’s \$10,000! Think of what you could do with all that money!”

Money. I have plenty now.

Millions even.

That’s not the point.

I see her pout, those absurd lips puckering like she’s sucking on a lemon, but I don’t give a damn. My mind’s already drifting back to the past, to the time when money was everything.

I turn from her, her fakeness turning my stomach, and head for the door. No looking back.

I was raised by the *pakhan*, Luka’s father.

He’d brought me over to the US. He saw something in me, a spark that no one else had cared to notice. A lost boy fighting in grimy alleys for a fistful of dollars to feed my family. My father’s drunken rages, my mother’s hollow eyes...they drove me to the edge. But Luka’s father, the *pakhan*, he pulled me back. He saw something in me no one else did.

Aleks took that from me. He killed the *pakhan*, killed the only father I’d ever known.

“I know you’re angry, Dimitri, but we have to be careful. We can’t let emotion cloud our judgment.” Erik’s voice breaks through my thoughts, bringing me back to the present.

“Emotion?” I snort. “This is not about emotion. This is personal. It’s about loyalty, about honor. Aleks will die by our hands tomorrow. That’s a fucking guarantee.”



I can’t shake the image of her from my mind. I’m back in my room now, a place of steel and shadow, the walls lined with weapons, a dark sanctuary that’s mine and mine alone. The air

smells of gun oil and leather, mixed with the underlying scent of sweat from countless hours of training. But even here, in my private fortress, she invades my thoughts.

I rip off my shirt, the fabric tearing as I throw it across the room. It lands in a crumpled heap next to a stack of cash and ammo. The frustration is eating at me, and I need to get it out. My punching bag is there, waiting, and I attack it with everything I've got. Each punch is an explosion, a release, but it's not enough. It'll never be enough.

My body's a traitor, a fucking bastard that doesn't care about anything but its own desires. I storm to the shower, ripping off my jeans, my cock already hard and aching. It's a torment, a thick and veined monster that hasn't reacted like this in a long damn time. The sight of it, pulsing with need, the head shiny with pre-cum, has me snarling with frustration.

I turn the shower on, cold as ice, and the freezing spray hits my back, but it does nothing to quench the fire raging inside me. My cock throbs, aching for release, and my balls pull tight against my body as the desire surges through me. Every part of me is alive, on fire, and it's all because of her.

I grab my length, squeezing hard, trying to force the images from my mind. But it's no use. The thoughts of her, untamed and fearless, covered in blood and brandishing a knife, are burned into my brain. She's unlike anything I've ever seen, and my body reacts to her with a primal need that scares me to my core.

The fantasies are filthy and consuming, so raw and real that I can almost taste her. I imagine her lips, not the fake ones from earlier but her real, sinfully plump lips, sliding down my cock, inch by brutal inch. Her tongue would be skilled, fearless, tracing the veins on my shaft, tasting the pre-cum leaking from the tip.

I'd shove myself into her mouth, fucking her throat without mercy, feeling her gag on me, hearing the sounds of her choking and still pushing deeper. Her tits would bounce fiercely with each thrust, her nipples hard and begging for my touch. But it's her mouth I'm obsessed with, her mouth that's

covered in blood and I don't give a shit. I just keep pounding her face, balls deep, holding her head and using her for my pleasure.

I pump my cock, stroking it as hard as I can and imagining her gagging. With a guttural grunt, my hips jerk uncontrollably as I explode, my cum shooting out in thick ropes, splattering against my stomach and the shower wall. There's no poetry in it, no romance, just the pure, primal satisfaction of a need fulfilled. I gasp for breath, my heart pounding in my chest as I turn the heat up in the shower. I wash myself off, scrubbing at my skin like I can somehow erase the filth of my thoughts.

Chapter 17

Sophia

Luka's mansion's gone through a total makeover, and it feels like I'm trapped in some over-the-top reality TV show. Giant golden balloons are everywhere, chandeliers dripping with crystals, and there's enough glitter on everything to make me squint. The maids are running around with golden swags and potted plants, turning the garden into something out of a fairy tale.

"Watch where you're going!" one of them barks at me as I almost send a ladder crashing down.

"Sorry!" I yell back, faking the frantic energy in the room. It's chaos in here, and all I want to do is get through the day without getting run over.

But there's a storm in my head, a chaos I can't escape. I'm walking a tightrope, and one slip could ruin everything. Like tipping off Anya about today's plan? That fear gnaws at me.

My palms are sweaty, my heart's racing, but I can't let anyone see that. I scan the room, looking for Anya, but she's vanished.

What's she up to?

Luka's words are a blunt reminder: "Act like normal, *krasotka*. Anya's not just in the kitchen, she's watching. If she gets to you, make sure Aleks doesn't know what we're planning. Understand? That asshole cannot know that we're preparing for him."

Normal? There's nothing normal about any of this.

Once, I was a puppet on Aleks's string, living every second with a lump in my throat, never knowing when he'd yank it tight.

Then came the whole "fake" nanny gig. And what do you know? I fall for Yulia like she's the kid sister I never had.

And Luka, that infuriatingly irresistible man, somehow sneaks past all my defenses. Now I'm carrying his child.

How the hell did I get here?

I find my hand drifting to my belly, where Luka's were just last night, those dark and dangerous eyes burning into mine. The guy looked like hell, but still managed to be painfully sexy. I wanted him to stay with me, to make everything seem okay, just for a little while.

But he left, lips on mine, and a quick, "We need to keep things as they are right now. Nothing out of the ordinary."

I bite my lip, feeling a sudden wave of nausea followed by panic. Then Luka's voice comes back to me, deep and reassuring, "You are part of us now; you are one of the Ivankov."

The Ivankov. I take a deep breath and straighten my back, pushing the fear down.

Yes, Luka kept his promise.

He saved Nilo and Wren.

It's been a long time since anyone made me feel protected. Not since Mom and Dad died, not since Nana fell ill and Nilo went off the deep end.

No one's looked out for me like this until now.

The room's busy, filled with people scurrying about, but it's all just noise to me. My mind is fixated on Luka, on his words, on the feelings he stirs up inside me. It's unfamiliar and scary, yet it's something I realize I've been needing all along.

I've been alone for so long.

Is it wrong to want this?

To want to feel secure and protected when everything's on the brink of collapse? That's what Luka's offering me, and it's tantalizing. It's a lifeline in a world where I've been adrift for so long. His promises, his touch, they make me feel like everything might just be okay.

Walking into Yulia's room, my eyes lock onto Anya, who's combing Yulia's hair like she's got every right in the world to be there. My heart kicks into overdrive, and a nasty taste fills my mouth.

"Hello, Ms. William," she greets me, and that damn smile on her face has me clenching my fists. She's playing a game, acting like a doting caregiver. "I found Yulia alone in her room and thought I would keep her company."

I want to grab her by the hair and demand answers. But I can't. I've got to act "normal." Whatever the fuck that means.

"Hi, Anya," I reply, forcing a sweetness into my voice that makes my skin crawl. I inch closer to Yulia, feigning nonchalance. "I was just out in the kitchen to refill some water for her."

My mind's racing a mile a minute. How the fuck did she get past everyone? What's she doing here?

Without warning, she's up and yanking me toward the bathroom. I flinch, but she doesn't seem to notice, her eyes darting as she whispers. "Everything is on track today. Bring Yulia to the barn at eight tonight."

My heart pounds in my ears. "What? Why?" I choke out, panic edging my voice.

Her grin morphs into something wicked, something evil. "Because we have a surprise for the Ivankov. If you want to see your brother and that bitch best friend of yours, you'd better listen to me."

I fight the urge to lash out. She doesn't know. She doesn't know that Nilo and Wren have been rescued.

But why?

I shove my fear down and put on a mask of obedience. "Of course, Anya. I'll do whatever you need."

Her eyes narrow, and she leans closer. "Remember, eight at the barn, and don't fuck this up."

I nod, pretending to fall in line. "I understand."

Her laugh is a cold, cruel sound. “See that you do.”

She leaves, and I’m left reeling, fury and terror warring inside me. I glance over at Yulia, her innocent eyes wide and curious.

“Where did Anya go?”

“She just had to run an errand,” I say with a soft smile.” My gaze drifts to Max, who’s gnawing happily on his favorite squeaky toy. “Look at Max. He’s already excited about your party. The circus crew will be there, remember?”

Yulia’s face lights up. “Luka said they’ll do all those amazing tricks and stunts, too!”

“Yes, and Max will probably outshine them all. Might even learn a trick or two from them.”

Her joy dims for a second, and she looks up at me with big, worried eyes. “What about Luka, Dima, and Erik? Will they be able to come? I miss them so much.”

I bend down to hug her, trying to convey reassurance. “I know you do, sweetheart. They’ll try their best to be there. They wouldn’t want to miss your special day.”

“Promise?”

My heart drops, but I puff out my chest, hands on my hips. “Of course! They wouldn’t dare miss it. If they do, they’ll have me to deal with.” I fake an angry pout, and she giggles.

Yulia’s eyes bounce back and forth to the door like she’s expecting Luka, Dimitri, and Erik to pop up out of nowhere.

“Let’s get ready, princess.” I look at the time, my heart pumping in anxiety, knowing things may get nasty tonight.

I’ve never thought I would come across someone so near to evil. My feelings for Aleks are beyond anger, beyond hate; it’s a gnawing loathing that eats at me every time I think of him.

At Yulia’s birthday party! Fucking bastard Aleks!

I glance at my watch, and my breath catches.

It’s five now.

Svetlana's voice is loud and clear in my head. "Mr. Ivankov's guests are arriving today at six p.m. Cocktails and food must be ready by then. We will have the circus crew performing from seven until eight," she announced this morning.

If she knows what's really going on, she's doing a damned good job of hiding it. There's no sign, no hint, nothing. Just the same cold instructions. It's maddening.

Only another hour before the guests start arriving. Who are these guests, anyway? Friends of Luka? Business associates? Or just random people here to gawk at the spectacle?

My mind spins, and I can't shake the feeling that tonight's event is a ticking time bomb.

I need to tell Luka about Anya's plan, plain and simple. She's up to something, and I can't let my guard down. Right now, my job is to protect Yulia, and that's exactly what I'm going to do.

"Sophia?" Yulia's voice pulls me back from my anger. I look down at her innocent eyes, a calming presence.

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Will there be cake?" she asks, her eyes wide and hopeful.

I laugh, shaking off my irritation. "Of course! The biggest and tastiest cake you've ever seen."

She beams, and my heart lightens.

"You know," I add, steering her attention back to the wardrobe, "the cake's going to be amazing, but what would make it even more special is the perfect dress to match it. I have just the one!"

I walk over to her inner closet and pull out a pink Chanel dress that's a work of art in itself. The fabric is a soft silk that feels like a cloud, with delicate lace detailing around the neckline. Tiny sparkling crystals are embedded in the material, catching the light as I move it. The dress probably cost more than my entire year's salary from my old jobs. It's ridiculous and beautiful at the same time.

“Oh, sweetheart, you’re going to love this one. It’s tailored just for you. Sparkling like the stars.” I reveal the dress, watching her eyes widen at the glitz.

She hesitates a bit, biting her lip, looking between the dress and me. “It’s really pretty,” she says slowly, “But, um, can I wear a suit like Luka?”

I pause, then smile warmly, understanding the longing in her eyes. “A suit? Now, that’s a stylish choice. Luka would be proud.”

Her face lights up, and she dashes over to another section of her closet, pulling out a smart little suit that’s every bit as tailored as the Chanel dress. “This one!” she exclaims, looking at me for approval.

I laugh, nodding. “That’s the one! You’re gonna be the best-dressed kid at the party!”

Chapter 18

Luka

The three of us stand, looking every bit the elite of the underworld. Dimitri obsesses over his cuffs, ensuring every detail is just right. Erik lounges on the armrest of a chair, his dark suit making him look like he's straight out of a GQ shoot. But his gaze is distant, his mind clearly elsewhere. I recognize that look; he's running through every nuance of tonight's plan, mentally rehearsing each step. His fingers absentmindedly play with a Swiss blade, twirling it, dancing it over his knuckles, and teasing the blade close to his thumb. It looks like he might slice it clean off.

"Five cars, then?" Dimitri asks, breaking the silence. He's referring to the convoy we have prepared for tonight's operation. The cars, filled with our chosen men, will be our main force in the attack against Aleks.

"Enough firepower to do the job, not enough to raise alarms," I assure him. The balance is crucial. Too few, and we risk failure; too many, and we tip our hand too early.

Erik leans back, his eyes fixed on the blueprint. He shakes his head and mutters, "You think she'd prefer a garden? Miniature roses?"

For a fleeting moment, Dimitri and I exchange glances, then turn back to Erik, each of us grappling with a mixture of confusion and disbelief, silently asking ourselves what the hell he's going on about.

"You sure about the dollhouse for Yulia?" Erik goes on. "I mean, it's not too much?"

I glance at Dimitri, who's stifling a laugh. "Really, Erik?" I ask. "We're planning an attack, and you're worried about a dollhouse garden?"

"It's a very important dollhouse," Erik responds, his face dead serious.

Dimitri bursts into laughter.

“And here I thought you only cared about guns and explosions,” I joke.

Erik raises an eyebrow. “Who says you can’t appreciate both?” He rubs his hands together, his voice tinged with wicked satisfaction. “By the way, Ivan just messaged. Our men are already mingling with the circus crew, slithering their way in. The game’s afoot.”

Dimitri’s voice drips with venom. “And how many packs of Aleks’s dogs are we expecting?”

“Three groups,” Erik replies. “Eight cars.”

“Eight cars, three groups. Bastards are playing it safe,” Dimitri mutters.

“And they should,” Erik counters, his eyes glinting with anticipation. “They know who they’re up against.”

“Make sure our men know their targets,” I instruct, my mind racing with the details of the plan.

Erik’s smirk turns into a knowing grin. “We won’t waste a single bullet. We know what we’re doing.”

“And the dollhouse?” Dimitri can’t resist asking, a teasing smile on his face.

“Safely packed away,” Erik answers, a hint of pride in his voice. “Some things are just more important than bullets and explosions.”

The low hum of the bunker’s private lift is a sudden intrusion, and we all turn as the doors slide open, revealing the tall figure of Svetlana.

“Svetlana,” Dimitri acknowledges, his eyes flickering with concern. “What’s happening up there? Any movement from Anya?”

“Anya’s been to Yulia’s room after sneaking from the kitchen,” she reports, voice flat. “Couldn’t catch what she said to Sophia, but it was a threat.”

“Fucking bitch,” I growl. “Review the exit strategy with us,” I ask as I glance between Svetlana and the map she’s just

placed on the table.

Svetlana indicates a location. “A hidden exit that leads to a discreet airfield. There’s a helicopter ready for Yulia if we need it.”

Dimitri speaks up, “Twenty minutes, give or take.”

I think for a moment. “So, we have an escape plan if things don’t go our way?”

“Not for all of us,” Dimitri mentions, “But we’ve always agreed Yulia’s safety is paramount.”

I nod slowly. “But now, we can’t let Anya be suspicious.”

“She won’t,” Svetlana assures me.

Dimitri nods. “Using the helicopter is our last option.” His worry is written all over him. “Is Sophia ready for this?” he asks, his voice colored with doubt.

“She’s as ready as she’ll ever be,” I reply, knowing Sophia’s strength but feeling that nagging doubt myself. “Don’t worry, Dimitri. She won’t let Anya get to her.”

Just then, Svetlana’s walkie-talkie springs to life. “Arrival of Mr. Jameson Locke, Mrs. Karina Vance, Sir Reginald Thornhill...” The names keep coming, but I’m not listening anymore.

“It’s time,” I announce, moving toward the exit. “We need to get Yulia.”

○○○○○

“Woof!”

“Luka!”

The sounds reach me simultaneously, Max’s bark and Yulia’s shriek mingling in the air. I enter Yulia’s room and can’t help but feel a tug at my heart as the pair run toward us.

Sophia’s trying to stifle a laugh, but her green eyes betray a trace of fear. I catch it, a quick, unsettling flash that she can’t

hide from me. Dimitri's looking at Yulia's suit, a mix of amusement and disbelief in his eyes. Erik's pretending not to care, but the smirk on his face gives him away.

"What's with the suit, Yulia?" I can't help but ask, a grin spreading across my face.

Yulia puffs up her chest, a serious expression on her face. "I'm the boss today, Luka."

Erik snorts, unable to contain himself. "The boss of what, exactly?"

"The boss of everything!" Yulia declares, hands on her hips.

"Alright, Boss Yulia," I say, still chuckling. "What's our first order of business?"

Yulia looks at me, her eyes bright and serious once again. "Our first order of business," she declares, "is to go have some ice cream!"

I can't help but laugh again. Dimitri doesn't seem to share my amusement, though.

"Ice cream now?" his voice booms, and he moves his large frame toward Yulia, something hidden behind him. He's gruff, almost growling.

Yulia meets his gaze without flinching. "Yes, Dima, ice cream now."

Dimitri softens immediately, twitching into a smile. "Alright then, ice cream it is. And after that..." He glances at the large dollhouse he's shielding. "Perhaps something else?"

Yulia's eyes widen and her face lights up with delight. "Oh, Dima, is that for me?"

"No one else, *sestrichka*. No one else," Dimitri murmurs, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

Yulia's arms circle Dimitri's neck, her excited voice bubbling with happiness. "Thank you, Dima! Thank you!"

"You deserve the world, little boss," Dimitri says, his voice thick with emotion as he kisses her forehead.

“And not just from Dima,” Erik interjects, moving closer with a surprising gentleness in his eyes. “Happy birthday from all of us.” He bends down and kisses Yulia on her cheeks, a smile transforming his face.

Yulia beams at Erik, her excitement bubbling over. “Thank you, Erik! This is the best birthday ever!”

I listen to Yulia’s laugh, a pure sound in a world that’s anything but.

But a nasty, gnawing thought edges into my mind.

Tonight.

Tonight, we end Aleks.

He’ll be a dead man walking, and we are cutting out a tumor, one that’s been poisoning us for far too long.

Sophia steps up beside me, and for a split second, I get distracted by her. The green dress she’s wearing clings to her just right, accentuating her figure. A soft emerald shade that compliments her eyes, making them pop. The dress is nonsense, clean-cut, with a subtle neckline and a skirt ending just above her knees. She looks stunning, but then she looks up at me, and her expression wipes away any other thoughts.

“Luka,” she mutters, voice almost a whisper. “I need to speak to you.”

Chapter 19

Sophia

Everyone's already out of the room, heading to get ice cream. A brief moment of privacy.

"Breathe in, breathe out, it's simple. Just keep telling yourself: We can handle this." Luka's arms wrap around me, drawing me close to his solid, reassuring chest. I can feel his heartbeat, steady and strong, as he leans down to kiss my forehead.

"Everything's fine," I say to myself, wanting to believe it. But the tremble in my voice gives away the fear I'm trying so hard to hide.

"We got this, *krasotka*," he whispers, his breath warm against my skin. "Trust me."

I want to believe him. I want to feel safe and protected. But I can't shake the nagging doubt, the gnawing fear that something's off.

"Why do you think she wants me to bring Yulia to the barn at eight?" I ask. "I'm scared, Luka," I confess, looking up into his eyes. "Anya, or whatever her name is... She seemed... evil."

I see a flicker of something in his eyes, a tightening of his jaw. But then he's pulling me closer, his arms like steel bands around me, as if he could physically shield me from the world.

"Go to the barn as she asked, *krasotka*."

"But- but..." I stutter, my eyes searching his for reassurance. Luka's fingers gently cup my face, forcing me to focus on him.

"I have people watching over you and Yulia," he says firmly, his gaze unyielding. "You won't be alone."

"We are putting Yulia in danger, too!"

He brushes a strand of hair behind my ear, his touch lingering on my skin. “That’s why I’ve taken precautions. Every move, every corner, someone will have eyes on it.”

I can see the sincerity in his eyes, the determination. It’s evident that he has gone to great lengths to ensure our safety. But the weight of the situation, the responsibility, makes me hesitate.

“What if something goes wrong? What if—”

“Hey,” he interrupts gently, his thumb tracing the curve of my cheek. “Trust me.”

I nod slowly, drawing a shaky breath. “Okay, I trust you.”

Luka leans in, his forehead resting against mine. It’s crazy how much I understand him. Even in silence. I know...

I can trust him. Completely.



The second Luka steps onto the cool, gleaming expanse of the main hall’s marble, a distinct hush falls. Eyes, previously busy in conversation, now fixate on him. My heart swells, pride bubbling up, and there’s this silent acknowledgment within me: *he belongs to me*.

Under the hall’s bright chandeliers, Luka moves with an effortless grace, engaging with the guests – a nod of recognition here, a brief yet meaningful exchange there. As he weaves through the crowd, I can’t help but laugh at our first encounter. It seems like a lifetime ago.

“Max! That’s too big of a bite.” I look over to a marvelously designed ice cream stand, where Dimitri, Erik, and Yulia are engrossed in their frozen delights. The stand itself looks like it’s straight out of a fairy tale, with silver swirls and golden stars shimmering around its canopy and ethereal lights floating like fireflies. An array of exotic flavors, some even glowing faintly, are displayed decadently.

Yulia, her face smeared with strawberry ice cream, is gleefully trying to get a taste of Erik's triple-vanilla cone. Beside them, Max looks on with keen interest, licking his lips, clearly yearning for another taste.

I laugh, covering my mouth with my hand at the adorable sight before me. "Oh, Yulia, you've got a little..." I gesture around my mouth, mimicking the smear of ice cream on her face.

She giggles, wiping her chin with the back of her hand. "It's just so yummy, Sophia!"

Before I can respond, a couple approaches Yulia. The woman wears a sapphire silk gown, her raven-black hair in an elegant updo, her throat highlighted by a glinting diamond necklace. Beside her, a tall man in a charcoal gray three-piece suit and polished shoes stands proudly. They bend slightly to greet Yulia.

"Happy birthday, darling," the woman coos.

"Thank you, Mrs. Montague," Erik replies with practiced politeness.

Mafia boss playing businessman now, huh?

The woman bats her heavily mascaraed eyelashes, stretching a grin so wide it looks painful. "I hope you like it, sweetie." A maid steps up, handing Yulia a big, fancy velvet box.

Bet that's not a stuffed toy inside.

The Montagues aren't the only ones. One by one, influential figures, from politicians to business moguls, come forward, showering Yulia with their extravagant gifts. The weight of their offerings and the glint in their eyes betray their intentions – these aren't simple birthday gifts. They're offerings, gestures of goodwill to the Ivankov Bratva.

CLINK. CLINK. CLINK.

I turn my head as Svetlana's wine glass makes a sound louder than her voice ever did. She's dressed to kill. Who would've thought the stern head-maid had legs for days?

Instead of that drab uniform, she's squeezed into a snug black cocktail dress that seems to challenge her usual stiff posture.

Damn, she looks breathtaking...and is that a glint of excitement in her eyes?

“Ladies and gentlemen, if I may usher you outside? We have an exquisite circus performance lined up.”

I steal a quick glance at Luka as he leads a group of guests outside. Just before he disappears from view, he catches my eye and shoots me a smile – quick, secretive, filled with meaning only we understand.

A confirmation.

“Ready for some fun, Yulia?” I ask, bending down to her level.

She nods eagerly. “Do you think they’ll have magicians? I want to see magic!”

“I’m sure there’ll be something magical out there. Maybe not a magician, but something equally exciting,” I teased.

Walking out with Yulia, I get this weird feeling. The noise of the party feels far away, and my heart is going crazy.

I look around and see Anya.

She's watching us.

Chapter 20

Luka

In the newly set courtyard, lights flicker from the mansion, illuminating the stage at its center. There's an acrobat on it, every move so bloody calculated, it reminds me of our world.

Just like walking a tightrope. One wrong move in our world, and you're fucking dead.

Out of the blue, Dimitri's voice cuts in, "Aleks's van just pulled in." His eyes are still on the stage, but I know he's seen everything. Every entrance and exit, every face.

Erik, ever the epitome of cool, lounges back, playing with that pocket watch of his. "Figures. Man's punctual even when he's walking into a trap."

"Guess we put on a good show." From the corner of my eye, I see Sophia. She's jittery, constantly checking her watch. Every tick seems to make her more anxious. Yulia, blissfully unaware, is clapping in delight at the acrobatics, her eyes shining with childlike wonder.

"Fuck, this is a shitty move," I grumble, the distaste thick in my throat. "Using them as bait... It's fucked up."

What's really fucked up?

Throwing this damn party for Yulia was a colossal mistake. I'd thought it'd be a way to make up for all the time I'd missed in her life, but now I know better. The kid would've been happy with just a damned ice cream cone shared with those she loves.

Erik, reading me like the damn open book I never wanted to be, leans in close, his smirk heavy with mischief. "Chill the fuck out; our boys have the barn on lockdown. Aleks is walking right into hell."

"We better make sure he does," I snap, my hands clenched into fists. "Let's gear up. It's showtime."

Walking out of the courtyard, I'm boiling inside. Every fake smile, every nod to these phonies, it's like trading away bits of myself. Screw the flattery game, I'm done. All I want now is to set things right, no BS.

The moment I step into the bunker, the mood's thick. You can still hear the party noise from outside, but in here, it's all business. We've swapped our fancy threads for vests and all-black gear.

Erik's already here, propped against a table. Dimitri's going through some guns, making sure they're good to go.

Then the radio comes alive. "Aleks and his men are in the mansion," the voice says.

I feel my blood freeze. "Which part exactly?" I shoot back.

"West entrance. Guy's in a hat and thick glasses. Moving with three men."

"Twenty minutes 'til Sophia and Yulia get to the barn," Erik chimes in, glancing at his watch.

I suck in a deep breath. "I'll be there. No one's laying a finger on Yulia...or Sophia."

I grab my earpiece from the table, quickly fitting it into my ear and giving it a tap to sync it with the team's channel. Dimitri and Erik do the same, our eyes meeting for just a second as if to say, "This is it." My grip tightens around my weapon; it's like an extension of me now.

"I hope you are right about Sophia."

"I *am* right," I snap back. His eyes are like a weight, but I don't waver.

He raises an eyebrow. "Even after all the crap we've been through?"

I don't break eye contact. "She's different, D. I'd bet my life on her."

Dimitri takes a deep breath and nods. "I trust you, brother. Let's roll."

Ollie's voice crackles over the earpiece, interrupting the tension. "Erm, hey guys, it's Ollie. So, uh, these bad hombres – shit, I mean Aleks's dudes – are, erm, splitting into three groups. Looks like they're...you know, setting up explosives? Like, at the party and also inside the mansion? So, yeah, FYI."

Rolling my eyes at Erik, I can't help but mutter, "Really, Ollie? That's the best you could do for intel?"

Erik just smirks, clearly amused. "Hey, the kid's got skill."

He turns to his crew, eyes steely. "Ivan, Alexei, you are with me. We're securing this goddamn mansion."

Ollie's voice comes through again, breaking into our gritty preparations.

"Uh, hey, it's Ollie again. Erm, so yeah, Sophia and Ms. Ivankov? They're, like, en route to the barn. Okay, thanks. Oh, and umm...we've spotted Anya. She left the kitchen about five minutes ago. So...yeah."

I shake my head "Goddamn, Erik, where'd you find this guy, a comic convention?"

"Hey, don't underestimate the nerds, man. They see everything."

Fuck. If Anya's moving, then shit's about to get real complicated, real fast.

We hustle out of the bunker, breaking into different directions.

My boots pound on the ground as I make a beeline for the barn. The air's heavy, like it's holding its breath for the shitstorm that's about to hit. A chill snakes down my spine, and it's got nothing to do with the weather. Tonight's sticky as hell, but this? This is the feeling you get when you know everything's on the line.

Almost there. I rush toward the barn.

The horses are already uneasy when I slip inside the barn, their whinnies low and nervous, hooves scraping against the wooden floors. Something's spooking them; they can sense the tension in the air.

I tap my earpiece. “Zakhary, Ilya – Sophia and Yulia should be here any minute. Eyes sharp, no fucking mistakes.”

“Understood,” Zakhary mutters back. Ilya just grunts an acknowledgment.

I switch channels. “Ollie, where the hell is Aleks? I need him to make a move.”

My hiding spot is carefully chosen – a haystack near the back, shielded by the shadows but close enough for me to spring into action. I have a clear view of the entrance. It’s perfect for what’s coming next.

Then the barn door creaks, and a shadow inches its way inside. The horses stir, their eyes wide and wild. I grip my gun tighter. If that’s Aleks, the son of a bitch is even quieter than I remember.

It’s not Aleks. A woman materializes from the shadows – Katerina!

“*Blyat*,” I swear under my breath.

I want to rush out and slice this bitch’s throat, but it’s not the right time. Not yet. My finger hovers over the earpiece, hesitant. I need Aleks to show himself.

Just then, the barn door creaks open wider, and Sophia and Yulia step in, their eyes scanning the dim interior. The air’s thick enough to cut with a knife. I can almost hear their hearts pounding from here. They don’t see Katerina. Not yet.

I tap my earpiece again. Whispering even lower, “Sophia and Yulia are in the barn. Aleks still hasn’t shown. Katerina’s here; keep a fucking eye on her.”

I hear Zakhary’s voice crackling in my ear, “Got it, target locking on Katerina.”

“We are here,” Sophia says, walking in slowly, trying not to appear so obvious in looking around for danger. Holding hands with Yulia, they walk toward Katerina.

“Right on time,” Katerina says, grinning.

“Why do you want us here?” I hear Sophia almost whispering. Horses are kicking the ground, their eyes wide. Sophia holds Yulia’s hand even tighter.

“I am scared, Sophia,” Yulia says, and I feel a sharp pang of guilt. “I thought we were going to see the circus.”

“It’s okay, Yulia. We’ll go there in a minute. No one is going to hurt you,” Sophia reassures her.

“Are you sure about that, Sophia?” Katerina hisses. “The Ivankov Bratva will die here today,” Katerina sneers. “And so will your pathetic brother and friend.”

Yulia’s clearly aware that something is wrong now, and her sobs fill the air, an awful soundtrack to an awful night.

“Fuck! Where the fuck is Aleks?” I mutter, my heart pounding out of my chest.

“Ssshhh...it’s okay, Yulia,” Sophia tries to comfort her, but the undercurrent of her own fear betrays her words.

“Oh yes, be scared, little princess. Be very scared,” Katerina coos. “Because when we’re done tonight, you’ll be the last living Ivankov. And all that wealth? All those dirty millions? They’ll go to your only family left – Aleks. How poetic.” Katerina’s cackle slices through the air like broken glass. “Sophia, your pitiful goody-two-shoes act makes me want to puke. You had one job: protecting Yulia. Guess you screwed that up.”

“Fucking unbelievable,” I growl, my grip on the gun so tight my knuckles go white. Aleks, that conniving piece of shit, is planning to erase us, and for what? So he can be daddy to little Yulia and snag the Ivankov goldmine?

Over my dead body.

I want to burst out and redecorate the barn with her brains, but I hold back. Just a moment longer.

That’s when Ollie’s voice hacks through my earpiece. “Aleks is—” Gunfire drowns him out. My guts churn; something bad’s going down outside.

“Boss, Aleks took out Boris and Pyotr. He’s found out about our ambush!” Zakhary spits the update into my ear, the urgency in his voice like a shot of adrenaline. “Do I take the shot at Katerina now?”

“Hold your goddamn fire, Zakhary,” I snap. The barn’s gone full-blown circus of hell. Horses are losing their shit, kicking and screaming, making the whole place quake. Yulia’s wails mix with the frenetic symphony, and it takes everything in me not to lose it.

I spin around, ready to make my move, but what I see nails me to the floor. Sophia, that brave fool, is tussling with Katerina, trying to pry Yulia away from her.

It’s now or never. I step out, ready to put an end to this sadistic game.

Then, a loud bang rips through the barn, and a body crumples to the ground in the shadows.

And just like that, my heart stops.

Chapter 21

Luka

“Malyška... Sophia...”

Fuck.

Fuck! This is all my fault.

My voice barely escapes my lips, a hoarse whisper shredded by fear. The kind of fear that grabs your guts and twists, the sort that comes when you realize you might lose the only goddamn people you love in this world, the only ones who mean a fucking thing to you.

Love.

I fucking love them.

I love Sophia.

My heart twists into a lump.

Ollie’s voice crashes back into my ear. “S-sorry, guys, the frequency got messed up. We’re back on. Aleks... Uh, he’s on the run. He knows about the trap.”

But I’m not listening. Couldn’t care less about Aleks right now. I stride into the center of the barn, eyes on the body on the ground.

It’s Katerina.

Thank fuck!

Her eyes are wide open, a horrific stare fixed on nothing. Blood oozes out of a bullet hole between her eyes, as clean and precise as a surgeon’s cut. A mess beneath the back of her head tells me it’s probably blown out. She won’t be missing it, I’m sure.

I look up. Sophia’s there, maybe ten feet away. Her hands snap to her mouth like she’s holding back a scream or maybe a sob. Either way, she’s pulling Yulia into her, like she can make the kid blind to this nightmare with just her body.

“Luka,” she breathes out, voice quivering. Her eyes are big and wet, but goddamn it, she’s shielding Yulia.

“Shh!” I stride in front of both of them against whatever hell might come next.

A shadow moves closer from the corner of the barn. My finger hovers over the trigger of my gun, itching to pull, to end whatever threat still lurks in this godforsaken place.

“It’s me, sir.” I recognize that ironclad voice instantly. It’s Svetlana. “Everything is under control here,” she announces, her posture stiff as a board. She strides over to Katerina, looking down on her with a smirk. Yeah, she’s still got it, that cold-blooded efficiency.

And that makes one of us.

My heart’s still pounding like a drum as I step away, making room for Svetlana to work her grim magic. “Sophia, Yulia,” I grunt, trying to soften the edge in my voice. “You’re with her now. Go.”

I drop to one knee, leveling my gaze with Yulia’s tear-streaked face. She’s sobbing, her little body shaking. It’s like a knife to my chest.

“You’ve been brave, *Malyška*. Very brave,” I tell her, keeping my voice steady. “Stay with Sophia and Svetlana, got it?”

Yulia grabs my shirt, her fists clenched. “Promise you’ll come back?”

“I promise. I’ll be back soon. You wait here.” I pull her into a quick but firm hug. She clings to me for a heartbeat, her arms gripping tight before she lets go and runs off to join Sophia.

As they’re hustled away, my earpiece buzzes to life. “Luka, it’s Erik.

“Status?” I can picture the scene outside these walls: Erik and Dimitri tearing through Aleks’s goons like a hot knife through butter. No doubt the floors are a mess of spent shell casings and bodies.

“Cleanup’s almost done,” Erik’s voice crackles back. “They had no time to attack; they’re scrambling like roaches in the light.”

My earpiece buzzes again as I step outside. “Luka, how’re Yulia and Sophia?” Dimitri’s voice cuts through the chatter in my ear.

“They’re safe, but Aleks – that fucker’s on the run,” I growl, gritting my teeth.

From the other end, I hear the sound of a fist meeting flesh, followed by a pained cry.

“Kill him,” Dimitri snarls.

“Ollie, where the hell did he go?” I bark into the earpiece.

“Uh, satellite’s picking up movement, boss. East wing. Your private library,” Ollie stammers.

“*Pizda!*”

Boots pounding on gravel, I haul ass toward the east wing. Aleks has dug his own grave; now he’s going to lie in it.

I kick open the door to my mansion, and I’m hit by a sudden wave of wrongness. What was once a lavish fairy tale for Yulia’s party is now a ghost town, the golden balloons sagging, chandeliers dimmed. All the guests have scattered – thank fuck they’re safe, but the high-class décor now looks like a sick joke.

I stomp through the marble-floored hallway, my boots thumping loudly in the emptiness. Making a beeline for the east wing, I ride the elevator up to the third floor. My private library’s up here, a fortress of knowledge and my personal sanctuary.

“He is still there,” Ollie’s voice calls out.

The elevator dings, doors slide open, and I step into a darkness that shouldn’t be. The library is a cathedral of literature, usually warmly lit, but now it’s more like a damn cave. High bookshelves stretch toward the ceiling like monoliths in a moonless night.

Where is he?

Then, a shadow moves, quick and low to the ground. I lunge toward it, but before I can even take a step, an earsplitting crash rings out. Books and whole damn shelves topple over like dominos.

I sidestep just in time, and there he is.

Aleks.

Our eyes lock, hate burning in them.

Simultaneously, we both draw guns and pull the triggers.

Click.

Click.

Empty chambers.

“*Suka,*” Aleks spits, echoing the curses in my own mind. Aleks sneers, his face contorted with malice. “You think you’re fit to lead the Bratva? You’re just as weak as your father.”

The venom in his voice pushes me over the edge. “You done?”

Fuck talking. We’re past that. Both of us draw knives – nasty pieces of work, serrated, designed to not just kill but mangle. My blade curves with the presence of a fucking machete. Pull this baby out, and it’ll drag your guts with it.

Our knives meet with a grating clash of metal on metal. Sparks fly, mirroring the ferocious energy between us. He lunges, aiming straight for my heart. I sidestep and swing, my blade singing as it slices through the air and cleanly severs three of Aleks’ fingers.

He screams, clutching his mangled hand to his chest. But I’m far from done. Before he can recover, I swing my knife again, slashing the blade across his legs, tearing through the fabric and flesh. He crumples to his knees, but I lift him by the collar, holding him up like a limp doll.

My knife is now at his throat, and I press just enough to let a trickle of blood stain his collar. Our eyes meet – his wide with

terror, mine narrow with finality.

“Do it then, you sniveling coward!” Aleks laughs with false bravado, each chuckle filled with a malice that only amplifies his pain. “Prove you’re as worthless as your father!”

His words are like splinters under my skin. Every fiber of my being screams to end this – to slice through the thin skin of his neck and put an end to the years of torment. And yet...it’s the blood we share that gives me pause, the same blood that courses through my veins and flowed through my mother’s.

I hesitate. *Blyat!* I can’t do it.

He’s my uncle, my family – twisted as it is.

His own blood, my mother’s blood.

Reluctantly, I lower my knife and release him, stepping back to put distance between us, between what we were and what we’ve become.

“You’re not worth the dirt you’ll be buried in,” I growl, almost a whisper.

I turn to walk away.

“*Yob tvoyu mat!* You don’t walk away from me, stupid, useless boy! You are just as useless as both your mother and your father. Finish what you’re supposed to do!” Aleks screams. With the ferocity of a wounded animal, I can sense him lunging at me, aiming his own knife at my back.

Yob tvoyu mat? Nobody...*nobody* gets to insult my mother.

In one smooth motion, the same knife that spared him now becomes his doom. Before he can react, my blade swings through the air, quick and precise.

His head rolls.

Chapter 22

Sophia

Three months later

I'm cocooned in warmth, draped in a sensation that feels both novel and intimate. Sunlight filters through the curtains, casting soft beams across the room. As my eyes flutter open, I remember – this is what waking up with Luka feels like.

Safe and secure.

I am not used to it yet, not really.

The past three months have been a whirlwind. We moved out of the mansion and into this secluded lake house right after that day.

That day was meant to be a celebration of Yulia's birthday, a day of pure happiness.

But instead, that day, Luka had severed his uncle's head from its body.

And now he's remained silent about it.

But I've overheard Dimitri and Erik discussing matters. The Bratva businesses have been shifted to their control, slowly winding down Luka's direct involvement. I know they're cleaning up, trying to make things right in their own way.

I press my naked body even closer to Luka's, savoring the touch of his skin against mine.

Luka 2.0 seems calmer, more attentive, protective in a way that suggests he's guarding something invaluable. This new Luka brings a sense of peace that even the tranquil environment surrounding our secluded lake house cannot rival.

However, despite the sense of security and newfound calm, I can't help but question what lingers in the silent recesses of his soul. Is he genuinely alright, or is this tranquility merely a façade?

Yulia is doing better; she's in therapy. Her art shows she's coping; it's brighter, less chaotic. She didn't see what happened that day, but she knows enough to be scarred by it.

He moves beside me, his arms closing more tightly around my waist. His hand slips lower, resting on my stomach with a gentleness that holds unspoken weight.

Is he thinking about our baby?

Our baby. The future, our future together – each silent moment stretches the tension a little more. The conversation is inevitable, I know, but I know he may need time.

Does he feel what I feel?

I feel loved.

Oh, God.

Yes, I truly love this man.

“Good morning.” His lips find the back of my head, a simple touch that starts a chain reaction deep within me. He clasps me closer still, lips lingering for another moment on my hair.

I smile, and it comes from deep within my heart.

“It tickles,” I shoot back, half-laughing, and grip his hand tighter.

His breath on my neck gets me emotional. His scent and mine, mingled, bring back memories – good and bad. I'm close to tears.

Darn pregnancy hormones messing with me.

I sniff quietly.

“What's wrong?” he asks, noticing I've tensed up

I shake my head. “Nothing, just...remembering some stuff.”

God, he feels like home.

“Good stuff, I hope?” he asks, his lips brushing against the nape of my neck. I can practically hear the smile in his voice.

I roll over to face him. “The best stuff. You.”

His eyes soften, and I'm not sure how, but I fall a little more in love with him right now.

He moves closer to me, laying a sequence of soft kisses on my forehead that make me tingle all over.

"You make it so easy to fall asleep and so difficult to leave this bed," he whispers into my ear.

My whole body responds, every cell ignited, as if he's struck a match and set me ablaze. I'm flooded with the need to feel even closer to him, to close the gap between us until there's no space left for anything but the electric energy we generate together.

Emboldened, I reach up and capture his lips. The kiss is heated, passionate, our mouths moving in a synchronized dance as if they were meant to do just this.

He groans softly, "Fuck," as my fingers trail down his abdomen, feeling every tense muscle along the way.

As if on cue, his hand reaches for my breast, which swells more now. His thumb and forefinger teasing my sensitive nipple.

"Luka..." I can't hold back the moan that slips out. The pleasure ripples through me, a warm wave that starts where his fingers touch me and flows all the way down.

I wrap around his cock, already so hard. His eyes meet mine, glowing with a mix of desire and something deeper, something eternal.

"You are so beautiful," he breathes, and the words feel like a caress, reaching parts of me that his hands haven't touched yet.

The depth of emotion is almost too much, so I channel it into action. I shift to straddle him, guiding him as I sink down onto him.

"Oh, God, you feel good," I husk, relishing the completeness, the oneness that comes from being filled by him. "Riding you never gets old," I say, making eye contact as a blush colors my cheeks.

“Feel free to take the reins anytime, *krasotka*,” he smirks, his thumb sweeping along my jawline. The touch is straightforward but resonant, as if he’s getting to the core of me. When he thrusts upwards, hitting just the right angle, I can’t hold back.

“Oh, God! Fuck yes.”

He holds my hips, keeping me there, as if he’s claiming every part of me with his gaze, his touch, his body. And I feel it, the delicious tension, the mounting climax.

“Now! I’m coming now!” My body shakes, my vision blurs, but all I can feel, all I can know in that moment, is him.



Lying side by side on the bed, our faces nearly touching, a silence envelops us. It’s a silence that’s not empty but full – full of a comfort and understanding that words often fail to capture.

Our breaths sync up as if our bodies inherently know how to fall in rhythm with each other.

His eyes bore into mine, and the emotion I glimpse there almost shatters me. There’s a deep-rooted sorrow, a concealed agony that even his captivating blue eyes can’t fully hide.

A lump forms in my throat as I softly hum the lyrics to a song that feels almost too fitting.

“No one knows what it’s like...

to be a bad man...

to be a sad man...behind blue eyes.”

My eyes well up, betraying my attempts to keep emotions at bay.

Pregnancy hormones again, amplifying every freaking feeling.

Summoning the courage to touch his face, my fingers trace the contours of his skin with a gentle reverence.

He breaks the silence, voice hushed but laden with emotion. “*Ya tebya lyublyu, moya koroleva.*”

I pause, processing the Russian words that I’ve heard but not fully understood. “*Ya tebya lyublyu*” – that much I know means “I love you.” But the rest, “*moya koroleva,*” eludes me.

“Wait -You- you love me?” My voice wavers.

“Yes, *moya koroleva,*” he replies, his voice imbued with an indefinable emotion.

At that moment, the dam breaks. Tears burst forth like a geyser, refusing to be contained any longer. “What does ‘*moya koroleva*’ mean?” I manage to stammer out between sobs.

“My queen,” he says simply.

“Thank- thank you,” I choke out, my voice tinged with emotion.

“*Ya tebya lyublyu, moya koroleva,*” he says it again.

“Luka, I... I love you, too.” Saying the words out loud doesn’t just make them real; it makes them a living part of me, so intrinsic that the feeling aches deep within my bones.

In a seamless motion, I draw nearer to him, my arms encircling his strong frame tightly. I hold him as if my very embrace could transmit my emotions, my inner serenity, directly into his soul. My head finds its natural resting place on his chest, each beat of his heart echoing like the sweetest melody in my ears.

Eventually, I withdraw just enough to meet his gaze, my hands lingering on his shoulders. “I know you’re taking your time...about what happened.” My voice wavers, tears threatening to spill over again.

Fuck! If this emotional waterfall keeps up for the next six months, I’ll turn into a human raisin.

A snort escapes me – probably the most unladylike sound I could make—and surprisingly, Luka laughs. But still, there’s that layer of sadness lurking in his blue eyes.

“The truth is...I never imagined I would feel this... anguish,” he confesses, his voice replete with an undertone of disbelieving sorrow. “I was bred for vengeance, schooled for Bratva justice. I was taught that a leader, a *pakhan*, dispenses retribution without flinching, without remorse.” His words resonate like a haunting melody within me, piercing the core of my being. My heart splinters for him, fragmenting under the sheer weight of his admission.

“But the truth was, I killed my own uncle, my mother’s brother.”

My heart just breaks more, hearing the sadness and regret in his voice.

“Luka, you’re not just the bad things you’ve done,” I say softly, my voice shaking. “You’re more than just the rules and revenge stuff you’ve grown up with. You’re an incredible brother to Yulia; the love and protection you offer her says volumes about the kind of man you are.”

He looks at me like I’m saying things he’s wanted to hear but never thought he would.

“And now,” I continue, “seeing how you are with her, how you are with me, I just know you’re going to be the best father in the world. You’re so much more than the Bratva and its rules. You’re a good man, Luka, even if you can’t see it yet.”

He fixes his gaze on me, searching my face as if looking for something.

“Look, Sophia,” he starts, locking eyes with me. “Life with me won’t be easy. I have enemies, so many that I’ve lost count. I can’t promise that it’s always going to be sunshine and peace.”

It’s as if he’s painting a canvas of our future with a mix of dark and bright colors, but I hang on to every word.

“But I will protect you and our family with everything I have,” he continues. “I may not be able to walk away from the Bratva entirely – it’s the life I was born into, the life that made me. But I can step back. Start focusing on legitimate businesses, try to move away from that world.”

He holds my hands and guides them to his chest, right where his heart beats strong and steady.

The feel of his heartbeat against my palms is both electrifying and reassuring. As if realizing the gravity of what he's about to say, he lifts my hands to his lips, pressing a tender kiss on each one. A silent promise that speaks louder than words.

“Will you marry me, *moya koroleva*?” His voice is so earnest, as if these are vows he's making before we even reach the altar.

What? What is happening?

I lose it. I'm sobbing, wailing, laughing – emotions spilling over in a chaotic blend that leaves me breathless.

“Are you saying yes, or is this hormone overload?” he quips, grinning even as his eyes beg for confirmation.

I compose myself just long enough to choke out, “Yes, yes, yes! A million times yes. But we'll need to get me a waterproof wedding dress at this rate.”

He starts laughing. Real laughter. It fills the room, warming it with a sound that I've rarely heard but have come to treasure. It's a sound that hints at a future, at a life beyond the reach of past demons and old sins.

Chapter23

Luka

“What did you say?” Dimitri leaps to his feet, his eyes wide, his face flushed.

“I said I’m getting married tomorrow, and I’m stepping back from the Bratva business,” I declare, locking eyes with him, daring him to challenge me.

The room, usually a pristine space reserved for calculated strategy and icy deliberations, feels like a live wire, every surface charged with tension. Dimitri and Erik had converted this meeting room into something resembling a war room over the past few months – maps on the walls, high-tech screens showing live feeds from our operations, stacks of untraceable burner phones, and, of course, a top-notch liquor cabinet.

Erik, standing off to the side, takes a deep breath, like he’s preparing to dive into treacherous waters. “Okay.”

“Okay? Okay?!” Dimitri nearly explodes, pacing the room like a caged animal. “How the fuck is this okay? What’s gonna happen to the Bratva, huh? You think these vultures won’t rip us apart the moment they sense weakness? What, you gonna start a bakery or something, Luka?”

“I’m not saying I’m stepping down immediately, D. Don’t be an idiot,” I snap, my patience thinning. “You and Erik are more than capable. You’ll be taking over most of the business.”

“*Blyat*, you think it’s that easy? Just pass the torch and ride into the sunset?” Dimitri seethes, his fists clenched.

“It’s time for a new chapter, D. You two have been in this life long enough to know what it takes. Besides, I’m not completely out. I’ll still have a say, but I need to focus on building legal enterprises, growing a family. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Dimitri scowls, pausing to weigh my words. “*Tak*, I get it. But right now—“

Before he can finish his sentence, I cut in. “Right now, Aleks is gone, his men are scattered like rats from a sinking ship, and the whole damned underworld is scrambling to fill that void. I know all of that. But I won’t be the main guy pulling the strings anymore. I can’t.”

Erik nods, finally breaking his monk-like silence. “I understand,” he mutters, his eyes meeting mine. “We’ll handle the Bratva business. You focus on what’s important to you now.”

Dimitri looks like he’s been slapped. He runs his fingers through his hair, yanking a little harder than necessary. “*Suka*, you’re really doing this, aren’t you? You’re really walking away from what we’ve built?”

I lock eyes with him, my gaze steady. “I’m not walking away, D. I’m expanding – expanding into a life where Yulia and my kid don’t have to look over their shoulders every damn minute. Isn’t that what we’ve been fighting for all along? A better life?”

Dimitri’s eyes soften for a split second, but he recovers quickly, masking it with a harsh scoff. “A better life, built on blood money and gunpowder.”

“Exactly why I need to make it right,” I shoot back. “Or at least try.”

Dimitri inhales deeply, his eyes clouded, his shoulders sagging as if carrying the weight of our collective sins. “Fine,” he finally says, his voice low, laced with defeat but also, curiously, a hint of relief. “We’ll hold down the fort. Just don’t expect any fucking ‘Father of the Year’ mugs from me.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” I reply, my wry smile dissolving into a smirk. “Now, we need to talk about dividing the empire, how to pull it off without making everyone think we’ve gone soft. Suggestions?”

Dimitri cracks his knuckles, leaning forward on the table, the tension oozing from his pores. “Chicago’s ripe for the taking. Aleks is gone, and with that old fuck Armando out of

the way, we could just steamroll through their turf. Grab the Italians by the balls before they even know what hit them.”

I nod, feeling the cruel twist of opportunity sharpening my thoughts. “Their world isn’t that different from ours, and right now, they could use our help as much as we could use theirs. Plus, their connections in the legal business are solid. We can start blending our clean and dirty money better. Set ourselves up for the long run.”

Before Dimitri can offer another snide remark, Erik interjects. “Actually,” he says, pausing for theatrical effect, “I was thinking of making Lucia di Fuoco my wife. She’s the only heir left of the Angeli di Fuoco crime family.”

Everyone freezes. Dimitri’s jaw practically hits the floor. “*Ty chto?! Are you out of your goddamn mind?*”

Dimitri’s outburst rings in the air like a gunshot, but I can’t help but admire the audacity of Erik’s plan. I turn my gaze toward him, looking for any sign that he’s joking. There’s none. The bastard is as serious as a heart attack.

“If you can make that happen, Erik,” I say, ignoring Dimitri’s tangible shock, “that would be a fucking coup. We’d have an inside track on both the Italian and Russian underworlds. But you’re going to need more than a wedding ring to get that ice queen to thaw.”

Erik just gives us a mirthless smile. “Oh, I have my ways. And once we’re tied by blood, not even a goddamn nuclear bomb will be able to break us apart.”

A long pause. Dimitri’s scowl gradually transforms into a reluctant nod. “Alright. Erik, you’re playing with fire here.”

“I’ll manage,” Erik says, smirking.

“Alright,” I say, clapping my hands together. “We’ve got a lot to do. But first, Yulia has been asking to spend time with us. The wedding is tomorrow, and today, we should give her a little attention.”

Dimitri exhales, the smoke from his ever-present cigarette curling into the charged air. “From war rooms to wedding bells and daddy-daughter dates. What a fucked-up life we lead.”

Chapter 24

Sophia

“You look like a princess, Sophia.” Little Yulia’s voice is filled with awe, her eyes wide as saucers as she stares at me in my wedding gown.

I look back at the mirror, my reflection transformed by the elegance of the gown and the artful touch of make-up. For a fleeting moment, I do feel like a princess. Like someone who has stepped out of a fairy tale and into a beautiful reality.

But this isn’t a fairy tale, and I know it. This is real life, my life, and today is the first day of a new chapter. A chapter I’ll be sharing with Luka, the complex, intriguing man who’s brought so much joy, change, and even a bit of turmoil into my life.

“Thank you, Yulia,” I say, kneeling down to her level. “You make a pretty fantastic flower girl, you know? Almost like a little fairy.”

“Really? A fairy?” Yulia’s eyes sparkle as she takes in the compliment. She clutches Max’s leash a little tighter; the dog is also dressed up for the occasion, looking rather dashing in his miniature tuxedo.

Max barks as if agreeing, and Yulia giggles. “Look, Sophia, even Max thinks he’s all ready for the wedding!”

“I can see that,” I say, chuckling at Max’s adorable little outfit. “You both look amazing. Max is definitely the most handsome dog at the wedding.”

“Max is the only dog at the wedding,” Wren interjects, adjusting my veil, her eyes squinting as if it’s the most important task in the world. “I can’t believe you are getting married, best friend.”

“I know, right?” I say, looking at Wren in the mirror. “I never thought I’d see the day. I mean, you and I used to have plans to grow old together – two crazy ladies with a house full of cats.”

“Speak for yourself, darling. My plan always involved multiple husbands, at least one of whom was a billionaire,” Wren retorts, her eyes gleaming mischievously. “But fine, for you, I’d have settled for the crazy cat lady lifestyle.”

“Multiple husbands? Really, Wren?” I raise an eyebrow, amused.

“What? I like variety. Is that so wrong?” Wren shoots back, grinning.

Nana shakes her head and mutters something about “young people these days.” I look at her, perched quietly in her wheelchair by the window. Beyond her, a tranquil lake mirrors the azure sky, its surface punctuated by the vivid greens of surrounding foliage. Nana is framed by nature’s canvas as if she’s a subject in a classic painting – beautiful, timeless, and regal.

Ekaterina had helped her to that special spot, and now the sunlight filters through the window, casting a soft luminosity on Nana’s face. It accentuates her lines of age, each one a testament to wisdom earned and love given. The room around us, filled with the buzz of preparations, forms a cocoon, a sacred space humming with the vivid hues of our dresses, the shimmer of jewelry, and the tangible yet unspoken expectancy that electrifies the air.

Ekaterina steps towards me, holding a velvet box reverently in her hands.

“Here,” she says softly as she opens the box to reveal a tiara. It’s not just any tiara; it’s an intricate, antique piece encrusted with diamonds that sparkle even in the soft light filtering through the large windows overlooking the serene lake outside. “This belonged to Luka’s mother. She would have wanted you to wear it today.”

I’m at a loss for words, touched by the emotional weight of the heirloom. I carefully lift the tiara out of the box, the diamonds catching light, twinkling like stars plucked from the sky. It’s elegance incarnate, with an arrogance that says, “I am here, and I am spectacular.”

“Wow,” is all I manage to say.

“One day,” Ekaterina continues, her voice full of a mother’s wisdom and a touch of solemnity, “little Yulia will wear this on her wedding day.”

“I don’t wanna get married!” Yulia suddenly blurts out. “So, Sophia, you can keep it forever!”

I laugh at her fierce determination.

“Yulia, darling, you might change your mind one day,” Ekaterina says, her eyes twinkling as she looks at her.

“Maybe, but for now, Sophia can be the princess, and I’ll be the fairy,” Yulia responds, making everyone laugh.

Just as I’m about to reply to Yulia’s delightful stance on matrimony, there’s a firm knock at the door. It’s the sort of knock that doesn’t ask for entry but rather demands it. The door swings open, and there, framed in the doorway, stands Svetlana.

“Miss Sophia, the time has come. You are required downstairs,” she announces, her voice as cold and unyielding as a winter in Siberia.

Wren eyes her and chuckles. “You do realize it’s a wedding, not a military operation, right?”

Svetlana’s gaze doesn’t waver as she fixes her eyes on me. “Are you prepared?”

I look around the room one last time, locking eyes with each person – Wren’s irreverent grin, Ekaterina’s maternal warmth, Nana’s wise nod, and little Yulia’s youthful exuberance.

“Yes,” I finally reply, “I’m ready.”



Luka

The sun’s dropping low on the horizon, painting the sky in shades of orange and gold. From up here, the lake house below looks like some damn postcard. But none of that matters; my

eyes are scanning the distance, waiting for the first glimpse of Sophia.

Dimitri is standing next to the towering tombstone of my parents that dominates the hill, intricately carved depictions of their glamorous selves captured forever in pristine marble that refuses to dull, no matter the years it's endured. Simple lines, regal designs, and elegant inscriptions are a testament to their legacy and style. Ostentation was never their thing. They always preferred intimacy, a close circle. Just like tonight – it's just us, family.

Dimitri's face is more serious than the occasion calls for. "You sure about this? Marriage is a life sentence, you know."

"Fuck off, D," I growl, not in the mood for his philosophical shit right now. "You think I'd be here if I wasn't sure?"

And then I see her.

Sophia steps out onto the hillside, and for a moment, everything else fades away. She's a vision, even from this distance. Her dress clings to her like it was made just for her, which it probably was.

"Fuck me," I breathe out, momentarily forgetting that the guys, and even the minister, are standing beside me.

"Ready for this?" Erik asks, clapping a hand on my shoulder, a smirk playing on his lips.

I let out a shaky breath, gripping my fists to steady myself. "More ready than I've ever been for anything."

My attention is fixated on Sophia. She's now close enough that the intricate patterns of her dress come into view, shimmering as they catch the last remnants of the day's sun. I can't help but inhale sharply; the sight of her is overwhelming.

God! She's absolutely breathtaking, and in this moment, the world seems to fade away, leaving just the two of us.

The delicate veil hides most of her face, but I catch that familiar chin dip – a silent, graceful acknowledgment as she continues her walk, each step calculated and assured. And

there's Wren, guiding Sophia, ever the graceful companion. The two of them make quite the pair.

Dimitri leans in, his voice a low whisper. "She's a vision, isn't she?"

Caught off-guard, I can only nod, wondering if he's talking about Wren or Sophia. My mind wanders, just for a second, to the memory of my parents. It's a comforting thought, the idea that they might be watching over me, blessing this union from afar.

"The *Pakhan* would be over the moon for you, Luka," Erik says.

"Yeah," I reply, the significance of the moment settling in.

This is it. The beginning of a new chapter.

Suddenly, a burst of energy catches my eye. "Luka! Erik! Dima!" Yulia calls out, her voice full of mirth. The sight of her is enough to draw a chuckle from me. Dressed in a little frock that matches the wedding's theme, she leads the way, with Max trotting dutifully by her side. In one hand, she holds a flower basket, and with the other, she waves enthusiastically at us. Her face is lit up, brighter than any star, eyes sparkling with excitement.

"D! Look at her! Isn't she the cutest?" Erik nudges Dimitri playfully, nodding towards Yulia.

I watch Sophia as she takes her final step, each one more measured than the last, stopping right in front of the altar. With a subtle, graceful movement, she hands her lily bouquet to Wren, who accepts it with a beaming smile.

With her free hand, Sophia turns to me, and we interlock our fingers. The warmth and connection are immediate. A genuine grin escapes from me, a reflection of the happiness bubbling from within.

God, she is stunning.

I glance past Sophia for a moment to acknowledge Nana, her revered grandmother. With a nod of respect, I silently

appreciate her for raising this woman standing in front of me so wonderfully on her own.

That's the woman right there who I've sworn to stand by, to love fiercely, and to throw down for, no matter what.

"Now," the minister's voice fills the air, breaking our shared moment, "we gather here to unite Luka Ivankov and Sophia Williams in marriage, celebrating the love and journey they've chosen to embark on together. Sophia..." the minister calls out.

She inhales audibly, her hand squeezing mine.

Behind the veil, I can't see her face clearly, but I can feel every ounce of her sincerity. She takes a deep breath, and her eyes briefly flit to mine, a hint of nervousness evident.

Clearing her throat delicately, she starts with a shaky voice, her accent thick yet endearing. "*Ya, Sophia, brat tyebya, Luka, za moj zakonuju muzha.*"

I feel the weight of her words, translating in my heart to, "I, Sophia, take you, Luka, to be my lawfully wedded husband."

There's a pause as she tries to recall the next line. She takes another breath. "*V radosti i v gore, v bogatstve i v bednosti,*" she continues. I can't help but smile as she says, "In joy and in sorrow, in wealth and in want." The slight stumble over her words, the earnest effort she's putting in to use my mother tongue melt my heart. She's always surprising me. I squeeze her hands gently.

"Did I say it right?" she whispers, her tone playful yet anxious.

Pulling her closer, the veil thinning between us, I reply, "Perfectly. And with an accent that's utterly captivating."

I can't wait to have her all alone with me.

The minister, sensing my impatience, clears his throat. My attention snaps back to the present. My hands, still entwined with Sophia's, tighten their hold. It's time for my vow, and I feel the weight of the moment, the importance of the words I'm about to utter.

“Sophia,” my voice is deep, husky with emotion, and even though her face is hidden behind the veil, I can sense her rapt attention. “Sophia, before this moment, I’ve lived my life without knowing the meaning of love, but now, it’s time for my heart to speak its truth. I love you, Sophia Williams. From the moment you came into my life, everything changed. You brought light into my darkest days, gave meaning to the moments I once took for granted.”

There’s a slight pause, my eyes finding hers behind that delicate fabric. “*Ya, Luka Ivankov, brat tyebya, Sophia, za svoju zakonuju zenu* – I, Luka Ivankov, take you, Sophia, to be my lawfully wedded wife. *Chtoby imet’ i derzat’, nacinaja s etogo dnja* – to have and to hold, from this day forward. Until the very last beat of my heart.”

I sense the onlookers’ collective breath being held, the silence weighing heavily with the emotions of our vow.

“The rings?” The minister’s voice punctuates the moment, and Dimitri and Wren step forward, the gold bands glinting as they catch the light.

Sophia’s fingers tremble just a little, reaching out to slide the gold band over my knuckle. “With this ring, I marry you,” she says, her voice thick with emotion.

Returning the gesture, I take the other band, sliding it onto her delicate finger. “With this ring, I marry you,” I echo, sealing our promise.

The minister smiles, a kind expression that reaches his eyes. “It gives me great pleasure to pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride.”

The moment I’ve been waiting for.

Without wasting a second, I reach out, lifting the veil to reveal her radiant face. Those green eyes, shimmering with happy tears, meet mine. Her lips move ever so slightly, barely parting, as if she’s breathing out a secret. Even without sound, the careful movement of her mouth forms three unmistakable words: “I love you.” It’s as silent as a whisper.

I lean in, gently pressing my lips against Sophia's. She wraps her arms tenderly around my neck, urging me closer, her lips yielding beneath mine as she intensifies our connection. I surrender to her pull. The shadows of my past and the fierce world I'm entangled with fade, overtaken by a love so profound that it leaves me in awe.

For you, I'd conquer empires.

For our child, I'd lay waste to entire cities.

But right now, all that matters is being the man you deserve and the father our child requires.

"See! I told you Beauty and the Beast would be together!" Yulia exclaims, her excitement unmistakable. She claps her hands together with such joy that it's infectious.

Max, always the loyal companion, chimes in with an enthusiastic bark, his tail wagging in harmony with the mood of the room.

Laughter bubbles up from the small crowd gathered, the lightness of the moment shared by all.

Erik, looking a touch impatient but with a smirk on his face, says, "I think it's time we head down to celebrate." He arches an eyebrow, his gaze drifting momentarily towards the lakeside. "My whiskey awaits, after all."

"I think we've had enough of formalities," I remark, watching as the guests begin to make their way toward the lakeside celebration. The scent of the food drifting up from the lake is inviting.

Wren, with her ever-playful demeanor, chuckles. "You may think so, but there's still the matter of the bouquet."

Sophia's eyes light up with mischief. "Ah! Wait. Almost forgot." She takes a step back, clutching the bouquet.

Erik smirks. "Just throw it to Wren and save us the theatrics."

But as Sophia swings her arm back and releases the bouquet, it's Dimitri – of all people – who unexpectedly

catches it, his reflexes as a seasoned fighter coming into play. He stares down at the bouquet, his face a canvas of surprise.

“Fuck,” he mumbles.

Sophia bursts into laughter.

Looking at her, a realization hits.

I can't think of *happiness* without her in it.

Dimitri, trying to play it cool with the bouquet in hand, mutters, “It just...flew my way.”

Wren teases, “Looks like fate’s sending you a message.”

“Then you can have it,” Dimitri retorts, tossing the bouquet in Wren’s direction.

With a swift move, she catches it. “No!” she shouts out.

Yulia tugs at my sleeve, her big eyes wide with innocence, “Does this mean Dimitri and Wren will get married next?”

I chuckle, ruffling her hair. “Maybe, *Malyška*.”

I wrap an arm around Sophia, pulling her close. This moment, with friends, laughter, and love, is all I’ve ever wanted. The beast in me is at peace, all thanks to the beauty beside me.

Epilogue

Sophia

Two years later

The tropical scent of plumerias surrounds me as I lounge beneath a shady palm, baby Natalya nestled next to me. She coos, her tiny hands playing with a colorful lei draped over her lap. The vibrant flowers contrast beautifully against her white sundress. Her striking blue eyes, the same hue as Luka's, are filled with wonder as they dart from one fascinating object to the next.

Absentmindedly, I touch my barely visible baby bump, and a tingling sense of excitement mixed with a dash of nervousness surges through me. It's still early days, but there's a gut feeling, or maybe it's a maternal instinct, that it might be a boy this time. Just thinking about how Luka's eyes shone when he first held Natalya does something to my heart.

"Ma-ma-ma," she mumbles, reaching out to hand me a plumeria blossom she's plucked from her lei. Every day, her speech becomes clearer, though Luka had the pleasure of hearing her first clear "dada." A memory that still has him walking on air, especially since those eyes of hers always search for him – eyes with Luka's depth and my warmth.

My gaze shifts, searching for him, and there he is, playing with Yulia and her friends by the shoreline, laughing as they craft a sand fortress. Luka's sun-kissed skin, glistening under the rays, sends a familiar, electric thrill down my spine. I bite my lip, trying to suppress those sinful thoughts, but damn, even with a child and another on the way, my husband is still a walking temptation.

Damn hormones on hyperdrive much?

"Mm...ma...da...da." Natalya's small voice interrupts my dirty thoughts. Her little fingers grip the fabric of my bikini, tugging it down with a determined look in her eyes. Recognizing her hunger, I help her out, pulling the bikini aside just enough for her to access my nipple. She latches on

immediately, eyes half-lidded with satisfaction. I can't help but smile, brushing a soft kiss atop her head, marveling at the intimate bond we share in these moments. The world seems to fade away, leaving just the two of us, mother and daughter, connecting in the simplest yet most profound way.

Taking a deep breath, the gentle warmth of sunlight caresses my face.

It's invigorating.

It feels so damn good to be alive.

The peaceful lull of our Hawaiian haven is a stark contrast to the chaos of our previous life. The decision to relocate here after Natalya's birth and with Yulia diving headfirst into a local school was our smartest move. She's blossoming, surrounded by friends and the joys of youth.

"Mmm...mm." Natalya suckles on, her rhythmic tugs pull me closer to her.

"My beautiful girl," I hum. Gently, my fingers sift through her soft locks – a shade darker than mine but a beautiful blend of both Luka and me. The strands feel silken between my fingers, a testament to the exquisite fusion of our genes. I marvel at her beauty, at how seamlessly she ties our two worlds together.

Natalya's little fingers move close to my mouth as she feeds. On impulse, I pretend to bite down on them, making sure not to touch them. Her reaction is immediate. She pulls her hand back, eyes wide in surprise, and then lets out a contagious giggle. This turns into a fun game between us, her offering her fingers and me feigning a bite.

"I love you, baby girl," I whisper to my daughter.

The twinkle in her striking blue eyes, so much like Luka's, often seems wise beyond her young months. Those eyes have witnessed the metamorphosis of a man from mafia leader to doting – no, exceptional – father.

Who'd have guessed Luka Ivankov, feared in the darkest alleys, would have a knack for changing diapers with military precision? I remember him all flustered, trying to fold the

diaper just right, that rare, boyish grin on his face. “How’s this for multitasking?” he’d said, holding up a successfully changed Natalya as proof. It was endearing to see him embrace full-time daddy duties, especially with Yulia around. Those two have an unbreakable bond, with Luka teaching her how to tie her shoelaces and patiently listening to her stories about school.

My thoughts drift to Nilo.

Seeing him emerge from rehab, finding his path, I’m overwhelmed with gratitude. Luka made sure he got the support he needed. Now, he’s back at the university, majoring in Clinical Psychology with a focus on Addiction Treatment and Counselling. It’s heartening to see him so determined to use his experience to help others navigate their struggles with addiction.

And then there’s Nana. Ah, my feisty, indomitable Nana. Watching her health bounce back, witnessing that spark reignite in her eyes – it’s a gift in itself. I’ve played with the thought of her living with us, but her spirit yearns for autonomy. She’s now living life on her terms in that swanky retirement haven Luka found. With each phone call, the lilt in her voice sings a tune of contentment. Knowing she’s happy fills my heart in ways words can never capture.

My chest tightens with a warmth that’s nearly overwhelming.

It’s a wonder how I can be so happy.

I watch as Yulia’s giggles from here, harmonizing with the laughter of the friendship bonds she’s formed, float in the balmy air. It’s like the soft prelude of her 10th birthday celebrations set for later; a gathering meant for only the nearest and dearest.

I’m momentarily pulled out of my thoughts by a deep chuckle. “Lost in thought?”

“Just counting my blessings,” I reply, giving Luka a silly, love-struck smile.

This is so perfect.

What's more perfect is my husband's sun-kissed skin radiating warmth, every defined muscle of his tattooed body standing out. Drops of sweat and seawater trace down his torso, leading to that enticing V. He catches my lingering gaze, a smirk forming on his lips.

"Enjoying the view, *Solnyshko*?" his voice, rich and teasing, resonates in the air, enveloping me in his irresistible masculine energy.

"Very much," I flirt back, my eyes shamelessly roaming over him.

Suddenly, Natalya unlatches from me, her little body filled with energy. "Dada!" she squeals. Seems I'm not the only one in the house smitten with Mr. Irresistible!

Luka's eyes momentarily drift to my exposed breast, and there's that unmistakable glint of desire in his gaze. His smoldering look says it all. In response, I raise an eyebrow playfully and stick my tongue out at him, giving him a cheeky wink.

He leans down and presses a lingering kiss on my lips that promises more for later. Pulling back slightly, he murmurs, "Tonight, after the party, it's just you, me, and the sound of the waves," right before he gently scoops up Natalya, who giggles in delight.

"*Malyška* has something to show you," Luka says, lifting his gaze to Yulia.

Yulia's eyes, sparkling with the same mischief and wonder, meet mine. "*Tetya* Sophia," she calls out, her voice bubbling with excitement.

Every time I hear her calling me "aunty," my heart swells.

She holds out a bright lei of Hawaiian flowers, the colors radiant against her sun-kissed skin. "For you," she beams, reminding me of how Luka often surprises me with little tokens of love.

"Thank you, sweetheart," I say, the aroma of the flowers enveloping me, grounding me further in the paradise we've chosen as home.

The sun illuminates Yulia's tan, her healthy skin contrasting vividly with her yellow bikini. It's a day filled with the sound of children's laughter and the gentle waves of the beach, but the loudest call of joy for me is when Natalya exclaims, "Yulya!" It's her own delightful take on the Russian term for auntie, and it's clear how deep their bond has grown.

"Hey there, little sunshine," Yulia coos, bending down to Natalya's level, her voice layered with affection. "*Ty moe solnyshko*," she says in Russian, which translates to "you are my sunshine." Natalya's response is a bubbly giggle, reaching out with tiny hands to tug at the strings of Yulia's bikini.

Our eyes meet. Yulia's reflect all the love and joy of the moment. "*Tetya* Sophia, just a tiny bit of ice cream for her? Please?" she implores with that mischievous glint I've come to know so well.

"I don't know about that," I reply, a playful hesitation in my voice as I glance back at my husband for some parental backup. But when I meet Luka's eyes, he grins conspiratorially and gives Yulia a subtle nod, signaling his approval.

"Hey..." I feign protest, raising an eyebrow in mock annoyance.

Yulia giggles, coming closer with puppy eyes. "Come on, *Tetya* Sophia. Just a teensy bit? It's a beach day and my birthday. It's practically a rule to have ice cream."

Luka chuckles. "She's got a point, *solnyshko*."

I roll my eyes playfully, a smile creeping on my lips. "Alright, alright, but just a little; a little spoon, okay? And no sugary toppings."

Yulia throws her hands in the air in victory, pulling Natalya into a celebratory dance. "See, 'Talya? *Tetya* Yulya always wins!"

"What are you guys doing?" In bursts Yulia's friend, Kalea. With hair that screams "I surf before school" and a tan that could put any sunbather to shame, she's the poster child for Hawaiian charm. "*Ta-da!*" She dramatically presents a seashell

to Yulia as if it's a golden trophy. With that flair for the dramatic, it's clear why Yulia's taken such a shine to her.

"That's beautiful!" Yulia exclaims, her fingers tracing the spiral patterns. She then gently places it in Natalya's grasp, teaching her the words "Sea...Shell."

"*Malyška!*" A deep voice rings out from nearby. I instinctively rise to my feet, glancing toward the source. Luka soon stands beside me, towering protectively. His arm wraps around my waist while he cradles little Natalya securely in his other arm.

Yulia's eyes light up with recognition and excitement. "Dima! Erik!" she exclaims, hurrying over to them.

Erik, ever the jovial one, engulfs Yulia in a big bear hug while Dima, holding a festively wrapped package, offers a warm smile.

"*Spasibo*, Dima!" Yulia says, accepting her gift with a grin.

Dimitri, with a warm chuckle, murmurs, "*S dnyom rozhdeniya*," before leaning in to plant a gentle kiss on Yulia's cheek as he wishes her a heartfelt "Happy Birthday." "Though I must admit, Erik chose the wrapping paper."

Erik defends his choice, "Come on! Who doesn't love neon flamingos?"

"Neon flamingos are my favorite!" Yulia exclaims, dotting a kiss on Erik's cheek. Dressed in yet another of his impeccable suits, he looks every bit the runway model. "Little sunshine," she says, placing a soft kiss on Natalya's tiny forehead, "*Tetya* Yulia's off to fetch the best ice cream for you. Wait here."

Natalya, eyes sparkling with curiosity and delight, tries to respond. "Ish...creem?" Her attempt is adorably imperfect, her voice filled with the charming hesitancy of an 18-month-old navigating new words.

I can't help but chuckle. "She's trying," I comment, looking over at Luka, who has a big smile plastered across his face.

With a playful nod and an energetic air, Yulia dashes toward a distant vendor, Max, bounding happily by her side.

Luka, watching the duo run off and suppressing his laughter, turns to his guests, “How was the flight?”

“Fantastic.” Erik reaches out to stroke little Natalya’s cheek, drawing her attention.

However, she instantly recoils at the unfamiliar touch, babbling, “Da-da da da da,” and hides her face in Luka’s chest, her tiny fingers clutching his shirt for comfort.

“Don’t scare her,” Luka teases, adjusting Natalya in his arms to shield her a bit more.

“*Prostitute*,” Erik apologizes with a playful roll of his eyes, holding his hands up in mock surrender. “I was just trying to be friendly. Maybe I should’ve brought a puppet or something.”

Dimitri leans in, wiggling his fingers playfully in a “come hither” gesture, attempting to coax a giggle from Natalya.

But she just peeks out from her hidey-hole, eyes big and round, then gives him a toothy, mischievous grin and blows a raspberry at him, causing the group to burst into hearty laughter.

“Seems like she’s got a bit of her mother’s spirit,” Dimitri observes with a mock sigh, rubbing his chin as though deeply contemplating the meaning behind that raspberry.

Erik reveals his own larger, somewhat clumsily wrapped gift. “Had some business back home, but there was no way we’d miss this. The Windy City’s got nothing on a beach birthday bash.”

I eye the haphazardly wrapped package. “Erik, did you wrap that yourself, or did a raccoon have a go at it?”

Erik, chuckling at my expression, shifts his gaze to Luka, “Seems like family life suits you well, big guy. The last time I checked, weren’t you chasing after trouble?”

Dimitri chimes in, “Never thought I’d see the day. Luka Ivankov, building skyscrapers instead of trouble.”

Luka grins, “Turns out there’s quite a bit of money in the construction world. Just secured another land deal last week.

And believe me, it's all by the book.”

I can't help but beam with pride, looking up at him. He skyrocketed to the top in record time, and not just in the underworld, but in some boardroom somewhere. It's heartwarming to see the respect he commands, how far he's come in such a short time. It's kinda badass, actually.

Luka pulls me close, breaking into my thoughts. His voice is deep and rough as he says, “All those deals and hustles? They're nothing compared to what I've built now.”

Dimitri smirks, eyebrow arched. “Clearly,” he teases, letting his gaze linger a moment too long on my belly. “Completely done with your old life, Luka?”

Luka's eyes, deep with emotion, find mine.

“There's not a thing in this world that could make me miss that life. Not when I have this.” He protectively places his hand over my belly before leaning over to press a quick kiss on Natalya's cheek.

Erik, always ready with a quip, leans in and asks, “So, another one on the way, huh? Going for a soccer team?”

My laughter bubbles forth, light and genuine. “Well, why not?” I jest, raising a brow in mock consideration.

The early evening sky gently blends shades of pink and purple together, a backdrop to the festive atmosphere below. As Luka and I walk towards our home, the unmistakable sounds of a children's party fill the air – a mix of laughter, playful shrieks, and the muffled bass of music.

Behind us, I notice Erik and Dimitri lagging a bit, their voices becoming distant as they get caught up in their own conversation.

“More business chatter,” Luka dismisses with a wave, but I can tell his focus is drifting. His eyes are fixed on our home, lost in quiet contemplation.

“You'd think it's just another one of Yulia's playdates,” I comment, observing the informal setup in our backyard. There's no elaborate decor or fancy arrangements. Just a group

of energetic pre-teens chasing each other, some gathered around a makeshift karaoke setup, and others huddled in a corner, their heads bent over a board game. A few parents chat nearby, sipping on their drinks, occasionally interjecting to remind the kids to “play nice.”

“It’s Yulia’s style,” Luka says, smiling. “She wanted her birthday to be like this. Just fun with her friends, nothing too grand.”

Natalya is snug in Luka’s arms, content and sleepy, her eyes tracking the movement of the older kids. I can’t help but chuckle. “Looks like someone may miss out on the party.”

Luka grins. “Just a few more years, and she’ll be running around with them.” He halts our stride, turning to face me. The last hints of daylight reflect in his eyes, deepening the pools of emotion they already hold. He leans down, his voice tender, resonating with a depth of emotion. “*Ya tak tebya lyublyu, moya koroleva,*” he murmurs in Russian. Those words, “I love you so much, my queen,” make my heart melt. Natalya coos sleepily against Luka’s chest as if she’s agreeing with her father’s sentiment.

Blame it on the baby hormones – I find myself tearing up. Seriously, this little one owes me for the emotional roller coaster!

“*Moy dorogoy,*” I begin, surprising even myself with the fluency of my Russian, “*Tvoi slova zastavlyayut menya chuvstvovat’ sebya kak edinstvennaya zhenshchina na svete.*” Admitting that his words make me feel like the only woman in the world feels both vulnerable and empowering.

Luka’s eyebrows raise, a playful grin tugging at his lips. “Your Russian has improved so much. I’m truly impressed,” he teases.

I chuckle quietly, glancing at Natalya, who’s nestled peacefully against Luka’s firm chest. “I have the best teacher,” I tease, winking back at him.

His embrace tightens around both of us and as the world fades away, leaving our little family in this intimate moment,

he whispers, “This right here...this is everything.”

THE END

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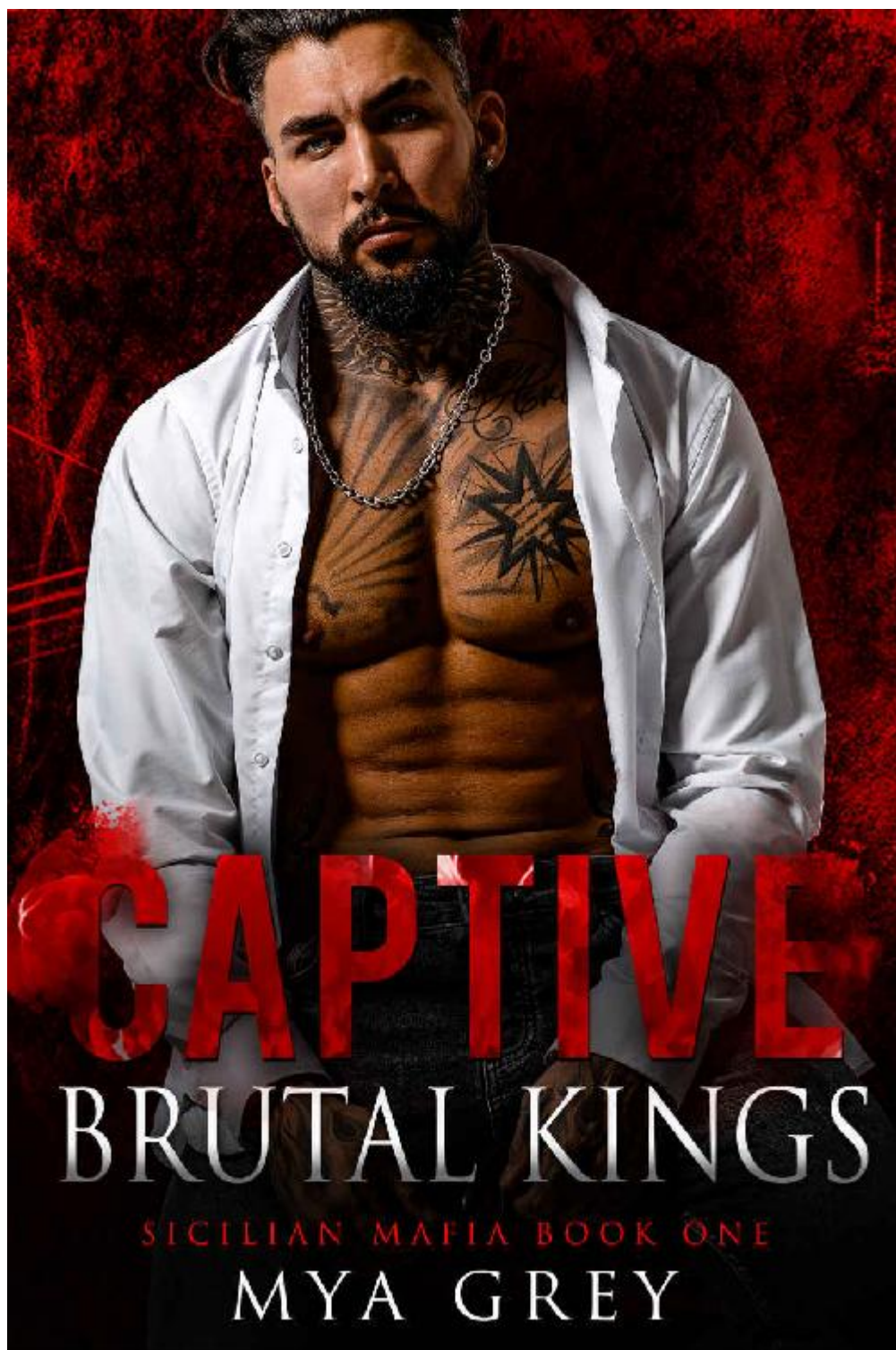
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I should have known better than to trust a monster.

After all, I was raised by one.

And I fell for one.

A one-night stand

Left me with a secret baby...

fathered by my father's worst enemy.

Letting a stranger touch me was a mistake.

After all, I knew he was evil in the worst possible way.

What kind of man laughs when he sees a woman nearly attacked?

But he saved me from Russian kidnappers.

And my hatred and distaste for him blossomed, then deepened into something dark and undeniable. I couldn't resist his dark charm, his brooding good looks, that incredible body that left me feeling safe and sexy all at once...

We shared one night together.

A mistake. A very passionate, hot mistake with a man whose physique makes my mouth water and a glare that makes my body respond.

And now I'm pregnant.

I'm in deep trouble.

Because I am about to start a mafia war...

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