



A RUSSIAN
MAFIA
ROMANCE

Immaculate

DECEPTION

Romanoff Bratva BOOK 1

NICOLE FOX

IMMACULATE DECEPTION

A MAFIA ROMANCE

NICOLE FOX

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IMMACULATE DECEPTION

A MAFIA ROMANCE

**MY WHOLE LIFE WAS ONE PERFECT LIE.
UNTIL THE DON BURST IN AND TORE IT ALL APART.**

He broke into my clinic late one night and made me his.

Nine months later, I'm on the side of the road giving birth—and who do I see stopping to help?

The mobster.

The monster.

The man who made me beg for more—and then left before I ever got his name.

He doesn't realize who I am. Where I'm from. What I've done.

But I've got secrets that I'll die to keep safe from him.

Starting with this:

That's *our* baby in his arms.

IMMACULATE DECEPTION is a secret baby romantic suspense novel. It is Book One of the Romanoff Bratva Duet. Arya and Dima's story concludes in Book Two, IMMACULATE CORRUPTION.

ARYA

A SMALL VETERINARY CLINIC—NEW YORK CITY—LATE AT NIGHT

People always ask me why I'm a good veterinarian. Why all the sick and injured creatures that come to my clinic listen to me. Why they love me.

The answer is simple: wounded creatures recognize one another.

And I'm as wounded as they come.

The broken part of them sees the broken part of me and vice versa. Sometimes, that's all the medicine it takes. Just to understand that you're not alone in this world.

I'm all alone right now, though. Not in a "woe is me" kind of way. I just mean that, literally, I'm here by myself.

Everyone else left the clinic hours ago, off to friends and families and lovers and hobbies and all kinds of things like that. But Roxie, the mutt with the broken back leg who was abandoned on the clinic's front stoop this morning, decided she'd forgotten how to eat. So I hung around late after the work day ended to coax kibble down her throat, one hand-fed piece at a time.

She's a scrawny little thing. Mangy, too. But she's got eyes like pools of liquid gold and the kind of happily wagging tail that just never quits. She's worked her way into my heart with remarkable speed.

So, I'm staying late. Like, really late. The clock on the wall reads almost midnight.

I don't mind, though. I don't have much to go home to. Just an empty apartment and some Chinese takeout leftovers in my fridge. Roxie needs me more than I need dumplings.

After almost three hours, she's finally eaten a reasonable amount of food. Enough to get her through the night and help keep down her pain meds, at least.

She's snoozing in her cage now, with that pitiful pink cast stuck out at an awkward angle. But even in her dreams, she keeps wagging her tail. I smile at the sight.

Satisfied with my handiwork, I go around the clinic to turn off lights and lock up. Then I grab my purse and keys from my locker, pull my jacket on over my scrubs, and head for the back door.

Before I get there, though, the back door explodes.

"Explodes" might be a bit melodramatic. But it definitely bursts open with an ear-splitting *WHAM!* The sound of the slam rattles all the contents of the clinic.

"What the fuck?!" I scream as I jump about three feet in the air like I'm in those old Tom & Jerry cartoons. My leap carries me stumbling backwards until the corner of a metal counter jabs into my spine.

I hiss in pain. But my pain disappears when I see a massive, shadowy figure moving into through the open doorway.

It's either a huge man or a grizzly bear walking on its hind legs.

To be honest, I think I'd prefer the grizzly. I have better luck with animals than with men.

The figure stumbles in, slams the door closed, and leans against it, breathing heavily.

Definitely a man. What a pity.

I'm halfway to screaming, "*What the fuck!*" again—when he looks up and sees me.

At least, I think he sees me. His hood is pulled forward and low, hiding what little of his face I would have otherwise been able to see in the dim lights. The rest is obscured by a thick beard. All I can make out is the twin pinprick of dark eyes set deep in their sockets.

“Who are you?” he growls. His voice is deep. I can’t tell if it’s natural or he’s disguising it.

“Who am *I*?” I echo in disbelief. I grab the straps of my purse in my fist, ready to use swing it like a pair of ninja nunchuks if need be. “Says the guy who just kicked in my goddamn door! Who the hell are *you*?”

He ignores my question. “You’re a doctor?”

“I’m a vet.”

“Same thing.” He moves towards me. As he does, I realize how much of his height was lost in his slouch against the door. Standing tall, he’s six and a half feet at least, and broad through the shoulders like a linebacker.

The purse in my hand suddenly feels like a pebble. David had a better chance against Goliath.

“It really, really isn’t the same thing,” I tell him. “There’s an emergency room ten blocks west if you need a doctor.”

I’m scanning the room for other weapon choices and coming up woefully short. So far, a tennis ball is topping the list.

I might be in quite a bit of trouble.

“I don’t want a doctor,” he says. “I want you.” His words are spoken with a steely calm that sends awareness buzzing into my limbs.

I take a step back, fear clotting in my throat. “Are you with the Albanians?” I ask in a timid voice I hardly recognize. “Because I don’t want any of your bullshit mob drama coming into my clinic.”

Fuck. I shouldn’t have said that.

I buried those demons a long time ago. Those secrets. Those skeletons in my closet.

But the question came out of me totally unbidden. As if I've always known, deep in my heart, that the past I thought I fled wasn't quite done with me yet.

That it was simply hibernating.

Waiting until the right time to come ruin my life again.

For a long time after everything happened, I carried a knife in my purse. *A lot of good that'll do you against armed mobsters*, my best friend Brigitte always said.

Eventually, realizing she was right, I got rid of it. I never had it in me to carry a gun. Besides—after a while, it all seemed unnecessary. My past had stayed in the rearview mirror, where it belonged.

At least, I thought it did.

Now, I'm not so sure.

The man barks out a laugh. I can't tell if he's surprised or offended.

"Well?" I demand. "Are you?"

He shakes his head. "You ask too many questions. Questions that could get you killed."

Then he rolls up his shirt sleeve and I see the reason for his sudden appearance.

Blood is caked across the rippling muscles of his forearm. When he moves, fresh blood spurts out. He scowls at the pain.

I don't have to look any closer to know what it is: a gunshot wound.

"You've been shot!" I gasp. I wince as soon as I say it. What an idiotic comment. As if he wasn't aware.

"Funny you should point that out," he drawls. "I noticed it as well. Mind doing something about it?"

I still can't see much of his face beneath the hood. Not enough to pick him out of a crowd, at least.

But those dark, glittering eyes... Those haven't left my face for a second.

I swallow past an obnoxiously large knot in my throat. "I already told you, I'm a vet. If you need a doctor, there's an emergency room—"

There's a quick flash of movement. And then he's holding a gun, pointed at me.

"I said, '*Mind doing something about that?*'" he repeats. Any hint of a question is gone from his voice.

Fuck me. Looks like my work day isn't over after all.

I stare for a moment longer into the darkness where his face is hidden. I don't know what I'm looking for. But whatever it is, I don't find it.

Plus, that gun is very hard to ignore.

Fine. I'll patch this asshole up and then send him on his way.

I spin on my heel and march towards the exam room just down the hall. He follows on heavy footsteps.

Yanking the door open, I gesture for him to go inside. "Sit down and put your gun away," I order. "I can't focus if I'm worried about getting shot."

Anyone else would be scared—and I suppose I am, at least a little.

But not as scared I should be. This is the broken part of me. The cracked pieces of my heart that the animals connect with. The part that's sickeningly familiar with fear and abuse and violence.

If I've learned anything in my life, it's that it's best to go along to get along. I'll patch this man up the best I can, then hope I never see him again.

Not for his sake—but for mine.

He brushes past me. His scent invades my nostrils: sweat, blood, and beneath all that, a swirling, musky cologne that makes my head swim.

I wrinkle my nose and ignore how it makes me feel. The less of this man I notice, the better.

I retreat to a cabinet in the hallway to grab a few supplies. When I return to the room, the hulk is sitting on the edge of the exam table. It's a metal structure designed to hold a chunky golden retriever at most, so I'm surprised the table legs aren't snapping under this behemoth's size.

I point to the chair in a corner. "Move over there before you break my table."

He shrugs, slides off casually, and moves to the chair. I lay out my supplies on the table where he just was. The metal top is still warm from his body heat.

"You're brave," he remarks as he settles into the seat. "Or stupid. Most people don't talk to me that way."

I scowl. "Gee, I wonder why that might be. Maybe I'm just PMSing. Or maybe some asshole just barged into my workplace with a gun and some very unreasonable demands. Who's to say?"

"PMSing it is, then."

"Har de har har," I scoff irritably. "You're very calm for a man with a bullet wound. Is this just a typical day in the life for you?"

His head is down, but I can see the square line of his jaw and his dark stubble. It's enough to tell that he's smiling. "You'd be surprised what's typical for me."

That's ominous enough to send shivers down my spine. But just like this man's smell, I ignore them.

Don't let him get to you. Just do your job, go home, and forget this ever happened.

That's good advice from myself to myself. I start to reach for his arm—and then hesitate.

It's been a while since I've touched another person. Especially since I've touched a man.

Animals are simpler. Their emotion are easier to gauge. Either they trust you or they don't. If they trust you, you're safe. If they don't, you get bitten.

People aren't as clear-cut. They're liars. Thieves. Manipulators.

Or, in the case of this man, probably all three.

"I won't bite, if that's what you're wondering." The man grabs my hand in his and steers my fingertips to his forearm, forcing the contact.

I jerk my hand back. "You might not, but I will. I'm the doctor, so why don't you be quiet and let me work?"

"I thought you said you weren't a doctor?" he chuckles.

Who is this man? Barging into my office, demanding I help him at gunpoint, and then... flirting with me?

Hell no. I turn that female part of my brain off. The part that dissects every interaction with the opposite sex, searching for points of connection, trying to find an "in."

I don't want an "in" with this man; I want an *out*. The sooner, the better.

I put my metaphorical "Doctor Arya George" hat firmly on my head. Time to focus all of my attention on mending up this man, whoever the hell he is, and getting him the fuck out of my clinic forever.

The gunshot is just a graze, thankfully. Anything more and I would have had to go digging through the wound in search of bullet fragments or bone pieces. I've done it before for more than a few animals, but always under anesthesia. I have less than zero desire to operate on a conscious patient.

Although, if this particular bastard squirms a little bit under my needle, I won't be too upset about it.

The work goes quickly. He doesn't squirm at all. Just watches me the whole time with unblinking eyes. When I'm done, I wipe the blood away with a clean towel and grab a roll of bandages.

"Will I keep the arm, Doc?" he asks sarcastically.

I ignore him as I put my tools away. "It's a glorified scratch. You'll be back to work in no time, waving guns in innocent people's faces or whatever it is you do for a living."

I wrap the clean fabric around his forearm and try to beat back the part of me that wants to run my fingers down his arm.

God, it has been a long time, I think. Way too long. Eighteen months or so, if my math is correct.

I've kept myself company when the nights get lonely. But there's nothing quite like the real thing breathing and flexing and bleeding right in front of you.

"How can I ever repay you?" the man teases, his voice a low rumble.

"For wrapping your arm in a bandage? A lifetime of servitude will do."

He takes the last bit of bandage from my hand and tucks the tail in himself. His fingers are huge, but there's a gracefulness in the way they move. I imagine what they would feel like on my skin...

Then I promptly begin reciting what I can remember of The Gettysburg Address.

It's a tried-and-true anti-horny tactic. I memorized the whole speech in sixth grade and it's never failed since then in keeping me out of trouble.

Or at least, it's never failed before. But tonight, I can't get past "...*we are engaged in a great civil war...*" before my thoughts turn dirty once again.

"Not for that," he says as he coolly assesses the remaining tatters of his shirt and then rips it free in one casual tug. "I meant for giving me a place to hide from the men who shot me."

I can't help but gasp in surprise. I'm not sure why, but it never occurred to me that someone else must have shot him. I glance towards the door in fright, half-expecting to see a group of men creeping down the hallway, guns drawn.

"Are you being chased?" I demand.

"I was," he says with an easy shrug. "Might still be, technically speaking. But looks like I lost them."

A chill moves down my spine. "They could have followed you!" I croak. "You put me in danger!"

“Considering you asked about the Albanians, I have to assume this isn’t your first run-in with danger.”

He tilts his head to the side. His full lips are pursed in careful thought—what little I can see of them, at least. Between that hood, the awkwardly angled lamp overhead, and my fervent desire to forget this ever happened as soon as it’s over, I still haven’t really seen much of his face.

“What do you know about them, anyway?” he presses.

“The Albanians? Nothing.” I answer too quickly and then take a sharp, stabilizing breath. “Nothing more than anyone else, I mean. The news says they are trouble, and when you pointed a gun at me, I assumed the worst.”

“You’re right. Nothing would be worse than being Albanian.”

I relax, letting go of a tension I didn’t realize I’d been carrying.

Thank God. He isn’t Albanian. On a day like today, that’s a win.

“Not friends of yours?” I ask as casually as I can.

“Do friends usually try to murder you?”

I swallow and shake my head. “Not usually.”

“Then I guess not.”

He stands up. His chest brushes against mine. I jump back like he’s a live wire. I think I see him smile, but I look away before I can confirm it.

This has gone on long enough. He needs to go.

“I’ll bill your insurance in the morning,” I say, waving my hand towards the door. “Off you go.”

He doesn’t move. “You’re funny.”

“And I’ll be here all week. But that’s not an invitation. If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask that you never come back here again.”

He whistles and resists the shove towards the door I give him. “You don’t mince words, either.”

“And you don’t take a hint.” I push him harder, ignoring how solid he feels beneath my fingers.

Again, it doesn’t do a lick of good. With one move, he slams the door to the hallway shut and leans against the door, blocking us both inside.

“I still have a gun, you know,” he says casually.

My heart beats faster but I try to keep a calm demeanor. “If you were going to shoot me, you would have done it by now. And if you decide to hold me captive in here, I might request that. Put me out of my misery, you know?”

He chuckles. “You should be more scared of me, *krasavitsa*.”

Is that Russian he just spoke? Whatever it is, it communicated directly with the heat between my thighs in a way that is equal parts awe-inspiring and terrifying.

Not that I’m willing to show this son of a bitch what he’s doing to me.

“You ran away and hid from a fight. Is that supposed to have me quaking in my boots, tough guy?”

There’s a growl of anger as he crosses his arms over his chest. “Boys stand their ground when they don’t have a chance. Men know that you can’t fight a war if you’re dead.”

“War?” I roll my eyes. “What are you, a drug dealer or something?”

He shrugs. “Let’s go with ‘something.’”

His shoulders are broad, chest tapering down to trim hips and strong thighs. He’s the kind of built that comes from a magic mixture of genetics and working out vigorously. I imagine him lifting weights—shirtless, muscles rippling, sweat dripping down his tattooed skin...

Then my fantasy shimmers and shapeshifts and suddenly, it’s me that he’s manhandling. His large, strangely graceful hands claiming every inch of me as his muscles clench, pressing himself into—

“Time to go!” My voice is high-pitched and strained. A heat has built in my stomach. Almost certainly a side effect of adrenaline and fear mixing with

lethal levels of horniness.

Let's be very clear: I do *not* want this man.

I've sworn off men like this. Men who show up with random wounds and bruises and broken bones. Men who put themselves—and me—in danger.

I'm done with that lifestyle.

But it doesn't seem to be done with me.

The man hasn't moved. "It could still be dangerous out there. For both of us. I think the best solution would be to stay here for a while," he says, uncrossing his arms and sliding his hands into his front pockets, his hips jutting forward. "I'm sure we could think of some way to kill the time."

The bulge at his crotch is like a homing beacon. It takes me three full seconds to pull my eyes away.

"You need to leave," I repeat, trying to reach around his body to find the doorknob. "Time to vacate the premises. You're all patched up and I need to get home."

He slides over and pins my hand behind his body. "Is there someone waiting for you at home?"

"My husband," I lie without hesitation.

Too quickly, he snatches up my left hand and holds it between us. The empty ring finger faces me.

"Give him a call, then," he chuckles, calling my bluff. "Tell him you'll be late getting home tonight. You might a little worn out, too."

I try to stop from trembling too noticeably. "He's a, uh... police officer. On duty. Out protecting the city from people like you, so he isn't home right now. But he actually has a tracking device on my phone," I lie again, even more unconvincingly. "I'm sure he's already on his way to find out what's going on since I'm not home yet."

"Great. Then I'll keep you company until he gets here. You know... to make sure the guys after me don't find you instead," he says.

He taps his fingers against my wrist before brushing slowly down my arm. It feels like he's flaying me open. Heat radiates through my bones and settles between my legs.

I'm pulsing. Literally, full-on pulsing, like my whole body is one giant, frantic heartbeat.

"I'm serious." My voice is barely above a whisper. My heart is beating so fast it's hard to get air to my lungs. "You should go."

"I probably should. But that's not what matters."

"What matters then?"

He walks towards me, backing me up to the exam table. I'm pinned between the metal edge of the table and him.

His body heat scorches me through my scrubs. His head drops down until his lips are next to my ear. He smells like cedarwood. Gunsmoke. Blood.

"What matters is if you actually believe that I'm walking out of this room without tasting you," he whispers.

A shiver moves down my spine. Before I can answer, the man grabs my hips and lifts me onto the exam table. Without a second thought, I wrap my legs around his waist.

And just like that, my fate is sealed.

So much for a poker face. I've revealed my entire hand.

The man laughs softly and slides his hand under my shirt, the calloused skin of his fingers sliding up my trembling ribs.

"That's what I thought."

My entire body is on fire. The feeling of his warm body between my legs is enough to turn me into an animal.

Suddenly, I don't care about whether this is right and wrong. I don't care about the promise I made to myself eighteen months ago. I don't care who this man is or what will happen afterward.

The only thing I care about is the pure carnal need roaring to life inside of me.

Before rational thought can break through, I grab the man's head and pull his face to mine. Our bodies meld together—lips, chests, hips.

The table is tall, but so is he. Tall enough that our centers match up perfectly. While I reach down and unzip his fly, he grabs the waistband of my scrubs and yanks them down.

“What am I doing?” I ask out loud as I kick off my pants in a flurry of movement.

The man answers by grabbing the side of my cotton panties and ripping them clean off. Effortlessly powerful. He opens his fist and the flimsy material of my underwear flutters to the floor.

The table beneath me is cold, but I only have a second to think about it before he frees himself from his boxers.

“Fuck,” I whisper. He's huge.

There are so many questions I should be asking him. So many doubts I should be having. Any normal person would hesitate here and reconsider.

But I'm lost in a haze of lust for a man I don't even know.

His breathing is heavy as he positions himself at my entrance. I don't wait for him to thrust—I pull myself onto him. Our bodies meet with a smack of connection as I toss my head back and revel in how it feels to be filled.

Really, *really* filled.

If I wasn't dripping wet, taking in so much all at once may have hurt. But as it is, I feel like I could come right now. Right at the first stroke.

The man grips the swell of my hips in his hands tightly, his fingers digging into my flesh, and pounds into me. Again and again.

The exam table is squealing in protest, metal cannisters of treats and cotton swabs vibrating off the table and scattering across the floor from our vigorous pace.

But I don't care.

Break the supplies.

Break the table.

Break *me*.

If it feels this good to be broken, I'll take it and beg for more.

"You're so big," I moan, opening my legs wider, giving more of myself to this stranger.

He curses under his breath and then presses a hand to my chest, laying me back on the table. I throw my arms over my head and grip the edges of the table for stability, which I need desperately as soon as the man brushes the pad of his thumb over my center.

I arch my back. The table jumps underneath me. The legs rise off the floor for a moment before crashing back down when this bloodied stranger fucks into me again.

"Harder," I beg, desperate for the feeling of a hand that isn't my own. "Touch me. Make me come."

I squeeze my eyes closed and focus on his body beating against mine, beating inside of me. I focus on the feeling of having someone close, of being connected to someone—even if that "someone" is a gun-toting stranger.

In the end, that is what tips me over the edge.

Not the mindblowing way he fills me or the way he strokes at my center until I scream.

It's that he's real. He's here.

I'm so fucking lonely that I come harder than I've ever come before, simply because he's a living, breathing man and he's touching me.

Wave after wave rips through me ruthlessly. I can't breathe, see, or speak for what feels like an eternity.

And then, as so often happens, shame follows the pleasure.

I finish before he does, my body still warm and limp when he slams into me one last time and shudders. I can feel him unleashing inside of me and the doubts I should have had earlier arise.

He's a stranger. A stranger who pointed a gun at me. Who locked me in an exam room and—

Well, he didn't force himself on me. I wanted this.

But that only makes my shame worse.

The man pulls out of me and zips up his jeans. "*Kakogo chyorta*. That was..."

"A mistake," I finish, scrambling off the table to grab a roll of paper towels from under the sink to clean up with. My panties are destroyed, so I'll have to flag down a taxi while rolling commando. *Fan-fucking-tastic*.

"Don't worry. I won't tell Police Officer Husband about this," he reassures me with dark laughter on the edge of his voice.

Finally dressed, I glare up at him. His face is still hidden. The only illuminated light is positioned just behind his head, casting his hooded figure in silhouette.

Suddenly, I realize he kept his hood on the entire time. I still don't know what he really looks like.

Maybe that's for the best.

"God, this is a nightmare," I mutter.

I wave him away from the door. This time, he lets me pass. When he does, I practically leap into the hallway.

Outside the room, the reality of what I've just done sinks in more and more. It's like coming out of a dream, reclaiming control of your mind and body, being forced to reckon with the decisions you made while you weren't really you.

Except I *was* me. The woman who asked a stranger to make her come *was* me.

Disgrace warms my cheeks.

“Not up for a round two, then?” the man taunts, calling down the hallway.

I ignore him and duck into the bathroom. Avoiding my reflection—nothing good can come of looking myself in the eye right now—I pee, splash water on my face, and fix my ruined ponytail.

After a few deep breaths, I march out of the bathroom, ready to send the man on his way before I call the cops.

Except, when I walk into the hallway, I can see the back door of the clinic is slightly ajar. The night breeze whispers through the crack.

He’s already gone.

DIMA

NINE MONTHS LATER—A BRAVA SAFEHOUSE JUST OUTSIDE OF NEW YORK
CITY

“A *mutiny*?” I shake my head and stand up, stretching my spine. “You gotta be kidding me. Are we fucking pirates?”

“Even pirates aren’t as ugly as you,” my lieutenant Gennady says wryly.

“Watch it,” I warn. “Or I’ll shove a peg leg so far up your ass you’ll get splinters in your tongue.”

“Jesus,” he mutters, chastened. “That’s a little grim, even for you, Dima Romanoff.”

Our smiles sort of linger for a moment before fading away. The truth is that this shit isn’t funny. Not by a long shot.

I’m the don of the Romanoff Bratva. A mutiny means someone is telling me they want that title for themselves.

I don’t like that.

And I plan to remedy the situation very fucking quickly.

“A mutiny,” I say again, mostly to myself. “Fucking hell. I’ll sort this out.”

Gennady rubs his chin. “And how do you plan to do that? All by yourself, Captain America?” He doesn’t go so far as to actually block the door, but he positions himself between me and it, trying to buy himself some time to keep talking me down.

I tap my hip where I keep my gun holstered. “I’ll manage. Get out of my way.”

He doesn’t budge. Gennady might be the only man alive who disregards my orders so regularly. He’s lucky he’s my best friend or else I’d make real on that peg leg threat.

“Gennady...”

“They have weapons, too, Dima,” he argues. “Zotov and the men who support him have claimed the main armory bunker. Right now, he’s more powerful than you are.”

I bristle at the suggestion, clenching my teeth. “That motherfucker is a scared little puppy. He doesn’t know what it takes to lead.”

“You’re not wrong. The dipshit wouldn’t be able to pour piss out of a boot if the instructions were printed on the heel,” Gennady agrees. “But he *is* smart enough to point the dangerous end of the gun at you and make it go bang. He’s not playing around, Dima. And he’ll kill you if you charge in there trying to demand their respect. We have to be smart about this.”

Anger curdles in my chest. “I don’t demand anything,” I retort harshly. “I earn it. No one in the Bratva has hungered for a goddamn thing under my command. *I* provide. *I* lead. The smart thing to do would be to execute all these traitors for disloyalty. Make an example of them.”

He shakes his head. “We don’t have the firepower, Dima. They’ll kill you if you stick your head above ground.” He enunciates every word, trying to make the point clear.

I growl in wordless fury and spin around, kicking the leg of the coffee table. The entire thing tips over, spilling house plants, coasters, and bullets across the floor.

Adrenaline is coursing through my veins and I don’t have anywhere to put it. I’d *like* to put it in Zotov’s head with a fucking bullet.

Or a knife.

Or my bare hands, if that’s what it came down to.

But right now, it seems that's not an option.

"My table isn't the one revolting, you know," Gennady grumbles. He bends down to scoop the spilled potting soil off his carpet. "Christ, that's the third time this month you've made a mess in my apartment."

"Zotov Stepanov," I mutter under my breath, ignoring him. "Fucking coward. Fucking traitor. And who's with him?"

Gennady rattles off a quick list of names as he continues to clean the mess. A few of my key lieutenants and their crews have thrown their weight in with the mutineers. A few others are already dead.

Soon enough, they *all* will be. I'm going scorched earth on anyone who thought betraying me was wise.

"I don't know why the fuck they thought this was a good idea," I growl.

"They're scared," Gennady suggests.

When I snap my head back around to glare at him, he holds up his hands in surrender.

"It's not an excuse, obviously. Just an explanation. They're scared of the recent crackdowns from police and what it means for business. Partnering with the Albanians could lead us—"

"To fucking disaster," I finish. My top lip curls in disgust. "Beginning and end of story. That's the only thing that matters. But if you need another, the Albanians would just as soon kidnap and sell your mother or sister off the street and sell her at auction like cattle. Is that what you want? You wanna see your family get bought by some Albanian fucking pig?"

"I've been your best friend for a long time, Dima," Gennady says. His voice is quiet. Almost mournful. "I want the same things you want."

That makes me take pause.

Scowling, I pace across the room again and take a deep breath. I know Gennady is on my side. We've been through hell and back together more times than I can count. He's one of the few people in my life I trust.

But a lot of the blame for this falls on him.

It was Gennady's job to watch over Zotov and the other brigadiers. His job to ensure none of them became too powerful. That none of them thirsted for control.

He fucked up. And now he's trying to fix it.

"Zotov is not a natural-born leader, but he is clever," Gennady continues. "His plans escaped my notice, which means he's organized and careful. That counts for something."

Gennady is right. But it still doesn't seem like enough reason for me to have to skip town.

"Has he spoken with the Albanians yet?" I demand. "Have they officially struck a deal?"

Gennady shakes his head. "Not yet. And I can assure you that intel is good. Zotov may have convinced the men under him to follow along, but it will be an uphill battle negotiating with the Albanians. They won't cross you that fast. They know it could be the last thing they do."

"Fucking right," I mutter, my hands clenching and unclenching at my sides. "I should have pushed back harder the first time they came to us. I should have killed the messenger to make my stance clear."

"Human trafficking is big business. Men like Zotov will always be tempted by it," Gennady says.

He's right, of course. After all the criminal shit the Bratva has done under my leadership, drawing a hard line at human trafficking was tough for my men to comprehend.

They saw dollar signs.

I saw innocent lives being desecrated.

But they don't need to comprehend a damn thing. They just need to obey.

"Fuck it. I'm going to go talk to him." I swipe my car keys off the floor and start marching for the door.

“Hold on, Dima. We should—”

BOOM.

Gennady doesn't even have a chance to finish his sentence before a huge explosion rocks the room.

I drop into an instinctive crouch and whip out my gun. Next to me, Gennady throws himself on the floor and finds his own weapon.

The windows rattle, the walls shake, and car alarms all down the street start going off.

“What the fuck was that?” I jump up and run to the window.

“Stay low!” Gennady is still sprawled in the middle of the room, though he's getting back up to his feet now.

I scan the street below. People are coming out of their houses to figure out what the noise was. It isn't hard to see.

A car on the street exploded.

There's a smoking crater along the curb where it was parked. Foul black fumes are swirling up into the air and fire is licking at the charred metal remnants. Even the tires are completely melted, turning into a river of dark sludge creeping down into the storm drains.

I feel Gennady walk up behind me and look over my shoulder. “Shit, man. Is that—”

“My car,” I finish for him with a nod.

Fuck.

Gennady starts making calls immediately. But there's no point, really. As soon as I see the ragdoll corpse sprawled at the side of what was once an absurdly expensive top-of-the-line Range Rover, the conclusion is obvious.

Zotov sent one of his men to rig my car with a bomb. Unfortunately for him, the idiot blew himself up in the process.

His plan didn't work, but his intentions are now crystal clear: I'm under attack from my own men. We are long past the point of talking this out.

"It's not running away," Gennady sighs, handing me a burner phone and his car keys. "It's regrouping. You need to get out of the city. We can't put Zotov back in his place if you're dead."

"It sure as hell looks like I'm running. Feels that way, too."

Gennady is ready to tear his hair out in frustration with my stubbornness. "Good! Great! Wonderful! Let them think you're running. Hopefully, that means they'll let their guard down. It will be easier to destroy them all if they think you aren't a threat."

I hate the idea that I'll look weak, but Gennady is right. This tiny detour will give me the element of surprise.

Lull my enemies into complacency... then plant a knife right between their shoulder blades.

I look him in the eyes. "Fine," I growl. "I'll go. But I'm coming back very fucking soon. And when I do return, I'm returning with a gun in each hand. Zotov is gonna suffer, *sobrat*. I swear it."

Gennady nods solemnly. "You go alone for now. One man is less suspicious than a pair of us. I'll be here gathering more intel. We'll reconvene when the time is right."

We shake hands. Then I use the fire escape in the back of his place to clamber out and down to the street.

Gennady's car is parked on the other side of the block, thankfully, which means it wasn't destroyed in the blast like mine. I eye the blast site mournfully.

Goddammit. I really loved that car.

As I get in Gennady's sedan and drive away, I see squad cars squealing onto the scene and an ambulance pulling up along the curb.

And, out of the corner of my eye, I spy the last bloodied fragments of the poor idiot who apparently didn't do so well in bomb school.

Good fucking riddance.

One less traitor to kill.

DIMA

I'm not even a mile away when I notice a black SUV on my tail. I call Gennady.

"Miss me already?" he jokes as soon as he answers.

I rub my temples. It never stops with him. Thinks he's a fucking comedian.

"I'm going to ditch the car. I'm guessing Zotov may have hacked into the tracker. Someone is tailing me."

"There's a tracker on my car? Damn it," he grumbles, accepting the loss. "Alright, that's fine. Probably for the best, actually. You wouldn't get far in it anyway."

"I'm not running," I correct icily.

Gennady starts in on another speech about how this is a just "tactical redeployment" or some other bullshit made-up phrase like that, but I just hang up on him mid-sentence.

I have no patience for that shit. I'm going to leave the city for a few days, regroup, and come back to wreak bloody vengeance on everyone who's wronged me.

An ambulance and a few more police cars scream down the road back towards where I came from. I use the opportunity to turn down a side street and desert Gennady's car along the curb in front of a laundromat.

From there, I take off on foot.

I don't have much on me. Just a wad of cash, my wallet, and my gun. But it will be enough. When I get wherever the hell I'm going, I can buy what I need.

But to get out of the city in the first place, I need a car. That means I'll have to steal one.

I zigzag through side streets and alleys, trying to make as unobvious a path as possible through the city. I hear the rush of highway traffic and I know I'm close. If I have to steal a car, I want to be as close to the highway as possible. It'll be easier to get away from there.

I stride past a line of industrial buildings, a porn shop, and a lumber supply store. I come to a stop on the intersection of the frontage road. Distantly, I still hear sirens tending to the explosion, but traffic is moving fine again.

Good. Now, I just need to find a ride.

Aaand... *there*. Fuck yes.

Two blocks down is a car parked along the curb, emergency lights flashing. I imagine a ray of heavenly light shooting down from the sky, illuminating it like the gift it is.

Not that I believe in fate or any bullshit like that. The heavens have never sent me a goddamn thing.

Nothing but pain, that is.

I unholster the gun from my hip and jog down the road. I haven't jacked a car since I was a teenager, but it's not exactly a skill one needs to hone. You point the gun in the civilian's face and tell them to get fucking lost. Simple.

The car would've been a nice find ten years earlier. Now, though, the rear bumper is rusted, the back tire is a spare, and the top is covered in hail damage.

Which makes it an oddly perfect choice. No one who knows me would ever suspect I'd drive something like this around.

Through the back windshield, I don't see anyone inside, but the car is obviously running. I crouch down and approach on the driver's side.

That's when I hear a groan.

More of a scream, actually. The muffled cry of someone in obvious pain.

I know the sound well enough, thanks to my line of work. Usually, it means someone undergoing interrogation is losing fingers to a pair of bloodstained garden shears. But I'm pretty sure that's not the case here.

I glance around, confused, and then keep pressing forward. Until I hear it again.

This time, I realize it's coming from inside the car. The cry is muffled because the windows are rolled up.

I peer inside. When I see what it is, I'm speechless.

I haven't been so surprised since I was a boy. In my business, hesitation equals death. But I can't help it. Can't help staring, slack-jawed, at the last thing I ever expected to see in this beat-up piece of shit.

A woman is lying in the backseat of the car, her head resting against the window and her feet pressed against the opposite door. Her hair is a bedraggled curtain plastered to her face with sweat so I can't see her face.

Her legs are spread and she is naked from the waist down.

I'm so lost staring at the unexpectedly shocking sight before me that it takes me a second to register that she is screaming again and waving her hand at me, gesturing for me to open the door.

"Thank God!" she cries when I open the door in a daze. "I tried flagging someone down, but no one would... Whatever, it doesn't matter. I need help. Call for help."

"What do you need?"

She points between her legs as if I'm stupid. That's when I finally grasp what's actually happening.

"For fuck's sake!" I snarl in surprise. "You're having a baby."

As if to underscore what an idiot I am, she arches her back and screams through what I now realize is another contraction.

I've seen a lot of shit in my life that most people will never see. Lots of death and violence and brutality.

But this is something else entirely.

As soon as she can talk again, she breathlessly tells me to call 911.

Instinctively, I nearly do. Then, I remember one little flaw in that plan: *The police will come.*

I don't know who I can trust. That means no cops. No telling who's on Zotov's payroll.

"I'll drive you to the hospital," I offer instead. She'll be rushed inside to deliver the baby, and I'll take off with the car. Win-win.

"No!" she shrieks, gritting her teeth as another contraction comes.

I can see she's right. The baby is coming. *Now.* We don't have time to make it to a hospital.

"Call someone!" Her scream is bloodcurdling.

I know what I should do—leave her, find a different car, hope that some other Good Samaritan comes along and helps this poor woman do whatever the hell it is she needs to do.

My life is under threat. Lots of violent men are trying to kill me.

But there's a tiny little voice in my head that roots me in place. The same voice that told me to turn down the Albanians' offer of equal partnership in their sex slave trafficking business. Call it a conscience, an angel on my shoulder, or just a fucking hallucination. Whatever it is, I can't ignore it.

And right now, it's telling me to stay and help.

"I can't. I don't have a phone," I lie, shoving my gun back in my holster before I throw the door wide and kneel down in front of her. "We'll have to do this right here."

I do my best to keep my face neutral. There's no need to make the situation worse than it already is by letting her know I have no fucking idea what I'm doing.

"Push," I say as confidently as I can.

"I have to wait for a contraction."

"Fine. Do that," I instruct. "Push on the next contraction. I'll catch the baby."

Another contraction comes. She begins to push. We do this several times. A contraction comes, she pushes, a brief lull. Rinse and repeat.

On the next contraction, she pushes so hard her eyes roll back in her head. It's not quite enough. I'm not sure she has many more rounds in her. We're approaching the point of "now or never."

"One more," I rasp.

The whole world has shrunk down to this.

Her groan builds up. Morphs into an agonized cry.

She writhes.

Tenses.

Screams...

And then the baby emerges into my waiting hands.

The woman sags at once in pure relief. "Thank God," she murmurs. "Thank fucking God..."

But it's not over yet.

Because the newborn's body is still and motionless. Eyes closed. Hands limp. Chest unmoving.

"Is he okay?" she whispers when I don't say anything. She doesn't look at me. Her head is still sagging back on the car seat and she's looking up at the ceiling. She's been through hell and back.

I stare at the unmoving baby and swallow back the words on the tip of my tongue. *I don't know.*

“Is he okay?” she asks again when I still don't answer. Her voice more frantic than a second ago. “What's going on?”

The baby is ominously silent.

I flip him over onto his stomach and pat his back. I'm just making all this shit up as I go and hoping I don't kill an innocent woman and her child.

Thwack.

Nothing.

I try again. *Thwack.*

Still nothing. I'm worried I'm about to have to give this woman the worst news anyone can hear.

And then...

Miraculously, he coughs.

A cough turns into a splutter. A splutter turns into a whimper. From there, he begins to wail.

The woman collapses in relief. “Thank God,” she sighs again, laying her head back against the window, exhausted.

I wrap the baby up in my jacket, too focused on making sure the little guy is okay to care about the cold anymore, and hand him to his mom.

Immediately, her entire posture changes. Before, she was limp, spent, on the verge of sinking into sleep.

Now, she's love incarnate. Her green eyes shine with happy tears, the sweat on her face makes her look luminescent, and she's smiling as she murmurs sweet things to her screaming baby.

Something about her is tugging at my memory, but I can't for the life of me figure out what it is.

Then she lifts her baby to her breast. I turn away.

“You can drive us to the hospital now,” she whispers.

Usually, I’d make it clear I don’t take orders from anyone, but something about this woman is different. Like I knew her in a former life or something.

There’s also that little voice in my chest. The saint buried inside the sinner.
You can’t leave her here.

Well, technically, I could. But I swore years ago that I would live by a code. That I’d never be the kind of beast who left needless chaos in his wake. I only cause harm when there’s a purpose and the people being harmed deserve it.

So I walk around, slide into the front seat, and we take off.

DIMA

I pull up in front of the emergency department. After flagging down an employee at the doors, a wheelchair is rushed out to the car. Nurses gawk at the sight of the half-naked woman and her newborn baby. They lay a blanket over her lap and then pester me for details.

“How long has it been since he was born?”

“Did you deliver the placenta?”

“Was there tearing?”

I hold up my hands. “A baby came out, I wrapped it in a jacket, and handed it to her. That’s all I know.”

The head nurse, an older woman with a thin ponytail and even thinner lips, narrows her eyes at me. “Are you related to the patient? If not, you’ll need to leave.”

More to the point, I *should* leave. I should hop back in the car and take off on the highway before anything else unbelievable happens to me today.

But I hate the idea of not knowing what will happen to this woman and her son.

Right now, the story is only half-complete. I want to know they’ll both be okay. Then I can set my mind at ease.

What a bad fucking time for a crisis of conscience.

“I’m her, uh, boyfriend,” I lie. “That’s my baby.”

After a thorough scrubbing, I’m ushered into the recovery room where the woman and her son are resting.

The nurse points to a stiff seat under the window. I drop into it.

“They gave her some pain medication,” she says, “and I think the day is catching up with her. Just let her rest as much as you can.”

I glance at the paperwork she hands me and then toss it aside. I won’t be here long enough to fill anything out, even if I did know such details as her first name or address. By the time the nurses come looking for it, I’ll be long gone, and this woman—whoever she is—will be able to inform them I’d lied and was just a kind stranger who helped her.

Not *that* kind, though—seeing as how I plan on leaving here with her car.

I walk over to the plastic bassinet pushed against the bed. The baby looks nothing like the mottled creature I delivered not so long ago. His face is clean, his cheeks are flushed, and his pink lips are relaxed.

Mom isn’t quite as angelic. The nurses cleaned her up a bit and gave her some medication, but her long, dark hair is plastered to her sweaty neck and face, and tears have sliced visible dark tracks through her makeup.

Still, there’s something about her that draws me closer. Something about her that tickles the back of my brain. The memory of a memory.

That’s ridiculous, though. The women I know are Bratva wives and groupies. Dripping in jewels given to them by whichever brigadier they last fucked, driving rented luxury cars to drunken brunches, and pumped full of so much booze and drugs that no human life could ever grow inside of them.

This woman isn’t a part of my world. And when she wakes up and finds her car is gone, she’ll be livid. She’ll hate me without ever knowing my name.

Good thing I don’t give a fuck.

“Everything okay in here?”

I step away from the bed. The nurse who spoke is lingering in the doorway impatiently.

“Yeah,” I tell her. “All good.”

She hitches a thumb over her shoulder. “Great. Then can we ask you to move your car? It’s blocking the driveway.”

That’s my cue. Time to go.

With one last look at the woman and child, I silently wish them luck and leave the hospital.

As I drive away from the emergency room entrance, I look over and notice the woman’s purse in the passenger seat. Hanging out of the side of her bag is a lanyard full of keys. One of them is marked clearly with a little gold house charm.

I riffle through the woman’s wallet and find her address on her driver’s license. By sheer dumb luck, her house isn’t far from where I am now.

All I need is a place to hide out for a little while until Gennady can gather some firepower, some backup, and some intel.

There’s as good as anywhere else.

ARYA

Weird dream, I think groggily, wiping my eyes.

Flakes of mascara coat the back of my hand. I groan. I can't keep falling asleep in my makeup. It was quirky and carefree in my early twenties, but at this point, it's just sad.

I should have a solid skincare regime by now. Soon, I'll need an anti-wrinkle cream in my lineup. Especially with being a single mom. Nothing ages you like motherhood, I hear.

Motherhood.

The word sticks in my head. Something about it is very, very wrong.

When I open my eyes and look up at the fluorescent light fixture above me, my brain practically screams the word at me.

Motherhood...

It's circling in my thoughts like an airplane trying to land in a storm. What could it possibly mean...? My head feels thick. Foggy.

Then I hear a cry.

I sit up so fast I wince. There's an ice pack wedged down the front of my pants and an IV in my arm, but I can still feel pain radiating through me from between my legs.

Because I gave birth.

Motherhood—holy shit.

It all comes rushing back to me.

I had a baby.

On the side of the road.

I lean over the side of the hospital bed and look into the bassinet. The child inside is like a doll. Chubby cheeks and a tiny button of a nose. He wiggles back and forth, trapped by the swaddle. His lips pucker like he's sucking on something.

This is real.

He is real.

He is mine.

In a dreamy, this-can't-be-happening daze, I pick up my son and hold him to my breast. This is the second time I've nursed since he's been born—the first time being on the ride to the hospital.

Which is when I suddenly remember the man who drove us here.

He was just a large, faceless mass. I was in too much pain to care who was between my legs. I knew I couldn't give birth alone, so when he appeared outside the car, I didn't question it. I just thanked heaven for an angel and kept pushing.

After the year I've had, it's about time the universe started sending some good fortune my way.

The clothes I was wearing earlier are folded in a dirty, sweaty pile on the table next to the bed. Including my jeans, which I kicked off well before the stranger arrived to help.

In the back pocket, just where I'd left it, is my phone. I pull it out and dial Brigitte's number.

“About time!” my best friend chirps in way of a greeting. “I’ve been texting you all day. Where have you been?”

“Giving birth on the side of the road. What about you?”

There’s a long, stunned pause and then a flurry of questions and shouts and squeals. “Tell me everything!” she demands.

Brigitte has been my best friend for years. When I found out I was pregnant, I told her before anyone else. To my everlasting gratitude, she didn’t immediately tell me I was the biggest idiot in the world.

“*What are you going to do?*” she had asked instead.

Keep it. The answer had been immediate and unwavering, even though I hadn’t given it a second of thought.

Once I made my decision, Brigitte never asked again.

“...I was timing my contractions and I thought I had more than enough time to get to the hospital, but I could feel him coming,” I explain.

“Ew!”

“I was afraid if I got on the highway, I’d end up crashing, so I pulled over on a frontage road to call for help. But the phone lines must have been jammed or something.”

“There was an explosion!” Brigitte interrupts. “That’s why I was texting you. Something exploded only a few blocks from your house, according to the news. I bet everyone was calling to figure out what was going on.”

“How do you possibly know more about what’s going on in the city than I do? You’re out of town!”

Brigitte laughs. “I’m like one of those businessmen who wears multiple watches, each one set to a different time zone. I always make sure to stay up to date with the important news.”

She’s been traveling a lot for work lately, so it does kind of make sense. She’s always been a little Energizer bunny.

We laugh, then I tell her about the man showing up to help. Even as I tell the story, I almost don't believe the words I'm saying.

A huge, handsome man opening the car door.

Calming me.

Taking my baby from me and swaddling it in his jacket...

"Who was he?" she asks when I finish the wild tale.

"No idea. I barely even looked at him."

"Was he hot?"

"I don't know," I insist. "Truly. I was so focused on pushing a human out of me that I didn't notice."

She groans. "You are useless! Was he big? Small?"

"Not that big. Seven pounds, four ounces."

"The man, you dummy. Not the baby."

"Oh. Right. He was big." That part I'm certain about. The man's shoulders were so broad he barely fit through the car door. "Very big," I add.

"That's something, at least," she says. "More than you gave me about your son's father! I thought after the reaming I gave you for that, you'd pay better attention."

Brigitte is the only one who knows the story of how I got pregnant. Anyone else would judge me as a shameless slut. But Brigitte knows me well enough to know how out of character it was for me to have sex with a gun-wielding stranger. At my place of work, no less.

She *did* hate me for not getting a better look at him. "Your kid could come out with three eyes and scales for all you know," she'd said when I told her the man never took off his hoodie that night.

"I saw enough of his skin to know he was human," I'd replied with a wicked smile.

For a few weeks, the tryst was a wild story I replayed more than once under my sheets, drawing on the fantasy to get me through the world's longest dry spell.

But it was just a story. Just a memory.

Then I missed my period.

When the positive sign appeared on the pregnancy test, I wanted to go back in time and undo everything. No quickie was worth that.

Now, however, looking down at the snoozing baby laying on my chest, I can't imagine taking it back.

I was wrong. This little one is worth everything.

"I'll let you go," Brigitte says quickly. "I'm sure you're busy being a mom."

We say a quick goodbye and promise to talk later. When we hang up, I place my phone on the table again.

The enormity of what I'm embarking on starts to wash over me.

Preparation has been the name of my baby game. Every time I went to the store since the moment I found out I was pregnant, I bought a pack of diapers to help spread out the cost over a longer period of time. I read parenting books, watched videos online, and took all of the free classes offered, from childbirth to CPR.

Like everything else in my life, I assumed this would be a challenge I could conquer if I worked hard enough.

Except no one really "conquers" parenting, do they? Looking down at my baby boy, I realize he will be mine forever. I'll always be a mom first. Even when he's grown and out of the house, I'll worry about him.

If I'm a good mom, that is. I've had more than enough experience with bad moms to know they don't do a lot of worrying.

My mom wasn't ever worried about me. It's why I ended up where I did. With who I did. It's how I got these scars on my chin.

I touch them absent-mindedly, the way I've done since the explosion tore my world apart all those years ago.

And as I do, I make myself a promise: I'm going to be one of the good ones.

Even after the past I've had, I have to believe that there's hope for redemption in my future.

"Lukas." I whisper the name that has been at the top of my list of baby names for months. It's the first time I've said it out loud and I like it.

Lukas seems to like it, too. He turns his little head up at the sound of my voice and opens one of his eyes. It takes him a second, but he eventually focuses on me. I think it's his way of approving my choice.

"I love you, Lukas," I whisper, brushing my finger across his cheek. "I'll always love you."

He falls asleep nursing. I eventually unlatch him and hold him against my chest.

I don't know how long I've been awake, but I'm surprised a nurse hasn't come in to check on us. I was so out of it when they wheeled me into the hospital that I'm not sure what has been done and what hasn't.

Has Lukas been tested? Weighed? Measured?

Did I tell them it took him a few seconds to cry after he was born? I don't think I did, so I mentally tick that off as something to ask the doctor about whenever they come in.

Speaking of which, did somebody call my doctor?

Dr. Johnson told me to call her if I was worried about when to get to the hospital, but I thought I had it all under control. She'll probably be mad at me for waiting so long. I did save myself a pretty penny by doing it *au naturel* on the side of the road rather than at the hospital.

Questions are still swirling through my head when I hear the door to my room open and shut. I make sure my breast is put away and sit up, putting on a smile.

“Doctor, I have a few quest—”

My words die on my lips, however, when a group of three grimacing men rip aside the curtain.

They’re definitely not doctors.

And they’re definitely not here to help.

DIMA

ARYA'S APARTMENT

I ease open the apartment door and slip inside with my gun drawn.

A quick search of the rooms comes up empty. No one here but me.

I sigh and relax—but only the tiniest fraction. I can't stay here for long. Too many people hunting for me. Too many skulls for me to crack open as soon as I get the chance.

It's also pretty fucking clear that I don't belong here. This apartment is laughably domestic. From the "Hello There" welcome mat to the unopened car seat and pyramid of diapers stacked high in the corner.

Cute. Cozy. Completely normal.

And then here I am—covered in blood and grime and carrying a weapon that's been used many times over to kill my enemies—sinking into a seat on the worn couch in the midst of it all.

I close my eyes and rest my head back for a moment. Immediately, I start thinking about how goddamn good it's going to feel when I catch up to Zotov and wrap my bare hands around that bastard's throat.

He thinks he can take what's mine. Thinks he can be me.

But there's only one Dima Romanoff.

And I'm not going anywhere anytime soon.

Revenge will come in due time, though. Right now, I need to focus on immediate next steps.

With a growl, I open my eyes again and take to my feet. I strip off my bloodied clothes and hop in the shower, turning the water up as hot as I can stand. It's a far cry from the palatial shower at my mansion and it sure as hell wasn't meant for someone my size.

Every time I turn around, I knock some more shit to the ground. A bottle of pomegranate body wash explodes all over me.

Teeth clenched in distaste, I make quick work of the clean-up and step back out.

My discarded clothes are lying crumpled on the floor where I left them. The pants are mostly usable, but my shirt is a repulsive mess. I go searching for an alternative option.

In the back of the closet in the master bedroom, I find a box of hoodies folded neatly. The smell of dust is strong when I crack the lid open. Whoever these originally belonged to, they haven't been touched in a while. I shake out a big gray hoodie and shrug it on.

As I pull on my pants, I feel the wad of cash in my back pocket. And a feeling I'm not altogether familiar with rises to the surface.

Guilt.

This is all the money I have until Gennady can get me some more or I can take care of the Zotov problem. But the thought of leaving a new single mother with a car to replace and one less sweatshirt seems needlessly cruel.

I toss a stack of crumpled bills on her dresser and curse at my damned bleeding heart. It won't buy her anything fancy, but it's better than nothing.

"Consider it my baby shower gift," I mumble to the empty room.

As if delivering the baby wasn't gift enough.

It doesn't matter anyway. In a few hours, both the woman and her baby will be a memory. I'll just be a story they repeat each time the topic of the boy's birth comes up.

So there was this stranger...

Things will be better if we never cross paths again.

I start pacing through the apartment. I thought the shower would help take the edge of my restlessness, but it hasn't done a damn thing. I ought to sleep, think, meditate on my next moves.

But I can't sit down. Can't sit still. Even striding back and forth through this shithole apartment isn't doing a goddamn thing to take the edge off.

I go from the living room to the hallway to the bathroom to the bedroom to the foyer and back out into the living room.

Repeat, ad nauseum. The same circuit again and again and again.

Time passes. But I'm just as pent-up and frustrated as I was when I first arrived an hour ago. And my thoughts are going in circles the same way I am.

The same old voices in my head, playing on endless loops.

There's the irritating angel on my shoulder, telling me to leave this woman's apartment before I bring the storm down on this place.

Gennady, telling me to lie low, away from cops and Albanians and Zotov alike.

Worst of all is the ghost of my father's angry snarl. He's been dead for a decade and I can still hear him rasping his unhelpful input on the whole situation. *How could you let this happen? If there was insurrection brewing, you should have known about it. You should have killed Zotov before he had the chance to gather forces. Made an example of him.*

"Gee, thanks, Father," I grumble out loud. "Why didn't I think of that?"

The hallucination alone pisses me off. Fuck that son of a bitch. I'm glad he's dead.

Still snarling, I snatch a picture off the wall carelessly. The nail rips out with it. My father's voice fades as I study the smiling face inside the frame.

It's her. The woman whose baby I delivered.

A thin brunette, smile too wide for her face, drowns in a too-large graduation robe. She's cute, but young. A high schooler when this one was taken, by the looks of her.

I drop the picture on the floor and look at the next one. Another graduation photo. Same girl, but she's blossomed. Her round cheeks are more sculpted and her graduation robe is open to show off a tight white dress with a low neckline. More curves. More sex appeal.

Beautiful, yes—but haunted.

Again, looking at her, something tickles in the back of my mind. A memory I can't quite grasp. Like a word on the tip of my tongue.

I study her face. The almond-shape of her eyes, the fierce arch of her brow. Those sparkling eyes. Full of fire and intelligence.

No parents in any of the pictures. No boyfriend or husband, either. Wonder where he is. She didn't strike me as the type to fall for a deadbeat dad.

My frown deepens. It's right there on the tip of my tongue. The connection. The—fuck, the *something*. What the hell is it?

It's been a long few days since Zotov made his move. Maybe my neurons are just short-circuiting. Crying out for sleep, food, vengeance. I've almost convinced myself that that's it...

Until I look at the stone sign behind her in the picture and see the words "Cornell University of Veterinary Medicine" etched in the rock.

At that, the memory lingering in the back of my mind becomes a movie.

The curvy, feisty veterinarian with her legs wrapped around my waist as I fucked her. Drawing me into her, begging me for more.

"Harder."

"Touch me."

"Make me come."

How many times have I played those filthy words over and over in my mind? She fucked me like she didn't know if she'd ever be fucked again.

And even when her face faded from my memory after that night, the feeling of her clenched around my cock stayed with me in the months that followed.

So tight. So wet.

There's no way in hell they could be the same woman. Not a chance. Surely I would have recognized her. Unless...

The chances are astronomical. Two random run-ins with the same woman in a city this big is unlikely, to say the least. More like impossible.

But my chest is clenching tight and a bead of sweat trickles down my forehead. I snatch the picture off the wall and carry it with me as I surge back into the living room.

I'm searching for something, though I don't know what. My mind is moving too fast for me to keep up.

Then I see her purse. I lunge for it, pluck out her wallet, and search through it.

"Arya George" is the name on her ID, but I'm not looking for that. I want something that could tie her back to the vet clinic I was at last winter. Or something that could tie her to another so I can put this ridiculous theory out of my mind.

I flip past coffee shop punch cards and department store credit cards without finding anything. Throwing her wallet aside, I dig through her purse.

Nothing useful. Not a damn thing.

And then—I notice a lanyard. The one that has been hanging out of her purse since I first spotted it back at the hospital parking lot.

It's light blue and faded, but the white lettering is still readable. *Lower Manhattan Animal Hospital and Veterinary Clinic.*

Fuck. There's a horrible realization dawning on me like a storm on the horizon.

I start flipping through the calendar in my head, rolling back the days and weeks and months. The night I got in a shootout with the Albanians was

warm, I remember. Not hot, though. Not summertime hot. More like early spring. We're in the dead of winter now. Which means...

I count on my fingers. *Seven, eight... nine months.*

That was nine months ago.

Nine.

Fucking.

Months.

I drop the lanyard and march back through the apartment. I'm shaking my head as if that can change what I already know is true.

What I refuse to accept is true—at least until it's confirmed.

I need more proof.

In her room, her bed is mussed, white sheets and comforter spilling onto the floor and pillows tossed haphazardly around. But a small leather book is placed prominently on her nightstand.

It's a journal. Open to anyone who wanted to look at it. This woman needs to learn how to better safeguard her secrets.

I start from the beginning. Most of the entries are dated years back. I keep flipping until I get closer and closer.

And then, in the exact middle of the book like some kind of sick fucking joke, the pages fall apart. I see two words stamped in bright blue letters and underscored over again and again.

"I'M PREGNANT."

Underneath, she goes into more detail.

"I'm pregnant thanks to a man I don't even know. I never even saw his face. He walked into the clinic with a gunshot wound and now I'm pregnant. HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?"

The montage of exactly how it happened plays through my mind.

Harder. Touch me. Make me come...

At that, the truth comes thundering down over me.

The vet I fucked at gunpoint nine months ago got pregnant.

And the baby is mine.

ARYA

THE HOSPITAL

The men crowding at my bedside are all clad in black. I can see weapons bulging out under their shirts. Lots of weapons.

I clutch Lukas to my chest. “Who are you?” I gasp.

A short man in front with a tattoo of a rose on his neck sneers wickedly at me. “Who are *you*?”

They can’t possibly know who I am. Who I was.

No way. I burned all those bridges a long time ago. I’ve been careful. Covered my tracks. Kept my head down.

“Arya George,” I say. I’m hoping the men will realize they’ve made a mistake.

A tall, thin man makes his way around the right side of my hospital bed. “That name mean anything to you?” he asks his comrades.

The two others shake their heads.

Fear is moving down my spine, freezing me vertebrae by vertebrae. I eye the nurse call button on the side of the bed and lunge for it.

But a hand clamps down over my wrist before I can mash it down.

The leader wags a finger in front of my face. “They won’t come in here even if you call for them,” he says, a slight accent detectable in his speech. “They

are following orders like good little girls. You should do the same.”

Lukas stirs and whimpers. I hold him tighter, a fierce protectiveness washing over me. “What do you want?” I demand.

“Answer a few questions and we’ll be on our way.”

The man looks like he’d smell like cigarette smoke and leather. When he leans closer to me, I confirm that he does in fact smell like cigarette smoke and leather. His head is bald, but he has a close-cropped beard and beady, searching eyes.

“How do you know Dima?”

I screw up my forehead. “Who?”

The man tightens his grip on my wrist until I whimper. “Do *not* lie to me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“How long have you been seeing him?”

“I’m not seeing anyone,” I insist. I try to pull my arm free, but the man keeps a firm clamp on it.

He eyes Lukas and raises his eyebrows, not at all swayed. “Is that so? No one ever explained the birds and the bees to me in full, but I’ve picked up on the finer details over the years. I’m fairly certain a man is required to create one of those little fuckers.” He points at my baby to illustrate his point.

“I’ve had sex before, yes,” I scowl. “Thanks for the biology lesson. But not in nine months. And I didn’t even know the guy.”

The leader narrows his eyes. “I told you not to fucking lie to me.”

“I’m not lying!”

He leans close enough that I can see the bits of yellow grime between his teeth. “You know Dima. He’s the one who fucked that baby into you. Now, I want you to tell me where he’s at.”

I blink down at Lukas, trying to figure out if this is some kind of fever dream.

Am I still asleep? Am I passed out on the side of the road?

Maybe no one came to help me deliver Lukas after all. Maybe I passed out from the pain and now I'm hallucinating all this craziness.

"Where is Dima?" The man pulls my arm roughly, jostling Lukas.

I cry out. "Please, stop! Don't hurt my baby. Please."

The man drops my arm. "I'm not going to hurt your fuckin' baby. But you, little princess, are another story. Cooperate and tell us where Dima ran off to. Then we'll let you go."

I huff in frustration and stare at the man, hoping he'll see the truth in my eyes. "I don't know who Dima is and I have no idea—"

Before I can get the rest of the words out, a hand cracks across my face.

The man moved so quickly I didn't even see the hit coming. But I certainly felt it.

I recoil from the sting of his slap on my cheek. My teeth rattle together, my jaw clenches, and my neck wrenches awkwardly.

I'm so surprised that I don't make a noise for a second. When I do, it's a sob.

"What is happening?" I whisper. My hands are beginning to shake. "What is happening?"

The man leans down, putting his face right in front of mine, and hisses, "An interrogation is happening, darling. Right now, it's not going well for you."

Then he slaps me again.

"Now start fucking talking."

DIMA

ARYA'S APARTMENT

This is a fucking disaster.

My world isn't fit for a child. The women I fuck aren't fit to be mothers.

With this woman, though—Arya George, according to her driver's license—I didn't even think about it. Something about her drew me in. Made me throw caution to the wind.

Might've been the way she begged me to fuck her harder, now that I think about it.

I shake the memory from my mind and try to focus. But I'm not so far off. More than anything, what drew me to her was how she spoke. No one in my life talks to me the way she did.

I'm sure that had a lot to do with the fact I pulled a gun on her. That brings out a new side of most people.

Usually, though, it's *fear* that bubbles to the surface. Pathetic, whimpering submission. That's fine. Makes my job easier most days.

But Arya wasn't scared.

I liked her fearlessness. I liked it even more when she tried to act like she didn't want me. I knew it was a lie, but I enjoyed the game.

Like animals in heat, we were drawn together, helpless against our instincts. And now, the universe or God or nature or whoever the fuck is in charge is

drawing us together again. Pretty fucked-up sense of humor, if you ask me.

But I make my own choices. Not God. Not nature. Certainly not fucking *fate*.

Still, I could just walk away. I should just walk away. Arya would never know. It says right here in her diary that she never saw my face. I could leave and she would have no idea.

But I can't.

That goddamn angel on my shoulder is chiming in again. I ought to strangle the motherfucker.

I can't leave her as a single parent without offering my help. Not now that I know the truth.

After all, that boy is my blood. My family.

My heir.

I have to protect them both.



The Hospital

I park in the hospital lot and go inside. I'm on guard the whole time, waiting to overpower anyone who tries to stop me.

The nurses from before have probably put the pieces together and realized that I am not in fact Arya's boyfriend. But if they think they're going to stop me from getting to my son, they'd better think again.

I don't run into a single problem, though.

Or, for that matter, a single living soul.

Not until I get the labor and delivery ward. A nervous nurse standing at the door takes one look at me and opens her mouth to speak. I'm expecting her to say, "*What the hell are you doing here?*" or "*Why did you leave?*"

Instead, she whispers, "I'm sorry."

That gives me pause. *What the fuck?*

She lowers her eyes as if she's afraid to look at me. I'm used to that from people who know what I've done. What I do. But this woman doesn't know me from Adam.

I frown, ready to storm past her. But something about her demeanor stops me. "Why are you sorry?" I demand.

The woman jumps at my harsh tone and then brushes her long ponytail over her shoulder anxiously. "I don't know. I just... I don't want any trouble, okay?"

My frown deepens. "What the fuck's going on?"

"Your boss is inside," she says, uncertainty in her voice. "They're in Room Twelve. I told the other nurses to stay away, just like he asked. I'm just trying to do what I'm told. I don't want anyone to get hurt. I'm sorry."

My boss? I don't have a boss. I *am* the boss.

Or at least, I was. But that's a problem for later. Right now, I'm focused on the other shit she said.

Room Twelve. *That's Arya's room.*

I spin around and corner the nurse against the wall. She's already frightened, but I want to make one thing clear—whoever she's scared of now, I'm much, much worse.

“What does ‘my boss’ look like?” I enunciate slowly, threat lingering on the edge of my voice.

Now, the pitiful nurse is looking like she's about to faint. She's pressed against the wall, trembling.

“Use your fucking words,” I order.

She nods, swallows, steels herself. “Big guy. Bald. Scary eyes. He had a scar on the back of his head.”

God fucking dammit. I should have guessed.

Fyodor has been Zotov's lapdog since they both were initiated into the Bratva. And now that Zotov has rebelled, Fyodor is apparently more than willing to be Zotov's *patsan*, his lieutenant, running errands for him and conducting special missions.

Of course that fucking *mudak* would be the first person to jump ship and join under Zotov's rule. He's a coward and a sneak. Useful in the right moments, but never worthy of respect. He wouldn't hesitate for a second to assault a young single mother in search of me.

And that has to be what they're doing here today. There's no other reason they'd be bothering Arya except that they somehow tracked me to her car and then tracked us both to the hospital.

Right now, she and my son are in danger—because of me.

I have to fix it.

I turn my attention back to the nurse. “Listen to me very closely. The man in there is not my boss. And whatever the fuck he's doing there, it's not good.

So, if you want to make this right, I need you to help me get the woman and baby in there to safety. Am I understood?”

She nods, her entire body shaking. “O—okay.”

Not exactly confidence-inspiring.

I add, “He will kill her if you fuck this up. And the baby. Maybe you, too. Do you understand that? You need to get them out or I’ll have to shoot up this whole fucking hospital.” I pull up my shirt to reveal the gun at my hip.

The woman’s eyes bulge out of their sockets. Her trembling worsens. I’m about ready to lock her in a closet out of the way and go with Plan B—*shoot first, ask questions later*.

But then she stills suddenly. A hard, steely glint comes over her eyes.

“No one is killing a baby on my ward,” she says icily.

I nod in satisfaction. That’s much better. “Good. Listen to me. You need to —”

I start to lay out a rough plan, but she holds up a hand. “I’ve got this. You just get a wheelchair and be ready to run.”

I’m not used to taking orders. Especially not from women I could break in half with one hand. But I like the fire in her face. It reminds me of Arya’s, as a matter of fact.

We hold eye contact for a moment longer before I nod and step away to find a wheelchair. The woman disappears behind the desk. A second later, I hear a flurry of beeps and alarms coming from Arya’s room. Muffled voices inside raise up in confusion.

I race back around a corner and grab a wheelchair I find folded up in a closet. Meanwhile, the red-headed nurse picks up a stethoscope and sprints into the room ahead of me.

“Something is wrong with the baby!” she shouts. “Everyone—out. The baby. The baby!”

I stay crouched behind a pillar with just a sliver of the room visible to me. Fyodor's pale brow wrinkles and he starts jabbering in Russian with his idiot stooges. I can't hear well enough to make out what he's saying, but the confusion is obvious enough.

"What's wrong with my baby?" comes another voice.

Arya. I recognize her voice. Clear as day. If I had any doubt before, it's long gone now.

She is the woman from the vet clinic that night.

She's the one.

"Where are you taking him?" she says. Her nervousness rising and rising.

"You can't walk yet," the nurse says. "If you could, I'd tell you to come with me, but—"

"I can walk!"

More machines begin beeping. More men's voices argue back and forth.

And a moment later, the nurse comes out pushing the baby's bassinet. Arya struggles along behind her. Her face is red and tear-stained. Bruises are already forming high on her cheek.

My teeth clench tight. *Those bastards hit her.*

They dared to touch the mother of my child.

I barely know a thing about this woman, but I know this—I'll fucking slaughter Fyodor, his men, and anyone else who lays a hand on her.

But not right now. Not just yet.

First, I need to get Arya and the baby out of here.

Through the crack in the open door, I can see the silhouettes of at least three men, chattering amongst themselves. Arya passes through the threshold after the nurse.

Behind them, the men seem to come to a decision. They start to charge out in Arya's wake.

But before they can get far, the nurse whips the door closed and locks it with a key around her neck. The men, realizing what's happened, start to bellow and pound on the door. It's already rattling on its hinges.

No way that flimsy shit keeps them in there for long. But it'll do for now.

The nurse turns the corner quickly, mumbling to me as she passes. "It works every time. Tell a new mom she can't do something and it's the first thing she tries."

I bite back a laugh. She's still shaken, but having a job to do seems to have soothed her.

Arya, following much more slowly, turns the corner next.

I shove the wheelchair in front of her. She drops into it gratefully. It takes her a second to look up and realize I'm not a nurse.

"You!"

"Me," I say grimly. I don't wait for her to put the pieces together. Just start pushing her down the hallway after the baby.

"What are you—"

"Shut up. I'll explain everything when we get to the car."

She shakes her head and points after the nurse. "No. No, I'm not going to a car. My baby. She said there's something wrong—"

"I said shut up. Do you want me to leave you in there with those motherfuckers?"

Arya seems to realize all at once that she's no longer in the room with those men. She looks around, panicked, and then flops back into the wheelchair with a sigh. "Who were they?"

"I'll explain everything when we get to the car."

"Stop saying that! Explain something now."

“I’m fucking saving your life,” I hiss in her ear. “How about that? Does that explain enough for you?”

Suddenly, Arya’s shoulders stiffen. She turns around and looks up at me.

I can’t believe I didn’t recognize her before. To be fair, what was happening between her legs was much more distracting. But still—those dark brows and bright green eyes. Her full lips. The fire, the passion in her gaze...

I should have remembered her immediately.

She blinks at me, lashes batting against her cheeks. “You,” she murmurs again, like she’s still coming to grips with everything that means.

She may not have seen my face nine months ago, but she heard my voice.

Now, finally, she knows.

The nurse pushes the bassinet to the elevator. When we’re there, she grabs the baby and places him in Arya’s arms. “This is as far as I go. I could get fired even for this, so—”

“We’ll take it from here,” I snap, jamming my finger on the elevator button. I won’t feel comfortable until the city is just a smudge in the rearview mirror.

“Thank you!” Arya calls as the woman walks away.

I push the wheelchair into the elevator. Just as I reach for the first floor button, Fyodor and his gang of morons rumble into the hallway.

There’s just enough time for him to recognize me and for his bushy eyebrows to shoot far up on his forehead.

“Dima, you fucking—!”

Then the elevator door closes.

What a shame. I’m sure he had something incredibly insightful to share.

Arya clutches the baby close to her chest. “Can we get away? What are we going to do?”

I grab the gun from my hip and cock it. “We’ll get away.”

Arya whimpers and kisses her baby on the cheek. *Our* baby.

“What’s his name?” I ask as I check the clip.

It’s not important. But just in case something happens... I want to know.

She kisses him again. “Lukas.”

“Lukas Romanoff,” I murmur.

Arya inhales sharply like she recognizes the name—not that that’s possible—but she doesn’t say anything. I don’t either. I have more important things on my mind.

Like getting us all out of here alive.

As soon as the elevator doors open, I push Arya’s wheelchair forward at full speed. A family is standing just on the other side of the doors. They scream and scatter as we fly through the doors and take a hard turn down the main hallway of the hospital.

A security guard is yelling from his post next to the front desk. “Slow down! Are you crazy? You need to—”

Then I hear the crack of gunfire.

Everyone dives for the edges of the hallway as a glass window up ahead shatters. Fyodor & Co. must’ve taken the stairs.

Arya throws her arms on top of the baby and folds herself over as a protective shield. I lower my head and run faster.

I’ll only return gunfire if I have to. I don’t want to risk hitting a bystander. Unlike Fyodor and his goons, I have a moral code.

“Get them!” Fyodor commands his men from far behind us.

The automatic front doors open slowly. Too slowly. The wheelchair catches on the right one.

The whole thing tips to one side. Arya screams, Lukas wails, Fyodor barks more orders, more gunshots crack out, but I manage to straighten everything and keep going before we spill over.

As soon as we are outside, I drop into a dead sprint.

Bullets *ting* off the cars next to us. I spin around and fire a few shots back towards the hospital. I mostly aim towards the ground to avoid hitting anyone inside. I'm just hoping that shooting back is enough to keep Fyodor and his men at a safe distance for now. At the very least, safe enough that Arya can get in the car before they catch up to us.

The vehicle is a few spaces away from a large black SUV, which I now recognize as one belonging to the Bratva. I was so distracted walking into the hospital that I didn't even notice it.

So many fucking mistakes. Each one threatening to kill me and my newfound family.

I can't let that happen.

I give the wheelchair one large push towards the car, letting go of the handles. "Get in the front seat!" I roar.

Arya's hand slaps against the side of the car to keep her from careening into it and then she gingerly makes her way to the passenger side, Lukas still cradled in her arms.

While she does that, I reload my gun, then fire at the back two tires of the SUV and each of the windows.

Glass shatters across the asphalt and bounces up everywhere like upside-down hail. I run through a downpour of it to get to the driver's side of Arya's car.

Arya is just closing the door as I drop into the seat. The moment both her feet are off the ground, I throw the car into drive and we take off with a screech.

I hope to fucking God we make it.

ARYA

Dima presses his hand to the back of my head and pushes it down below the window. “Keep your head down,” he growls.

“I’m crushing Lukas,” I argue, trying to sit upright.

His hand holds me firmly anyways. “Better that than making him an orphan.”

I scowl in irritation, but I’m not exactly in a position to fight back. Even when he takes his hand off the back of my head, I stay tucked down like he asked. Mostly because I don’t know what else to do. He at least seems to have some idea of how to operate.

The processing part of my brain has backfired after everything that’s happened. I’m not sure how to understand what is going on, so in a way, I’m grateful to have someone tell me what to do, how to act.

Even if he is even more of an asshole than I remember from the night we met.

“Okay,” he says a few minutes later, his voice a deep rumble. “We’re clear.”

I spin around and scan the road behind us. I can’t even see the hospital anymore. “Are they coming after us?”

“Not with two flat tires and busted-out windows.”

I sigh in relief.

Then I realize—I’m with Dima Romanoff.

The man from that night in the clinic.

Lukas's father.

My stomach twists. I'm not sure if it's because of shock, disgust, or the fact that I gave birth a little over six hours ago. Probably all three, plus a dash of the primal heat that drew me to Dima in the first place.

I assumed I'd never know the identity of Lukas's father. There didn't seem to be a way to identify him, aside from submitting Lukas's DNA to one of those ancestry websites and hoping for a match.

I'd imagined explaining to my child that I didn't know his father's identity. That I didn't know the man's name. His face. Or even a single thing about him, for that matter.

That answer might work when he's young. But eventually, he'll realize what it means.

One-night-stand.

Accident.

Mistake.

So in one way, Dima's appearance is a blessing.

In just about every other way, though—i.e., the ways in which I'm currently fleeing the hospital with my baby in my arms and armed gunmen behind us—it's a curse.

My son's father is a killer. A beast. A monster.

How do you tell a child that?

Dima is flying down a frontage road, headed for the highway, and I realize all at once Lukas isn't in a car seat. He's in the front seat. With an airbag. As we speed down the road.

“Stop the car!”

Dima ignores me. In fact, he pushes down on the gas a bit harder to make a point.

Like I said—asshole.

I reach over and grab his sleeve—which is actually my sleeve, if I’m not mistaken. Yes, I can tell from the bleach stain on the cuff that he’s wearing my favorite oversized sweatshirt. I file that away to ask about later.

“Stop the car right now!” I yell. “Or slow down, at least. We need to go back to my house.”

“I don’t take orders from you. Or from anyone, actually. Besides, it’s not safe.”

I blink at him. “What do you mean it’s not safe? It was safe enough for you to go there and raid my closet.”

His square jaw clenches, muscles working in his neck, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Do those guys know where I live? Am I in danger there?”

“They probably know everything about you by now,” he says with a shrug. “They want to get to me. Now that they’ve seen us together, they’ll want to get to you, too.”

“But... but I didn’t do anything,” I stammer lamely. “Just tell them I don’t have anything to do with this. Tell them I’m normal.”

“Oh, okay. Sure.” Dima pretends to reach into his pocket and pull out an imaginary cell phone, which he holds to his ear. “Fyodor, Zotov, hello! Big misunderstanding. I know you want to kill me and anyone who gets in your way, but there has been a miscommunication. Arya is ‘normal,’ so—”

I slap his fake phone right out of his asshole hand. “For fuck’s sake, you’re a dick. I just gave birth, okay? None of this makes sense. You told me you’d explain in the car, so...”

“So what?”

“So start explaining!”

He twists his neck one way and then the other, cracking it, and takes a deep breath. “Those motherfuckers are after me, and—”

“Go to my house first,” I say, interrupting him.

“For fuck’s sake, are you stupid? *No*. It’s not safe.”

I point to Lukas in my arms. Miraculously, he’s still asleep. “Neither is driving around with a newborn in a car without a car seat.”

Dima looks over at him and his gray eyes seem to darken. Then he pulls over without another word. I’m confused until he gets out and opens the back door. When I twist around to see what on earth he’s doing back there, I notice that the car seat has been installed behind us.

I gape at him. “How the hell did this get here?”

“It was in your apartment. I grabbed it before I came back.”

I don’t know what to say to that. It’s so tender, so sweet—and so wildly out of character, even for what little I know about this guy. I feel like I’m seeing a dog walk on its hind legs.

But when he reaches for Lukas, I hesitate.

Sure, he did one nice thing by installing the car seat. But lest we forget, he did that right before coming to the hospital to save me from armed thugs that were after him in the first place.

He’s no Good Samaritan. No guardian angel. He’s a piece of shit and a mobster.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

That all being said, I’m also in extreme pain. The idea of climbing into the backseat to buckle him in is enough to make me want to cry. So after a few seconds after flip-flopping back and forth in my head, I pass my precious baby to him.

“Why did you come back?” I ask softly.

Dima nestles Lukas into the seat. I get the impression he’s trying not to look directly at him. Like he’s afraid to make eye contact.

“I found your diary,” he murmurs. “The entry about you being pregnant. I don’t know of many other veterinarians who have sex with a stranger at

work, so I figured you must be the woman from that night.”

My face flushes.

We’ve had sex. He literally delivered my baby.

And yet somehow, him reading my diary feels far more intimate.

If I remember right, I put a fair amount of detail into that entry. And I *do* remember it right because I’ve gone back and read it several times since then. Whenever the details began to grow a little fuzzy.

“How did you find me?” I ask. “I wasn’t even at home. I was on the side of the road. Were you following me?”

“You think I’m so desperate for some pussy I’d have to follow you around for nine months?”

I scowl. “Just how every woman loves being referred to—‘some pussy.’”

Dima just laughs humorlessly. “No, *krasavitsa*, I didn’t follow you. I didn’t even know who you were until I went back to your house.”

I hear what he’s saying, but I can’t believe it. The coincidence is too unreal. “You mean to tell me it was a complete and total accident that you showed up to help me give birth?”

He nods and snaps the straps together around Lukas’s little chest. “Believe me: I wouldn’t have willingly shown up had I known what I’d have to do. I planned to steal your car, actually. But I thought I should help you out first.”

“And then you stole my car anyway,” I point out. “And broke into my house to boot.”

He shrugs, completely unapologetic. “I found your address on your ID and used your keys to get inside. I figured I’d stay there for the night and head out in the morning. Then I saw pictures of you on the wall and read your diary entry. And... I remembered you.”

The story sort of makes sense, but only in the most technical sense.

“Or,” I offer up as an alternative, “you figured out my name and address because you knew where I worked, you found out I was pregnant, and you

stalked me.”

“You think very highly of yourself,” he drawls. He drops back into the driver’s seat and takes off towards the on-ramp to the highway.

“No. I have to be right. Because your version is too wild to be true. It makes way more sense that I gave you mind-blowing sex, and now you want to keep me as your sex slave.” I say it as a joke to try and dispel some of my own tension. But the thought takes root in my brain and my heart starts to race.

Dima doesn’t laugh. “Your words, not mine.” His eyes are locked on the road ahead, grim and distant.

My face flushes and I slap his arm again. “You shouldn’t invade people’s privacy. Or break into their houses. Or break into their places of business!” I shout, frustration and fear bubbling over. “This is all your fault! You did this to me!”

“If you’re talking about being on the run right now, then yeah, probably. When it comes to him,” he says, hitching his thumb over his shoulder to point at Lukas, “that was a team effort.”

“You blocked the door!”

“I would have let you out if you wanted to leave.”

Touch me, I’d whimpered to him that night. *Make me come*. My cheeks burn even hotter at the memory.

“Instead,” Dima continues, “you practically begged me to—”

“Enough! That’s enough. We don’t need to rehash the past. We just need to sort out the future. Where are we going?”

Dima shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t have a plan?”

“I had one, but that was before I knew I’d been traced to your house. Now, I have to scrap those plans and make it up as I go.”

“Yeah, well, that doesn’t work for me.” I cross my arms over my chest.

I always imagined going on the run to be a fun kind of Bonnie-and-Clyde-style adventure. Wind in my hair, open road ahead, the law and my enemies fading behind me in the distance as I cackle and throw cash into the air.

This is... not that.

This is a fucking shitshow, to say the least.

I'm also extremely conscious of the fact that I'm still in a hospital gown and a pair of mesh panties with a melted ice pack between my legs. Not exactly an action-movie-heroine outfit.

"I have a baby," I remind him. "A baby who needs diaper changes and a feeding schedule. Plus, I need pain medication. I can't make any of that happen 'as we go.' I need a plan."

His hands tighten on the steering wheel, his knuckles going white.

"If you don't want to deal with it," I continue, "then let us leave. I'd be happy to take care of myself."

"Believe me, I'd be happy to get rid of you. But I can't. I can't trust you."

I turn and gape at him in utter disbelief. "Are you fucking serious? *You* can't trust *me*? You're the one who held a gun on me. You're the one who led thugs to my doorstep. I should be the one not trusting you!"

"If Fyodor and his men find you, how do I know you won't tell them where I'm going?"

"Because *you* don't even know where you're going," I argue. "How can I know something you don't even know yet?"

His eyes narrow. "There's still a lot of information you can share that would help them. Besides, Lukas is my son. I have to keep him safe, whether you like it or not."

I take a deep breath, trying to stay calm. "Asshole" is beginning to look like an extremely insufficient word for this colossal prick. The possessive tone in his voice has my hackles rising automatically.

But I can already tell what kind of man he is. Brusque. Demanding. Dominant.

Pushing back will only make him dig his heels in harder. Normally, I wouldn't care, but I'm in no fit state to fight against him. I have to try a different approach.

“Fine. You want to be a father all of the sudden? Then get your baby some diapers and pull over so I can nurse him. Also, find me some hydrocodone. Or I'm gonna turn into an even bigger bitch than what you've already seen.”

ARYA

While I nurse Lukas in the backseat, Dima goes into a convenience store to get me some “real clothes.”

“You’re joking,” I say when he re-emerges and shows me what he bought.

“Would you prefer to stay in what you have right now?”

I look down at my current attire. My sweat has soaked through the crotch of the shapeless green hospital gown and the mesh panties are really starting to chafe at my thighs.

On the other hand, the sweatpants in Dima’s hand have the words “Big Apple” written across the butt in a glittery pink cursive.

I hesitate to call that “real clothes.” But it’s all I’ve got right now.

“Fine,” I growl, snatching them out of his hand. “Face over that way. I don’t want you watching me change.”

He shrugs and strolls over to the side of the road to scrutinize oncoming traffic. I duck back in the car and shimmy into the sweatpants and the Jersey Shore tank top he bought to go with it.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I’m finally rid of the hospital gown. This outfit isn’t exactly runway ready. But it’ll do.

I crack open the door and call out over the noise of the highway, “Coast is clear.”

Dima trudges back, hands in his pockets. I study him as he walks over. He's deep in thought. Brow furrowed, eyes stormy and distant. The beard he wore the night we met has been trimmed to close-cropped stubble. It's effortlessly attractive.

The man is a study in contradictions. High, graceful cheekbones like a haute couture model, but a brutally sharp jaw always clenched hard and twitching with angry muscle.

Huge hands that look like they could break me without even trying. But they're lithe and gentle, too.

He's beautiful and violent in equal measure.

He catches me giving him the thirsty up-and-down look and arches a brow. But he says nothing.

I swallow and hurriedly turn away to pretend I'm fussing with something on Lukas's seatbelt.

"Here. Take this." I turn back to see he's handing me another piece of clothing.

It's the sweatshirt he stole from my closet. I also can't help but notice that he is now shirtless.

His body is somehow even more jaw-dropping than I would've expected. Broad, muscular shoulders swoop down to abs like hardened boulders.

His skin is tanned, smooth, and rippling with inky tattoos. I see symbols and shapes I don't understand, along with Russian characters I can't decipher.

Beautiful and violent, indeed.

There's a tense silence in the car as he shrugs into the t-shirt he bought for himself.

Although the tension dissipates like a whoopy cushion fart as soon as I see the shirt. I burst out laughing as I read it out loud.

"I Heart NY"?

Dima growls, "... Shut the fuck up."

I keep chuckling as he puts the car into drive and pulls us out. At least we both look a little ridiculous. And at least I have my sweatshirt back. It smells like him, though—the cedarwood and gunsmoke smell I remember from that night almost a year ago.

And once again, that tense silence descends on the car. I feel like my skin is tightening on my face. Everything about him reminds me of how I begged him to make me come the night we met.

Those fingers—graceful, tapered, brutally effective—resting lightly on the steering wheel.

The swell of his thighs beneath his jeans.

The tendril of tattoo peeking out from beneath the collar of his shirt.

I shudder and busy myself with looking through the bag at the other items he purchased. We're now equipped with diapers, wipes, baby powder, a pack of water, two boxes of granola bars, and a gas can to cut down on how often we have to stop for fuel.

“That’s it?” I ask in alarm.

“What’s it?”

“I can’t eat a granola bar for dinner. I need real food.”

“We don’t have time for real food,” he snaps. He’s sitting in the front seat with his eyes facing fiercely forward. He also tilted the rearview mirror up so he doesn’t see me nursing in the backseat.

What a gentleman. As if he hadn’t seen enough of me already.

“My body is making milk for another human. It cannot do that with a hundred and fifty calories of oats and chocolate. If you want your son to eat, you have to feed me.”

I don’t mean to sound whiny. I’m just tired and sore and, in case he’s forgotten, recently shoved a human being out from between my legs.

Not that I care what he thinks.

“Who says I care about what either of you eat?” he asks as he drives across the convenience store lot to park in front of a rundown diner next door. “You act like you’re solving world hunger back there.”

I roll my eyes. “When your nipples start dispensing milk, let me know.”



A Diner Outside Of New York City

Amongst the other patrons of the diner, our new clothes fit right in. Everyone I can see is wearing flannel and trucker hats or a matching sweatsuit. New York Fashion Week, this is not.

The hostess sits us at a booth near the back next to an elderly couple sharing a piece of pecan pie. I immediately order chicken fried steak with mashed potatoes, gravy, and corn. My mouth is salivating at the mere thought.

While we wait for our food to arrive, I scrutinize him. He doesn't bother returning my gaze. "So you're a Romanoff," I say. "*The Romanoff.*"

"Mhmm."

"That makes you one of the most powerful men in New York City."

He nods. "Sure."

I sigh. "Okay, Monosyllable Man. I'm trying to figure out why the most powerful man in NYC would be on the run from a few thugs. Shouldn't you squash those guys in a second?"

Dima stretches an arm behind his back. His muscles strain against the thin material of his new shirt.

Not that I'm noticing. Not that I'm daydreaming about running my hands down his chest again. About feeling his butt flex as he thrusts...

I clear my throat and shake my head, wiping the image from my mind.

He's just as built as I remember, and now that I can clearly see his face, he's even more handsome. His jaw is square, softened by a light layer of stubble. He has full lips, gray blue eyes, and dark hair he keeps pushed back from his face.

Aside from a few pale scars across his cheek, his neck, and all over his forearms, I'd think he was a model rather than a career criminal.

“Those ‘guys’ work for me,” he says, folding his hands around a coffee cup in front of him. “Well, they did. But they won’t be working for anyone when I’m done with them.”

Lukas is awake now, his slate blue eyes wide and searching, not fixating on anything. I wonder if he’ll have his father’s eyes when he gets older.

“Why are they chasing you?”

“I passed on a... business opportunity they thought I should take. They didn’t like that, so they wanted a change in leadership. It’s a small faction, but I was unprepared, so I have to leave the city temporarily and regroup.”

I answer hollowly, “*Boys stay and fight when they don’t have a chance. Men know that you can’t fight a war if you’re dead.*”

Dima’s eyes pinch together, confused. “Huh?”

“That’s what you said to me that night.” It doesn’t need any more explanation than that. “Speaking of which, where are we sleeping tonight? I’ll need a bassinet for Lukas. And pajamas. He doesn’t have any clothes or—”

“Your hospital bag is in the trunk,” Dima says, cutting me off. “It has some of his clothes in it.”

My eyes widen. And then, for no reason I can really determine, I start to laugh.

I tip my head back and cackle so loudly I have to place a hand over my mouth. Tears form in the corners of my eyes, and before I know it, I’m laughing so hard my whole body is starting to throb painfully.

I try to swallow back the hysteria. But the harder I try to keep it at bay, the more it wants to come up. I laugh and laugh and laugh. People start to look over at us warily.

Dima leans across the table. “Are you okay?”

I shake my head and snort through the giggles. “Not even a little bit.”

When I’m finally able to calm down, I take a drink and wipe away the tears rolling down my cheeks.

“I can’t believe you delivered my baby. You just wandered in out of nowhere and pulled a baby out of me. You, of all people, in all places, at all times. *YOU.*”

“It wasn’t high on my bucket list, in case you were wondering.”

I shake my head again. “Jesus, what a weird fucking day.”

The elderly woman who smiled at Lukas as we passed earlier snaps her attention over to me, her top lip pulled back in disgust. I don’t think she approves of my colorful word choice. She may be old, but her hearing is apparently pristine.

“You know, I don’t think that woman approves of my mothering skills. I should probably rein in the cursing.”

Dima shrugs. “My father did far worse than curse in front of me. I turned out fine.”

Again, I dissolve into a fit of riotous, uncontrollable laughing. This time, Dima joins in.

Stress release—that’s what it is. After a day like we’ve both had, the emotion has to come out one way or another. I’ll take a laugh attack over violent sobs. It was back-and-forth between those two options for a while. Still is, really.

“I turned out okay, anyway,” he amends. “The guys after me are mad because I won’t join in with the Albanians and their human trafficking ring. So that makes me better than the Albanians, at least.”

My laughter dies rather quickly.

And I remember just what kind of man I’m with.

ARYA

A MOTEL SOMEWHERE OUTSIDE OF NEW YORK CITY

“You don’t have as many questions as I thought you would.”

Dima rolls in the bassinet provided by the motel and leaves it next to the bed. It’s an ancient wooden thing, covered in years of unwashed grime, with a mattress that is more yellow than white.

“I am not putting my baby in that,” I say, holding Lukas closer to my chest. “It’s horrific.”

“It’s all they have. I threatened the man at the front desk to go buy a new one, but he said the only store around here won’t open until the morning.”

I sigh. “It’s fine. I’ll hold him.”

“I’ll do it. You need to rest.” He kicks the bassinet away and reaches out for Lukas.

Before he can, I turn around and begin changing Lukas’s diaper. It’s not wet yet, but I need something to do with my hands. Also, I’m not ready to hand over my baby.

Dima sits down on the end of the single queen-sized bed. The springs squeal under his weight.

“You’re handling this too well,” he remarks. “You should be freaking the fuck out.”

“How do you know I’m not?”

“You should be freaking out more,” he amends. “Most women would be terrified. Of me. Of the situation. They’d be trembling in a pile in the corner, crying to make calls to family or the police. But you... You’re not.”

I tape the diaper closed again and tuck Lukas’s legs back into his onesie. “I’m good under pressure.”

That’s true. But it’s sure as hell not the whole story.

“And that night at the clinic, you weren’t scared of the gun.”

“Maybe you’re just not as scary as you think you are.”

“You also asked about the Albanians.”

I keep fussing with the buttons on Lukas’s onesie, opening and closing them. I need something to do with my trembling hands and I don’t want Dima to see the rising color in my cheeks.

“There are stories about mob business all over the news. I just assumed. You all aren’t exactly discreet, as evidenced by the shootout you had at the hospital this afternoon.”

I stand up and lay Lukas over my shoulder, patting his back gently. It’s soothing for him and for me. A way to work out my nervous energy.

“You don’t have anyone you want to call?” he rumbles. “Any family?”

“It would only put them at risk, right? That’s what you said. If they know where we are, Fyodor and the other two guys might try to get information out of them.”

Dima stands up and spins around, pointing at me. “That’s what I’m talking about. That’s not a normal response.”

I throw up a hand, frustrated. “I don’t know what you want me to say. I guess I’m not normal.”

He just watches me. Even when I turn around to pace back the other direction, I can feel his eyes on me.

He’s studying me. Trying to find my secrets.

But only I know how deep they're buried.

He doesn't stand a chance.

Lukas is comforted for a few minutes by the pacing and patting, but soon he starts to squirm and suck at my shirt. It's easy enough to tell what he wants. I sit on the bed and yank my sweatshirt up over my shoulder.

Dima is still watching me, eyes fixed like he can't pull them away, as I push my bra aside and let my breast fall out.

Breastfeeding is a natural thing. A loving, nurturing act between a mother and a child. Of course, that doesn't stop men from turning into drooling cavemen at the sight of a nipple.

"You can take a picture if you'd like," I snap, eyebrow raised in challenge. "It'll last longer."

Dima smirks, but still doesn't look away. "I have enough mental images for a lifetime."

My stomach tightens at the memory. *The* memory. The one that has been bringing me to climax over and over again over the last few months.

Even as my belly swelled with the product of the encounter, I couldn't make myself stop wanting more of it. Wanting more of *him*.

"Good. Because there won't be a repeat encounter," I say sternly, hoping the message comes through clearly—for him and, more importantly, for myself.

"After what I saw this afternoon, believe me, I'm in no rush to try anything."

I grab the pillow next to me and throw it at the back of his head. He laughs and sets it in his lap.

I wonder if the move is strategic. If maybe his body is responding to the memories as well and he doesn't want me to see.

Lukas drifts off as he eats. I eventually pull my sweatshirt back down and cradle him against my chest. Dima has been flipping through the TV Guide magazine on the table, but when I move, he turns and then walks across the room.

He sits next to me on the bed, his eyes on Lukas. “You can call someone if you want,” he says quietly. “If there’s someone you want to tell about—”

“There’s no one to tell.”

He waits to see if I’ll elaborate. I don’t want to, but I have a feeling he’ll annoy me until I do.

With a sigh, I add, “My parents are dead, I don’t have any siblings, and I spend all my free time working at the clinic. I’ve been so busy there, I haven’t had time to get much of a life.”

“Until I showed up and gave you one.”

I wrinkle my nose. “That’s one disturbing way to put it, yes.”

He chuckles morbidly. Then we fall into a heavy silence again.

I can hear Lukas’s little breaths against my chest. As I do, I feel the strange urge to thank Dima.

Not for bringing mobsters to my hospital room. Or getting me shot at. Or shoving me in the car and taking me on a road trip to who the fuck knows where.

But for Lukas. For this one little piece of perfect in the world.

For giving me a family.

I don’t say anything, though. I wouldn’t know how to phrase this emotion if I tried.

So I swallow the words down and find some others instead. “When will it be safe to go back?”

Dima grimaces. “I have someone working on intel for me back in the city. Once he contacts me, I’ll formulate a plan and take down the mutinous faction in my Bratva. After that, you’ll be under my protection. No one will hurt you.”

“Until you’re under attack again.”

“That won’t happen.”

I snort. “It’s happened at least twice that I’m aware of. Both times put me in direct danger.”

“Outliers.”

“Now, it will put Lukas in danger, too.”

“You can’t keep me out of his life,” he snarls. “He’s safer with me in it.”

“I don’t see a shred of evidence for that yet,” I say. I’m trying hard to keep my voice steady, rational, even though all I want to do is crawl under the covers and cry.

He cracks the knuckles in his fingers with his thumbs. “And you don’t think being raised by a single mom in the city is dangerous? You think you’ll be able to protect him from everything?”

“Of course not, but—”

“But you’d rather raise him poor and by yourself than with help from a man like me.”

“Hey!” I raise my voice enough that Lukas jolts. “I didn’t ask for this, okay? I had no way to contact you. No way to know who you were. I had to plan for a life of raising him on my own, of depending on no one but me. Of keeping him safe. Just because you’ve shown up, guns blazing and tires squealing, doesn’t mean my plans have changed. I don’t know you and I sure as hell don’t trust you. Certainly not enough to count on you as a part of my son’s life.”

Dima has stopped pacing and is watching me. I can’t tell if he’s angry. His expression is neutral, cool. If he is angry, it’s a kind of deep simmering rage that takes a while to rise to the surface. I’m worried of what it could mean for me and Lukas if it ever does.

Finally, he tightens his fists. “What you want doesn’t matter. He’s my son, too.”

“Biologically.”

“And in every other way,” he snaps. “Romanoffs look out for our kin. As soon as I knew he belonged to me, I came back for him. And for you.

Whether you trust me or not, I'm going to fix this shit. And then I'm going to provide for my son."

"Yeah, well, we'll see about that."

Dima grabs his gun from the table and marches towards the motel door. "Yes, *krasativsa*. We will."

ARYA

AN HOUR LATER

I don't know how to grasp what is happening, but taking care of Lukas gives me solace. It gives me purpose and structure that I desperately need right now.

I fold up an extra sheet from the closet and make him a little pallet on the floor. It will be safer than letting him sleep on the soft mattress and more comfortable than having him sleep on my chest all night.

Once he's fed, changed, and asleep, I go to the bathroom and look after myself.

I'm a mess. I can officially say that delivering a baby isn't exactly a beauty regimen for the stars.

I do the best I can with the limited supplies at my disposal. Then I slink back into the motel room with my hair pulled up in a bun just as the door opens and Dima walks in. His arms are full of bags and he drops them on the floor in front of the door.

"I thought the store was closed."

He shrugs. "I convinced the security guard otherwise."

Dima brought a portable bassinet, more baby clothes, more clothes for me—just sweatpants and t-shirts, but still miles better than what I've got on—and a bundle of toothpaste, toothbrushes, deodorant, and razors.

I pop the lid on the deodorant and take a deep breath. "You're an angel."

In response, he reaches into his back pocket and holds out a small orange canister. It's a pill bottle, but the pharmacy label has been ripped off.

My eyes widen as I reach for it. "What's this?"

"Hydrocodone."

I don't want to know where or how he got this or who he had to hurt along the way. I'm just so relieved to have some relief that I could cry.

"Thank you."

He gives me a terse nod and drops down in the recliner next to the bed. "I told you I'd provide for you."

I'm so grateful I don't want to argue, but I can't help it. I shake my head. "You said you'd provide for your *son*."

"You're his mother," Dima says quietly, almost more to himself than to me. "What's the difference?"

I swallow a single pill and then set up the bassinet for Lukas. He doesn't stir at all when I pick him up from the floor.

The sight of him in an actual bed brings tears to my eyes. It's a small bit of normalcy in a fucking insane day.

I'm exhausted. As soon as Lukas is settled, I lay back on the bed and close my eyes. I fall asleep immediately.



I don't wake until I hear Lukas whimpering a couple hours later.

He's in his bassinet, lips puckered, searching for food. For me. I pluck him up and settle him in my arms to feed.

Once he's eating, I look around. "What the..."

I don't see Dima. Did he leave us? Just like he left me at the clinic? Disappeared without a trace, without a word...

I'm starting to panic again at the thought of being stranded out in the middle of nowhere with no car, no phone, no nothing—

When I see him through the darkness.

He's sleeping in the recliner, which he's pushed against the back of the door.

He put himself directly in the doorway. To keep us safe. To provide for us.

I meant what I said earlier: I don't trust Dima Romanoff. I know almost nothing about him, and what I do know is dangerous and terrifying.

But it's clear that he's a man of his word. He's a man with a code.

If he says he'll take care of me and Lukas, I believe he will.

Even if it costs him his life.

DIMA

THE NEXT MORNING

I don't trust Arya.

She's made it clear she doesn't trust me, either, but I can understand that. I'm don of the Romanoff Bratva. She's just a fucking veterinarian.

I should be able to trust her, but I can't shake an unsettling feeling. She's far too comfortable with everything that has happened in the last twenty-four hours. She's handling it better than many of my own men would.

The delivery.

Being interrogated in the hospital room.

Getting shot at.

And now, her first full day as a mother is being spent in a shitty motel with a man she barely knows, and she's... relaxed?

Not happy, obviously. But calm. Eerily calm.

If I wasn't positive that our two meetings had been pure coincidences, I'd think she was some kind of operative or outside spy. Pretty damn sure she didn't plan to have her baby on the one road in Brooklyn that I happened to be creeping down, though.

As it is, I only know she's a potential vulnerability. One that I can't let out of my sight.

Last night, I pushed the recliner in front of the motel room door. I'm still not sure if I was doing it to keep other people out—or to keep Arya in. Maybe both.

“What do you mean, you ‘have to go’?” Arya asks, bouncing Lukas on her knee as she tries to burp him. “Go where? Are you leaving me here?”

“Only for an hour. I have to speak with someone.”

“Someone *here*? You know people in this podunk shitsville?”

We're a few hours outside the city, stopped in some microscopic, drive-by town. It wouldn't take much time here to know everyone by name, I'm sure. But I don't know a soul. That's why I chose this place.

“Someone I know is coming to me.”

Her green eyes flare wide. “Isn't that a risk? I thought we didn't want anyone to know where we are.”

“I can trust him.”

“What am I supposed to do while you're gone? Twiddle my thumbs?”

I shrug. “If that's what does it for you.”

“I want to come!”

“Absolutely not.” I shrug into a fleece jacket I picked up at the store last night and rip the tag from the sleeve. “Out of the question.”

Arya huffs. “Why?”

“Number one, because you can't walk across the room without limping. Have you taken your pain meds yet?”

She checks the clock next to the bed. “Thirty more minutes before my next dose.”

I smirk. “How perfectly obedient you are.”

“You and I both know what this shit can do to people who abuse it.”

The look on her face is serious and steeped in sadness. Part of me wants to know this woman's life story. I want to understand how she can feel so at ease talking to—and challenging—a man like me.

But there isn't time for that.

“The answer is no. Stay here. Don't leave.”

“Wait, I—”

“Stay the fuck here,” I growl over her. “Don't fucking leave. Don't make me fucking repeat myself again.”

“You really need to work on expanding your vocabulary,” she retorts.

“You need to work on your listening skills.”

“Screw you. You can't keep me here.”

“For fuck's sake, woman!” I clench my fists tight. “You wanna run? Fine. Go ahead. I'll hold the door open for you. But I doubt it will take long for me to catch up to you and a newborn hobbling down the highway. Especially since I'll have your car.”

We stand there glowering at each other for a long moment.

But she knows I'm right. More to the point, she knows I won't back down.

In the end, she sighs melodramatically like she's choosing to stay here of her own free will. Fine by me—whatever helps her sleep at night.

Satisfied, I turn to leave.

Just for good measure, though, I stick the security system I bought at the store last night to the outside of the door frame.

If the door opens for any reason, an alert will be sent to the 90s-style pager on my hip, and I'll be able to storm back here to show her what happens when you disobey the don.



Gennady and I meet at the same diner I ate at yesterday.

The morning crowd leans older than last night's. The counter stools are filled from end to end with old men drinking coffee and eating donuts. They yak about the football team, the corrupt politicians, the weather, and when those topics run dry, they compare their aches and pains.

Needless to say, Gennady and I stand out a bit.

I don't like it. Gennady, on the other hand, looks like he's on a fun little field trip.

He waves the waitress over for another coffee refill. "Thanks, hon," he tells her, drawing a beaming smile from her. To me, he tuts, "Stop pouting. You look like Eeyore."

"We should've stayed in the car." I'm scanning the diner again and again, one hand clenching my butter knife in case anyone gets any ideas. Relaxing gets a man like me killed.

"*Sobrat*," Gennady sighs again, "chill. You think Hillbilly Bob over there runs a secret mafia you don't know about? Everything will be fine. I wasn't followed."

"If the person tracking you was good at their job, you'd never know if you were followed," I fire back. "We aren't in a position to take chances. Not anymore."

Gennady winks at the young waitress, who nearly swoons on her way back to the kitchen. "That's right. You're a papa now. A new chapter for Dima Romanoff."

"Christ, don't call me that. I didn't exactly have a choice."

"Well, strictly speaking, you did have a choice, but I get it. Based on what you told me, I would have made the same one. The she-devil vet..."

Gennady's gaze goes hazy as he no doubt recalls all of the details I shared with him months ago. Back when Arya was just a random, nameless fuck. Way before I knew anything concrete about her.

"Stop thinking about it," I snap. "Even for you, there's a line."

Gennady holds up his hands in surrender. “Mea culpa.”

“We’re here to talk about a plan, so talk. Tell me what you know.”

“Do you want the bad news or the good news first?”

“Good.”

“Well, I found out Zotov has money flowing in from the outside.”

I frown. “That’s not good news.”

“It’s new information. Which is good news. It means we’re one step closer to finding out how to put down this uprising.”

“Pretty shitty good news. What’s the bad?”

“We still don’t know how to put down this uprising.”

It takes everything in me not to reach across the table and throttle him. If I didn’t want to avoid a spectacle, I would. Gennady is cackling.

“Why the fuck did you come here if you don’t have anything to tell me?” I hiss.

Gennady runs a hand over his chin and sighs. “I came because I knew if I just called you instead of coming in person, you’d sprint back to the city. You’d be pissed and impatient, and you’d rush back and get yourself killed.”

“Bullshit. I’d never be that reckless.”

“Not anymore,” Gennady says mysteriously, echoing my own words back to me. He leans back in the booth with a knowing smile on his face. “The kid has changed the math for you, though, hasn’t he? And the woman.”

I want to roar in his face that he doesn’t know a fucking thing that’s happening in my head. But I can’t.

Because he’s right.

Before yesterday, I would have come roaring back into the city and tried to brute force my way through this hiccup. I would have killed as many people as it took. Might’ve gotten myself killed in the process.

Now, the risk calculus has changed. Those kinds of brash actions don't seem worth it.

Measure twice, cut once, my father always told me. I always disregarded that kind of patient advice.

As of yesterday, I'm finally starting to see the wisdom in it.

When I look up, Gennady is shaking his head. "For a guy who never wanted to have kids, you sure have taken to it easily."

I know what Gennady means, but I'm not sure if he knows what he's saying. He doesn't have a kid. Shit, I barely have one. A single day of fatherhood under my belt hasn't exactly filled me with wisdom.

But it's filled me with something.

I don't have time for that shit, though. I have a Bratva to run. An enemy to fucking mutilate.

I'm going to get Arya and Lukas somewhere safe, far away from all this chaos.

Then I'm coming back to New York to finish what Zotov started.

The waitress is moving towards our table with our food, including a to-go box of breakfast burritos for Arya. I excuse myself to take a piss.

I hear people chattering as I step to the urinal. Slow-paced conversations that meander here and there and nowhere in particular. Makes me fucking uneasy.

People don't talk like this in the city I come from. I'm Russian by blood, but I was born in New York. Shaped in New York. Until yesterday, I fucking ran New York.

I'll be back where I belong soon enough.

And Zotov Stepanov will become nothing more than a bloodstain beneath my feet.

I finish my business in a hurry. On my way back to the table, I glance out the large front windows towards the parking lot to make sure Arya's piece of shit car is still there. It is.

But so is another car. A black SUV.

In the city, it wouldn't be anything. But here in the middle of nowhere, it's far too nice to blend in.

I freeze and watch. The door opens and the driver steps out. A white guy, tall and skinny like a scarecrow, with braids in his hair and a chain around his neck.

He doesn't blend in, either.

I've seen enough. Time to leave.

I hustle back to the table where Gennady is diving face first into a plate of waffles.

"*Smotri,*" I hiss in Russian, slouching low across from him. *Look.* When he glances up, I jerk my head towards the window.

"Shit. Who are they?"

"I don't know, but I don't think they're here for the coffee." I grab my gun from my holster and check the clip to make sure it's ready. "They're here for blood."

DIMA

“You sure you weren’t followed?” I ask as I survey the building and start mapping out angles and avenues of attack.

Gennady shakes his head fiercely. “No. Goddammit, no. I took a subway and two taxis to the car rental place on the other side of town. I left my phone at home and used a burner. There’s no way Zotov tracked me. No fucking way.”

“Well, someone did.”

Two more men have climbed out of the car now. The one on the passenger side is tall and thin with gaunt cheeks and hollowed-out collarbones. He looks like he’s wasting away. His clothes are tight enough that I can see the bulge of the gun on his hip.

The guy in the back, by contrast, is huge. Almost as big as me. A man and a half in every direction.

“*Blyat*, that guy is a fucking mountain,” Gennady whispers in awe.

The man in question stands almost a head taller than the SUV and he’s nearly as wide as it, too. He’s so large his entire body sways as he walks, like he can’t get out of his own way.

He’ll be slow, no doubt about that. But he will make it hurt if he catches you.

I don’t plan on letting that happen.

“Do we run?” Gennady asks.

I hate that word. “Retreat” is what my father always said. *A real man knows when to retreat.* So far, I’ve retreated when the time called for it.

I’m sick of that shit, though. It’s time to fight.

“We have to send a message,” I say. “To Zotov or whoever else he’s working with. If we run, they’ll just keep coming.”

“They’ll keep coming anyway.”

“Sure,” I admit. “But when they do, at least they’ll be scared shitless.”

Gennady smiles. “It’s been a while,” he comments as he starts prepping his own weapon.

“That it has.”

“Do you remember the first time we did this kind of shit?”

I laugh bitterly as I keep an eye on the men sauntering up to the diner steps. “I’ll never forget it.”

The first time Gennady and I ever fought together, we were still in our teens. My father had sent us out to shake down a few dealers who hadn’t delivered their payments after the re-up.

It should have been an easy job. And at first, it was. But the pathetic dealers coughed up what they owed too quickly and too easily. It left Gennady and me unsatisfied.

We wanted something bigger. Something more.

So we rolled out, all testosterone and bravado, looking for trouble. I ended up hitting on a girl who was standing nearby. Long legs sticking out of a tiny skirt, an ass that wouldn’t quit, a daredevil gleam in her eye. I asked her if she wanted a taste of a real man and she didn’t refuse me. Even back then, I had a way with women.

What she failed to mention was that she was dating an enforcer for the Albanians and he was just around the corner. It didn’t take long to erupt into a full-on brawl. The kind that lesser men don’t walk away from.

Gennady and I had to fight our way through one Albanian after the next. We barely made it out. But it was the moment that forever forged our friendship.

We worked together like clockwork. He could anticipate my movements and vice versa. We synced up and we've never fallen out of sync since.

Which is why I don't have to tell Gennady to stand up and move towards the counter so he can get a better view of the door without looking suspicious. He just does it.

The waitress ambles over, ready to flirt with him again, but Gennady is distracted.

"Can I help you, honey?" she asks. When he doesn't answer, she frowns. "Darling?"

He still doesn't answer. We're both watching as the mountainous man walks up to the diner door and yanks it open with one huge hand.

Gennady fixes her with a harsh glare. "Walk into the back and duck down. Hide in the walk-in freezer. Don't come out until the shooting stops."

She jerks back, eyes wide. "Are you crazy? What does that—?"

Before she can finish the question, the driver of the car walks into the diner, takes off his sunglasses, and scans the room.

When his eyes land on me, he flashes a nasty grin and pulls out his gun.

"Get down!" I bellow.

I raise my own weapon and squeeze off a few bullets into the ceiling.

No one in this room deserves to be shot, so I want to give them as much time as possible to get out of here.

But they'll have to move fast.

"Run!" Gennady yells, knocking an old man's steak and eggs off the counter as he slides over the greasy surface and drops down on the serving side for cover.

A few patrons sprint out the side door. A few more dash into the kitchen where the waitress has disappeared. I hear screams peppering the air. Wails. Whimpers.

The attackers duck for cover behind a half-wall just beside the door. But as soon as they get the chance, they pop back over the top, guns aimed our direction.

“Gentlemen!” Gennady waves a white napkin from behind the counter. “Come on. Let’s sit down. Have some brunch. I can vouch for the pancakes.”

The attackers respond with a barrage of gunfire.

I answer in kind, piercing a hole in the half-wall. If it hit one of them, they don’t make so much as a peep.

“Things don’t have to be this way,” Gennady continues. “I assume you followed me here, so why don’t you at least do me the honor of telling me how you did it before you kill me?”

One of them calls out, “We didn’t follow you. We have better intel than that.” *Albanians*. I recognize the accent.

“Don’t be a tease. Tell us,” I yell right back.

I glance to my right. Gennady has crawled to the far end of the counter and pokes his head around the corner enough so that I can see him.

Me—back door, he mouths, pointing to himself. Then he points to me. *You—side door*.

The side door is only two tables behind me. Right next to where I parked Arya’s car. The problem is, it’s visible through a wall of windows. Glass doesn’t do too well against bullets, historically speaking.

I shake my head and hold up my gun. That route is a no-go.

Looks like we aren’t leaving here without spilling some blood.

Gennady grits his teeth and nods begrudgingly. We’re friends always, but I’m the one who calls the shots. In this case, literally.

“Your time is over, Dima,” the leader of the Albanian soldiers says. He’s speaking slowly, enunciating every word. “New leadership has dawned.”

I bark out a laugh, unable to help myself. “Zotov? Are you fucking serious? He’s green as hell. The Bratva will fall apart within the year.”

“Zotov is nothing.”

That makes me do a double-take. I snap my attention to Gennady. He shrugs. Last intelligence we heard said Zotov was leading the rebellion.

If he isn’t in charge...

Who the fuck is?

“Tell me who sent you.” I lean back against the vinyl seat of the booth, the table offering moderate protection.

Whoever these men are, they aren’t trained assassins. If they were, they’d be shooting right now. They’re low-ranking nobodies. Cannon fodder sent on a Hail Mary mission.

“If Zotov didn’t send you, who did?” I repeat.

The mountain man chuckles. “You think that young pup is the only one you’ve pissed off? You think you don’t have any enemies because you’re such a fucking saint? I’m afraid not, Romanoff. You aren’t better than anyone else just because you choose to sin in another way.”

I roll my eyes. “Jesus, enough with the fucking lectures. Are you here to shoot me or bore me to death?”

Gennady’s eyes widen, warning me. I respond by counting down on my fingers.

Three...

Two...

One...

Gennady leaps up, aims, and takes out the skinny man with a single shot. The son of a bitch was exposed, sticking out from behind the half wall. He

crumples to the ground like a pile of bones.

Fine by me. The world is better without his kind.

His two comrades are stunned for a moment. But the sound of my gunfire brings them back to the fight.

I blow two more holes through the half-wall before the mountain dives across the welcome mat and flips over a table to use as cover. I fire a few rounds into that, too. They thud uselessly into the wood.

Distantly, I hear screaming coming from the back of the kitchen. I hope the civilians are gone soon. Gennady is going to exit that way when the time is right. If our attackers survive to follow him, everyone back there could be caught in the crossfire.

“Fucking pussies!” Gennady snarls like a war cry, jumping up on the counter and approaching the two guys.

He’s right. That’s exactly what they are. They make me fucking sick.

I had the feeling they were the worst losers the Albanians had to offer, but now I’m positive that’s the case. They don’t know what they’re doing. In fact, I’m not even certain they planned to kill me. Based on how hesitant they are to fire back, it seems to me they were planning to surprise me and lead me out of here at gunpoint.

They didn’t expect me to be ready to fight. They expected a victim. An easy catch.

Dima Romanoff is neither of those things.

“*Begi ot syda*, Gennady!” I yell, backing towards the side door as I gesture for him to get down. “Go, go!”

Before he can, the mountain man stands up again, his gun trained right at my best friend. I don’t blink as I aim and pull the trigger.

Blood splatters across the window. So much of it that it looks fake. The mountain man stumbles. Totters. Coughs.

And finally, he falls to the ground. His bulk smashing into the floor makes the whole restaurant shake.

Coming to his senses once again, Gennady pivots and unloads a full clip at the last man standing, the leader who spoke up first. It's a full few seconds of semi-automatic hellfire.

Then a final Albanian body hits the tiled floor.

Three men came for us.

Three men died.

When Gennady is done, silence drops over the room. All I can hear is a clock on the wall.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Tock.

I let out a sigh. It's over—for now.

Gennady jumps down from the counter and curses again. "Fucking pussies."

"They had no clue what they were doing."

He nods in agreement and then looks at me, taking a deep breath. "Albanians."

"I know."

The leader claimed he wasn't sent by Zotov and that he had intelligence we didn't know about. But I can't help but think this all had something to do with that fucking usurper.

Maybe Zotov partnered with the Albanians already. Gennady didn't think they would join his ranks so soon after his mutiny and at first, I'd agreed. The Albanians are a well-established group in the city. They don't need to partner with an upstart new kid and his ragtag team of traitors. They would wait until

he was clearly established. Until he had something to offer them.

Unless, of course, he already *does* have something to offer them. Something I don't know about.

"I have to get to the motel. Arya is still there. She doesn't know—"

Gennady waves me away. "Go. I'm headed back to the city now."

"Keep your eyes open and call me when you figure out what in the fuck is going on."

"Roger that."

Briefly, we clasp hands and shake. Then we separate.

I hop inside Arya's car and fly down the road towards the motel, checking my rearview mirror every few seconds to be sure no one is following me.

If the Albanians didn't follow Gennady, then how did they know where I was?

Someone had to know. I can't fucking stand that I haven't figured out where the weak link lies.

Something's digging into my thigh. I reach into my pocket and fish it out. When I realize what is, my stomach drops.

It's the pager that's synced up to the alarm I left on the motel room door. And thirty minutes ago, it sent me an alert.

MOTION DETECTED.

Thirty minutes ago was before the gunmen even showed up at the diner.

Fuck.

Arya...

Lukas...

I smash the gas pedal to the floor, praying I'm not too late.

ARYA

THE MOTEL ROOM—ONE HOUR EARLIER

I sag back against the headboard.

There is nothing good on TV mid-morning. It's either local news, Westerns, or cheesy game shows. On the television, two cowboys are drawling on about how the town isn't big enough for the both of them.

Lukas cried for a few minutes right after Dima left. He refused to eat or be soothed, but eventually, I swaddled his arms to his sides. That seemed to settle him down. He fell right to sleep and he's been sleeping ever since.

If Dima comes storming back in here and wakes him up, I'll murder the man with my own two hands.

Dima. The name alone inspires such an infuriating mix of emotions that I don't even know where to start with processing them.

He's irritating as hell, first and foremost. He told me to stay put—like I'm some mangy stray dog. Obviously, that means my first instinct is to immediately leave. Even though I have no way to escape, no idea where I'd go, and a body that's just barely started to piece itself back together again, I just hate being told what to do.

Especially by an ass like him.

He's the reason I'm in this mess in the first place. If he hadn't burst into the vet clinic that night, I'd still be living alone, working eighty hours a week, and watching Netflix until my eyeballs bled.

It sounds bad when I say it like that. But it really wasn't. It was better than watching garbage in a shitty motel room in whatever the name of this bumfuck town is, at least.

Lukas coughs twice suddenly. His little body jolts from the sudden attack before he settles back down without ever opening his eyes.

Which brings me to the other half of the dilemma. That life that Dima stole from me—the Netflix life, the simple life, the work-until-I-can't-keep-my-eyes-open-anymore life?

It wasn't better than this.

It wasn't better than Lukas.

He's perfect. Sleeping or crying, feeding or burping—everything he does is the greatest thing anyone has ever done in the history of humanity and deserves to be announced on TV 24/7. Preferably instead of this terrible movie.

And I have Dima to thank for that.

So I can't hate him. Not entirely, at least. Maybe 99.9% hate—but there's always going to be a little sliver of gratitude. That in itself is every bit as irritating as the rest of him.

And don't even get me started on this mess of a situation he's dragged me into. I woke up yesterday ready for a regular day.

I ended it with bullet holes in my car and a mob-boss-in-exile in the driver's seat.

Who knows what comes next?

My mind flips back and forth every other minute on what to do. Who to trust. Whether I'm ever going to get out of this shit. But honestly, I'm so tired that I don't know if I can trust my own mind anymore.

Everything's fuzzy. Unclear. Uncertain.

So if I can't trust myself and I can't trust Dima, who *can* I trust? There's only one good answer to that.

I grab my cell phone from the bedside table and dial Brigitte's number.

"Hello?"

"Babe, hi."

She releases a heavy sigh. "Oh my God, Arya! Where the fuck are you? One minute, you're telling me you had a baby on the side of the road, the next there are reports on the news that you were whisked into an escape car with gunfire behind you? Like, what the fuck?"

"I'm fine," I murmur. Physically, it's true. In every other respect, however... I'm not sure.

"Okay, I call bullshit, but we'll circle back to that question. *Where* are you?"

"A motel on the side of the road. I'm fine, seriously. I just got tangled up with the wrong crowd and—"

"Guns!" Brigitte screeches, interrupting me. "The news said there were guns fired in a hospital. I would say that is the *worst* crowd. How did you manage to get involved in this from your hospital bed?"

In as few words as possible, I relay the entire story to her. She already knows about that night at the clinic and getting pregnant, so I fill her in on the fact that the mystery man who gave me Lukas is also the one who showed up to save me on the side of the road and deliver the baby.

"You're shitting me," she gasps when I'm done. "No way. That's like a movie. It can't be real."

"I know. I still barely believe it, but it happened. Somehow."

"Fate!"

I shake my head and then remember she can't see me. "No. No, it's something else. Is there a bad version of fate? Like, the opposite of fate?"

"Karma?"

I wince. "I don't like that, either. It makes it seem like I deserve this. Well, shit, maybe I do."

“Okay, I’m going to cut off this negative line of thinking before it can get started. You didn’t deserve any of this, Arya. Making a few mistakes in your past does not earn you this level of bad karma, okay? This is chaos. Pure chaos.”

“You’re right. But still, I have to figure this out. I have to get home. I have a baby.”

“Oh my God, I almost forgot about that! How is he?”

I glance over at my darling son in his bassinet. His face is wrinkled in a frown. My heart stops for a quick second when I realize that he looks just like his father when he broods like that.

I’m relieved when I touch his tiny hand and the frown eases away. As does the resemblance to Dima.

“Adorable and very calm, thankfully. The last thing this situation needs is an inconsolable baby. I’m already enough of one by myself.”

“I want to help. Where are you?”

I pick up the hotel brochure from the bedside table and read off the address.

“Hell yes, I was right! I’m like, ten minutes away, I think.”

I frown, not understanding. “What do you mean? How?”

“Okay, don’t be mad...”

“Brigitte...”

“I said don’t be mad!”

“No promises. Spit it out.”

“Ugh, fine.” She hesitates for a little longer before sighing and saying, “I may or may not have tracked your phone.”

Before I can even begin to process that, Brigitte launches into an explanation, talking so fast I can barely understand her.

“I know that’s a sensitive subject for you and a total invasion of privacy. But I didn’t know where you were and I was freaking out. My flight got in late last night and I couldn’t just go home and do nothing. I had to find you. I was able to pin you to this general area, but the service is so shitty that it couldn’t narrow it down any further.”

My instinct is to be angry. Brigitte knows how much being tracked bothers me, especially after everything I ran from in my old life.

But right now, I’m so relieved, I don’t care.

“Drive fast,” I say. “I need you.”



I hear tires on the gravel and throw the door open before Brigitte can even knock.

Seeing her in her standard Brigitte outfit—skinny and hot as hell, dressed head to toe in black, sporting bright red lipstick—feels like hugging a favorite stuffed animal. A comfort my body needs.

I throw my arms around her. “Oh my God, I can’t believe you’re here.”

Brigitte hugs me back and pushes me into the room, closing the door behind her. “I can’t believe *you’re* here. You should be at home with your baby.”

Speaking of Lukas, Brigitte lets go of me and rushes over to the bassinet where he’s sleeping.

“*Ohmygod*, Arya, he’s perfect. The actual cutest.” She sighs and then spins around, hands on her hips and a fierce glint of determination in her eye. “That’s it. I’m getting you out of here.”

“What do you mean? We’re being chased, I think.”

“You *think*?” Brigitte raises a blonde brow. “That is not a good enough reason to stay trapped in a motel room with a man you don’t know.”

“He’s the don of the Romanoff Bratva.”

“You’re oh-so right,” she drawls sarcastically. “Thanks for the correction. A man you don’t know—aside from his title as the most dangerous mobster in the city. What an improvement. We have to get you out of here.”

“He isn’t the *most* dangerous,” I argue pitifully.

I remember what Dima said about his code. About not participating in human trafficking. He may not be a saint, but he’s not a monster. Plus, he came back for me and Lukas when he didn’t have to.

Somewhere in there is a heart.

I hope.

“You’re right,” Brigitte agrees. “The problem is that if you don’t get back to the city soon, the person who actually is the *actual* most dangerous might think you’ve tried to skip town. You could have someone much worse on your trail soon.” She gives me a knowing look.

I shrug, but even I’m not buying the nonchalance I’m trying to project. “Maybe he’s stopped tracking me. He has better things to deal with, I’m sure.”

“Doubtful. We both know a man scorned can turn into a real psycho.”

She’s right about that. Brigitte and I both have experience in that department.

We’ve each got some demons in our rearview mirrors.

Brigitte grabs my hands and sits on the edge of the bed, one leg curled up underneath her. Her blonde hair is curled in loose waves that flow effortlessly over her shoulders. I feel like a goblin in comparison. Granted, I just gave birth yesterday, but still. I haven’t even showered yet.

“Let me take you home,” she pleads.

“My house isn’t safe.”

“Then to my house. You and Lukas can stay there while Dima runs around fighting bad guys,” she says with a flippant wave of her hand. “If anyone comes for you, I know how to use a gun.”

I shake my head. “I can’t put you in that kind of risk, Bridge. It’s not fair to you.”

“Who ever said life was fair?” she asks. “Or love, for that matter? Because I love you, Arya, and I’m not going to let you be dragged around by this guy who got you into this mess in the first place.”

Brigitte’s attitude towards Dima has me feeling defensive, of all things. But hadn’t I said the very same thing this morning?

On one hand, Dima rescued Lukas and me at the hospital.

On the other hand, he’s the reason we needed rescuing in the first place.

On the third hand, he showed up at the car yesterday to help me deliver Lukas when I thought I’d have to go through that whole ordeal all on my own.

And on the fourth hand, if I had in fact gone through that on my own, I’d probably be recovering in the hospital right now, safe and protected, instead of moldering in ill-fitting sweats and taking stolen medication while hiding out in a dirty motel room. Not exactly the way anyone wants to spend their maternity leave.

I don’t know. I just don’t know.

I’m out of hands twice over and nowhere closer to knowing how to feel about a single thing that’s happened to me in the last twenty-four hours.

Make that the last nine months.

Actually, make that the last few years.

Now that I think about it, it’s been a long time since I felt like I had a grasp on my life.

Maybe I just got good at pretending I was in charge.

Maybe fate has had its hands on the steering wheel the whole damn time.

“Listen,” Brigitte says, squeezing my fingers and looking deep into my eyes. “I know this guy is the father of your baby, but you don’t owe him anything. You have to look out for yourself and Lukas. If you think staying here in this

motel with a mob boss is safer than coming to my house, then by all means, stay. I just want you to know you have options.”

With the options outlined like that, it’s hard to see how staying could possibly be the best choice.

Brigitte’s not done yet, either. “I know you think you’re alone in this world. But you’re not. I’ll always be your family, Arya. No matter what.”

Tears well in my eyes. I try to pin them back, but the emotion I’ve been suppressing for a long time comes spilling forth in the form of me sobbing on Brigitte’s shoulder.

She pats my back and shushes me like a baby while I cry. “It’ll be okay, girly. I’ll take care of you.”

We stay like that for a while until my sobs ease and I can breathe again.

Nothing is truly solved and I don’t feel all that much better.

But a little bit? Yeah, a little bit.

It’ll have to be enough.

Eventually, Brigitte untangles herself from me. “As nice as this is, I think we should start packing up, right?”

I wipe my nose with the back of my sleeve and nod. I grab Lukas and rouse him for another feed before we leave. We won’t want to stop once we’re on the road, so it’ll be more efficient to try and nurse him now.

As I do, Brigitte packs up my stuff. “There isn’t much here,” she says, wrinkling her nose. “Honestly, we should leave these clothes behind. You do not need to bring old lady sweats back with you. And do these say ‘Big Apple’ on the butt?”

I laugh. “Bring those. You never know when they could come in handy.”

It’s so nice to smile. To laugh. To feel for a second like my life is moving back towards normalcy.

Part of me feels bad for running out on Dima and taking Lukas with me, but Brigitte is right. My first duty is to protect him. As his mom, it’s my *only* job.

No matter what, he comes first.

His health. His safety. His happiness.

Which is why, when the motel room door bursts open, I scream and lunge for my son.

If it comes down to it, I'll die to keep him safe.

DIMA

I fly into the parking lot, gravel kicking up in a cloud around the car, and shove it into park in front of the motel.

There's another car here that wasn't before, but it's just a little green hatchback. Hardly something a mobster would drive.

Although, considering the hunk of junk I've been driving for two days, I can't be so sure.

I reload and keep my gun in my hand as I run towards the door. There are no bullet holes in the exterior wall that I can see. Nor any signs of a scuffle or fight.

But that doesn't mean shit.

Arya is hardly in a state to fight. Even if she was, she's tiny. Any man could hoist her over his shoulder and carry her to the car with ease no matter how hard she tried to resist.

I slow down as I approach the door. Cock my gun. Control my breathing.

If whoever came is still in there...

They'd better be ready to fight for their fucking lives.

I reach for the doorknob slowly. But just before I lay my hand on it, I hear voices. It could be the television.

No—that's Arya.

Through the thick door, I can't make out her words, but she sounds upset. Scared. And there's another voice I don't recognize...

Fuck the slow approach. I'm going in guns blazing.

I wrench the knob and kick the door in. By the time it bounces off the wall, I already have my gun trained into the room and I'm roaring, "Who the fuck —"

My words die on my lips.

Arya is standing by the bed holding Lukas, a scrawled note clenched in her hand. Across from her, a blonde woman with bright red lips twisted in a deep frown stares at me.

"Mind putting the gun away, Rambo?" the stranger remarks saucily. "You'll shoot someone's eye out."

I look back and forth between the women for a moment and then lower my weapon. Finally, my anger trumps my adrenaline.

"What the fuck is this?" I rasp.

The blonde snarls, "I'm a 'who,' thank you very much. And I go by Brigitte. You must be Dima."

Arya steps forward, putting herself between me and the blonde. "Brigitte is my best friend. She came here to—"

I raise a hand to silence her. "How did she know where to find you?"

The man at the diner said he didn't follow Gennady to find us. Maybe he followed this woman. This Brigitte. Maybe *she* is the weak link in my security measures.

"I called her and told her where we were staying," Arya claims.

I may not know her well, but I can see the lie written all over her face. Her green eyes are wide and blinking and the tips of her ears have gone red.

I turn my attention back to the blonde. “How did you get here so fast? This isn’t exactly a vacation destination.”

She presses her lips together, not wanting to answer.

“Fine, I lied!” Arya bursts out. “She tracked my phone. She was worried about me because I hadn’t answered her calls or texts, so she traced my phone. She was already close by when I called her.”

“*Ti dura,*” I curse under my breath in Russian.

I charge into the room, sending the two women scattering to get out of my way, and dig through the plastic shopping bags until I find Arya’s phone. I power it down and then smash it into a dozen pieces against the corner of the entertainment center for good measure.

“Hey!” Arya protests.

I hurl the pieces to the floor. “I should have done that yesterday. I was stupid to think your phone couldn’t be traced.”

“Just by Brigitte. She’s not here to hurt me.”

“Perhaps not. But someone else is.”

Arya starts to ask, “What are you—”

But my attention shifts elsewhere before she can finish the question. Because I just noticed something.

Her bags are packed. The piles of new clothes I’d bought for her and Lukas, the diapers, the wipes—everything that had been scattered around the room before I’d left is now stacked neatly in a pair of unzipped duffels.

And Arya is holding a note in her hand.

I slide my gaze up to her face. She can’t quite meet my eyes. Her chin wobbles imperceptibly.

I reach out and snatch the hotel memo pad from her hand. Written in a neat, looping script is a goodbye note.

Dima—

As you can tell, I left.

I won't say where I'm going, but I'll be safe. Safer than on the road with you. When things settle down, find me and we can work something out with Lukas. As much as I want to give him a normal life away from all the shit that seems to follow you around, he should know his dad.

Sorry,

Arya

Anger bubbles up in my chest. Hot. Molten. Relentless.

“We can ‘work something out’ with Lukas?” I growl. I take a slow, menacing step to halve the distance between us. “You think you’ll be safer somewhere else?”

“She needs to rest and recover,” Brigitte snaps. “She shouldn’t be taking a road trip.”

Without even looking at the blond bitch, I snarl, “Fuck you.”

“Hey!” Arya steps between us and lays her hand over mine.

I jerk my hand away and talk over her head at the bitch who thinks she knows better than me. “You think I want my newborn son to sleep in a shithole like this? Do you think I meant for any of this to happen? We don’t need you. I’m handling the fucking situation.”

“It isn’t good enough,” Brigitte retorts.

Arya turns on her friend. “Enough, Bridge. Okay?”

“You’re defending him? He’s the reason any of this is happening! You need to come with me and let me protect you.”

I snort. “No fucking way.”

“You’re not her keeper.”

“Not forever,” I agree, “but so long as you want to put her in harm’s way, I will be. I’m not going to let anything happen to her or my son.”

Brigitte opens her mouth to respond, but before she can formulate a coherent sentence through her anger, my phone rings.

I rip it out of my pocket. It's Gennady. "What?" I growl into it.

"Caravan headed your way," he says breathlessly. "I just passed them on the highway."

"What do you mean, 'a caravan'?"

In the motel room, Brigitte and Arya go deathly quiet.

"Armored cars, tinted windows. Three of them. They're five minutes from you right now. You have to go." He sounds panicked. "Do you want me to come back?"

"No. Keep driving. Thanks." I hang up on him and grab Arya by the arm. "We have to go. Now."

"Are people coming for us?"

I nod. "Get everything and go."

"She's already packed," Brigitte says. "She can ride with me."

I pivot towards Arya's friend and tower over her. "You can fuck off. She's coming with me."

Arya lays a hand on my chest. I feel the angry fires inside of me simmer down at her touch. But different fires heat up at the same time.

"We don't have time to argue," she says. "Lukas and I will go with Dima. Brigitte, you can follow us."

"She can go back to wherever the fuck she came from," I bite.

Brigitte glares at me and I glare back, but Arya's gentle squeeze on my arm brings me back to the reality at hand.

Bad men are coming. We have to go.

I pick up the bags and run through the motel door to where I parked, quickly tossing them in the backseat of Arya's car. She comes up behind me, carrying

Lukas. “I haven’t changed him yet. He—”

“Later. Put him in the car now.”

Brigitte comes storming up last as Arya straps Lukas into the car seat. She’s still looking at me with fury in her eyes. “At least tell me where you’re going. We could get separated on the highway.”

Arya looks at me, green eyes wide and pleading.

She almost left. If I hadn’t come back when I did, she might have been gone.

She tried to take my fucking son away from me.

When the time is right, I’ll explain to her who makes the decisions here. I’ll make it very clear that she does nothing without my explicit permission.

But time is the one thing we don’t have on our side right now. It’ll have to wait.

“Chicago,” I answer finally.

I don’t explain why. Not yet.

Just as Brigitte starts to balk at how far away we’re going, a window in the car behind Arya shatters.

Across the street, I can see a black SUV squealing to a stop in front of the gas station. Another one is parked next to the pumps, passenger door open. The barrel of a rifle is resting above the sideview mirror.

“Get down!” I roar.

I duck down and crawl across the ground to Arya. She’s still in pain from labor and is struggling to crouch or crawl. I scoop her up and drop her in the passenger seat as another shot whizzes by. This one pierces the door to our motel room.

“Fuck, we have to go. Now.”

“But Brigitte—”

“Is not my priority,” I finish. “She can take care of herself.”

The car is in drive before my door is even closed. I fly diagonally across the lot and ramp over a curb to get to the road as fast as possible. All the while, I hear shots cracking off the asphalt.

Brigitte is driving just behind us, ducked down so she is barely visible above the steering wheel. At least she's smart enough to shut up and drive like I told her to do.

"Don't they know we have a baby in the car?" Arya cries, angling around in her seat to try and see what's going on.

I laugh bitterly. "They don't give a fuck. They'll kill us all to keep me from regaining what's mine."

"Just resign, then! Why die for this?"

The cars have pulled out of the gas station and are on the road behind us—pinned behind a slow-moving semi-truck, thankfully.

"I'd rather die than be a coward. I won't walk away from this. I can't."

"But you could. Other people have done it."

"Other people are pussies."

She snaps her head to me, nostrils flared. "Wanting to live doesn't make someone a 'pussy.'"

"We aren't talking about this now. Even if it was possible, I'm not resigning. I'll kill these men like I killed their friends today. Like I'll kill anyone who comes for me tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that." My hands tighten on the steering wheel in fury.

"You killed..." Arya's voice fades away before she clears her throat and tries again. "You were attacked today?"

"Yes, and I took care of the threat. Because that's what I fucking do."

We aren't far from the highway. I take the ramp as fast as this shit heap of a vehicle will let me and merge into the traffic. Brigitte isn't far behind.

We're surrounded by other cars, but that doesn't mean anything to someone whose job it is to take me out. They aren't worried about the ramifications of

killing innocent people or causing accidents. They'll do whatever they have to do to complete their mission.

Which is why I'm surprised when the caravan doesn't take the on-ramp for the highway, but instead keeps following the frontage road.

"What the fuck?" I mumble.

Arya spins around, trying to see what I'm seeing. "What?"

"They left. We aren't being followed anymore."

"We outran them!"

I shake my head. "No, we didn't. They just... gave up. Something's not right."

It doesn't make any sense. When Gennady calls to check on me half an hour later, he sounds relieved to hear my voice. Until I tell him what happened.

"Maybe they heard how we dealt with the guys at the diner and got scared," he suggests. "That's what you wanted to happen. Maybe they saw the example we made of their friends and decided to die another day."

"Maybe."

But something about the whole situation doesn't sit right with me. It doesn't make any fucking sense. And yet, as uneasy as I feel, I can't help but be temporarily relieved.

For the time being at least, we're all safe. Lukas is content in the backseat, Arya is unharmed, and I'm getting us all out of this shithole town.

Hopefully, better things await in Chicago.

DIMA

EVENING—SOMEWHERE ALONG INTERSTATE 90 BETWEEN NEW YORK CITY
AND CHICAGO

An hour passes with no one on our trail.

I check the rearview again and again. I change lanes. I take highway exits, loop around, and get right back on.

Still no one following.

I don't fucking like it.

I don't buy Gennady's explanation that we frightened them off. There's something else happening here. And it's bugging the hell out of me that I can't figure out what.

But that'll have to come later. For now, we need to stop.

Lukas has begun to cry. Soft whimpers at first. But growing louder and louder with each passing moment.

"We have to pull over," Arya says at once.

I pull to the side of the road and put the car in park, but I keep the engine running. "You have five minutes."

For once, she says nothing. No sassy comeback, no snide retort. She just clambers into the backseat and frees Lukas from his car seat. He quiets as soon as she takes him into her arms.

"Did Brigitte stop, too?" Arya asks after a moment has passed.

My eyes are trained on the cars whizzing past us on the highway. I shake my head. “I haven’t seen her in a bit.”

“Did she pass us?”

“I don’t know. I was a bit too busy looking out for the cars of the people who want to kill us to see where your ‘friend’ was at.”

“You don’t have to say it like that,” she huffs.

“Say what?”

“*Friend,*” she repeats in the same sarcastic tone I used. “She’s my best friend and has been for years. She’s more like family, really. If you want to be in my life and Lukas’s life, you’ll have to deal with her.”

“You’re not going to threaten me into doing anything.”

“It’s not a threat!” Arya almost sounds like she’s amused. Almost. “It’s a fact. I’m the one getting the shit end of the stick anyway. I have to deal with the fact that my son’s father is some big bad mob boss who is regularly getting shot at. And you have to deal with the fact that my best friend is pretty vocal about her opinions.”

“She’s not the only one.”

Now, she is definitely amused. Frustrated, but amused.

She laughs and kicks the back of my seat. “Watch it, buster.”

“I’m watching,” I mutter darkly, scanning the traffic yet again. “I’m always watching.”



Once Lukas is re-settled and asleep, we hustle through a drive-thru to grab food. Then back on the road. We can’t afford to stop for long.

Arya folds down the paper on my sandwich and lays a napkin across my lap to protect my pants from grease drips. It’s very motherly, very tender, and so fucking weird for a man like me that I actually mumble an awkward,

“Thanks.”

She looks at me like I just sprouted a third arm from the middle of my forehead. “What’d you just say?”

“Nothing. Pass the mustard.”

“Turkey and lettuce? I see you’ve opted for the healthy option,” she teases, opening the Styrofoam lid of her pancakes swimming in syrup. “Big buff dude like you must wanna watch his figure.”

“I’ve got enough people who want to kill me. I don’t need my food to do the job for them.”

She snorts. “It’s funny to me you think about cholesterol at all when you are, quite literally, on the verge of death. I’d wager you’ll be assassinated before your arteries have a chance to clog.”

I stare straight ahead at the road. She’s not wrong. In fact, she doesn’t know the half of it. But it’s better that way. The less she knows about my work, the happier we’ll both be.

“I’m sorry.” Arya reaches over and lays a hand on my shoulder. A strange warmth surges through me at her touch. “That was mean. I shouldn’t have said that.”

I shrug. “It’s fine. It’s true.”

“I know it’s true,” she says, nudging my arm playfully. “Still, I shouldn’t have said it.”

Tension tightens between us. Like the air got sucked out of the car. I’m all too aware of her petite hand on my shoulder. Of the laughter on her lips. The taunting tease in her eyes.

She’s a fucking liability, Dima, I scold myself. Get her to Chicago. Then get rid of her.

For a change, my inner voice is right. This cannot last. It was doomed from the start.

I've reached a decision: as soon as we get to Chicago, we're parting ways. I'll send money for my son and his mother. I'll look out for them from afar. But it's best for us to untangle our lives as quickly as possible.

As if she can sense what's happening in my brain, Arya's hand retreats from my shoulder like I stung her. Her eyes cloud with confusion.

Then she sighs and looks down at her food. "I hate silence," she whispers.

"Turn on the radio."

She shakes her head. "Not the same. Car rides are for talking."

I shrug. "Then talk."

Arya glances up at me and scoffs. "You don't talk back. It's like trying to have a conversation with a brick wall on steroids."

"Mhmm."

"I rest my case."

"Finally."

She bites her lip, trying not to laugh. Then, glancing back down into her lap, she starts discussing the merits of fast-food pancakes as compared to pancakes made at home. She rattles on with the topic for an impressive amount of time. Size and density and syrup absorbance, more pancake particulars than I even knew existed. It's like she's jabbering just to keep from screaming.

Strangely enough, I'm alright with that. I like listening to her talk. It gets me out of my own head for a bit.

Maybe this shit all feels so weird because of what my normal life looks like. To be specific, it looks like one thing and one thing only: the Bratva. My role requires absolute dedication. I have too many men who rely on me, and too many other people—their wives, their children, their families—who rely on my men. One fuck-up means a lot of people get hurt.

I don't regret that. I chose my world. I chose my life.

But it's a burden no matter how you slice it. I feel that weight at all times.

Arya, though, is lightness incarnate. She can sit and talk about pancakes as if that's all that matters in the world.

It's like nothing else I've ever known.



We pull into the next gas station to use the restroom and take care of Lukas. As soon as I put the car in park, there's a tap on the passenger side window. I look over and clench my jaw in immediate irritation.

The blond bitch is standing on Arya's side of the car.

"Bridge!" Arya exclaims in delight.

I don't know what it is about this woman, but I can't stand her. Actually, I do know what it is—she tried to fucking take my family away from me. Or, Lukas, anyway. Arya isn't my family.

But for as long as we're stuck together, they both belong to me. They both need my protection.

Brigitte and Arya have no idea what they are getting into. They think they can hunker down in Brigitte's apartment with a pink Taser nearby and be safe.

But it's trained killers who are coming after us.

So far, Zotov and the Albanians have sent the runts of the litter. One look at all those dead bodies we left behind in the diner, though, and they'll realize they underestimated me. They won't make that mistake a second time. They'll send the big guns.

Arya clambers out of the car and the two women start talking. I pick up bits and pieces of their conversation. "...Are you okay? ... No, no, that was craziness, I'm just glad you're..."

"Tell her to go home," I rumble. "No one's chasing her."

Arya glares at me and then turns her attention back to her friend, nodding more as she listens to whatever shit Brigitte is spewing now. I grit my teeth

and drum my fingers on the steering wheel, eager to go.

After a few more minutes, Arya sinks back into the passenger seat. When I look over at her, her lips are pursed.

“What?” I demand.

Arya worries at her lower lip, still not saying anything.

I spin around in my seat. “Well?”

“You said yourself no one is chasing Brigitte, right?”

I don’t like having my own words used against me, but I have no choice but to nod.

Arya takes a deep breath and launches into what has her so twisted up. “Brigitte’s brother lives in Chicago. That’s where she’s going right now. She just talked to her brother, and he would be willing to take me and Lukas in for a while. Until things die down. No one would suspect I’d be there, and even if they did, they’d never suspect *you* would be there. And you’re the one these guys are after, right?”

“Technically speaking, yes.”

“If you drop me off and disappear, I won’t have a clue where you’re going,” she continues. “I know you were afraid I’d tell the men chasing you where you were, but I hope I’ve proven myself trustworthy by now.”

“You’re a couple hours fresh off an escape attempt, in case you think I forgot. Is that what you’d call ‘proving yourself trustworthy’?”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t going to tell anyone where you were!”

There’s a strange, crackling energy flying around the car. I don’t know what to call it or what to make of it. All I know is that it’s pissing me off that she’s trying to shed me like a bad date.

Which begs the question: *Who the fuck does she think I am?*

I’m not the kind of man someone just leaves in the dust. Not by a long shot.

She's still talking while I simmer. "...And I wasn't leaving because of—well, I only wanted to leave to keep Lukas safe. He has now been in two shootouts since he was born, and I don't want to go for lucky number three. Do you?"

It's a loaded question, of course. She's playing mind games. Trying to get inside my head.

I glance down. Lukas is sleeping against her chest now, his lips parted in full-bellied contentment.

Of course I want what's best for him.

Of course I want him to be safe.

And he'll be safest with me.

Or at least, that's what I thought—up until recently.

As much as I hate to admit it, Arya has a point. There are a lot of people with an interest in planting a bullet in my head right now. Anyone in my vicinity faces the same threat.

Arya presses forward. "I know you think I'm some idiot civilian who doesn't know anything about your world, but you're wrong. I know how to keep myself safe."

I raise a brow. "What does that mean?"

She looks away opaquely, turning her gaze to Lukas. "I just mean I'm not as clueless as you may think. I've taken care of myself successfully for years. There's no reason to believe I'd fail now."

I want to argue with her, but I can't. The truth is, my destination in Chicago is not a suitable place for Arya and Lukas. My business there is dangerous.

Our son is only a few days old. He and his mother some place where they both can rest and recover. Someplace safe. Someplace comfortable.

Brigitte's brother's house could be that place.

Plus, if I drop them off there and then make a scene somewhere else in Chicago, it will draw the people looking for me away from Arya and Lukas. I can make sure they're left out of the crossfire. I owe my son that much, don't

I?

But, *fuck*—I don't like this at all.

We don't come to any official agreement right away. Arya puts Lukas back in his car seat, and we drive in silence for a while as I brood.

Arya dozes in the passenger seat. I watch the white lines in the road disappear under the car, trying to figure out if there is any other option that makes as much sense.

But I draw blank after blank after blank.

DIMA

CLOSE TO CHICAGO

When we are just outside Chicago, I finally nudge her awake. “What’s her brother’s address?”

I’ve racked my brain and come up with a grand total of jack shit. So that’ll have to be it. For now.

Arya gives me the address with barely-suppressed glee. I navigate the crisscrossed highways and one-way streets until I pull up in front of a narrow, two-story house in a suburb just outside the city.

And just like that, we’re at the end.

Lukas is waking up from another long nap and squirming in his seat. Arya and I just sit in silence. Neither of us know what to say.

This shouldn’t be an emotional goodbye. We only met a few days ago—not counting our first meeting. And “fucking each other’s brains out before parting ways forever” isn’t exactly the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

It’s not like we made any promises to one another, either. From the moment we drove away from the hospital, I knew I’d let Arya go at some point. That time has now come.

So it ought to be easy to part ways. To recede back into our respective worlds.

But it’s not.

It's really fucking not.

"Well," Arya says, her voice drifting off. "I guess this is it."

"I guess so."

I climb out of the car and open the backseat to remove Lukas's car seat and diaper bag. "I'm keeping the car," I growl. "I left money at your house to help buy a new one."

Arya nods nervously. "Okay." She tucks a strand of dark hair behind her ear. She glances down, glances back up, glances everywhere but right at me.

This is ridiculous. What is there to be nervous about? She should be happy. I should be, too. Finally, I can focus on taking care of myself. On my vengeance against Zotov and the Albanians. On my return to the city.

Traveling will be much easier without Arya and Lukas tagging along. No more stopping for nursing sessions and diaper changes. No more dealing with her sass and her evasive bullshit.

So then why do I feel so damn conflicted?

Why is my chest a knot of roiling tension?

"You're here!" Brigitte beat us to the house. She comes down the steps, arms thrown wide. She walks right past me and hugs Arya. "God, I'm so glad you're safe. And where's the little man?"

She turns around and barely hides a grimace when she sees me holding the car seat. "Sorry, but you can't come in. My brother doesn't want any trouble. Just drop their stuff on the curb and leave."

I'm about to ask Brigitte who the fuck she thinks she's talking to, but Arya steps between us just in time with a hand on my chest. "I'll meet you upstairs, Bridge, okay? I want to talk to Dima."

Brigitte reaches for the car seat as she passes. I slap her hand away. "Don't touch my fucking son," I snarl.

Her eyes narrow, but then Arya nods for Brigitte to go on. The blonde bimbo lifts her hands in surrender, clearly annoyed. But she leaves us alone.

Arya turns to me when she's gone. "I know what you're thinking," she says before I can say anything. "But she's not a bad person. She's just protective. And she doesn't trust you."

"The feeling is very fucking mutual."

Arya lays a hand on my arm again. It's oddly calming. A cool touch to battle back the fire that constantly rages inside me.

"I'll be okay here," she tells me. "We both will be. Brigitte won't let anything happen to me. Or, I mean, to Lukas."

We both seem to notice the way she corrected herself. She knows where my priorities lie.

She's my son's mother. That's *all* she is to me.

Nothing more. Nothing that matters.

Arya laughs nervously. "Not to say you care about what happens to me. But you know what I mean."

I nod and grunt. "I do."

She frowns. "You do what? Care about me, or know what I mean?"

Fucking hell. More mind games. I want her to just go inside already. Leave me to do what I do best. But she's lingering and looking up at me with those emerald eyes. Searching. Imploring.

I don't know what she wants. But I do know I'm the wrong damn person to give it to her.

What could I possibly say? *I do care?* That would be a lie. I don't give a fuck about anything but my Bratva.

Arya looks down at her feet, her toe nudging a pebble across the pavement. She's in the sweats and oversized sweatshirt I bought for her at the store, but she's still stunning. Without any makeup on, I can see the pale freckles across the bridge of her nose. And the fading bruises across her cheekbones from her interrogation at Fyodor's hands mere hours after giving birth.

That sight still makes the anger in my stomach curdle. But the swell of her breasts, the jut of her hips—those things make my cock stiffen against my better instincts.

It's not just that, either. There's something more to her. The woman standing before me, as fragile as she may appear, is fierce. Fiery.

In the end, that's why it doesn't matter that I'm walking away.

She doesn't need me to keep an eye on her.

She'll be just fine.

"I should get going," she says, taking a step away from me and hitching a thumb over her shoulder towards the house.

"You should probably take your son with you." I hold up the car seat in my hand.

"Oh," she says, blushing. "Right."

Lukas is awake. His gray blue eyes squint up at me, unaccustomed to the brightness of the streetlight overhead.

I place his seat on the sidewalk leading up to the house and kneel down in front of him, pinching his little fingers gently between mine.

"Goodbye, *malyshka*," I rumble quietly.

It's a piss-poor parting line, but I don't know what else to say. *Good luck? Have a nice life?* No. That feels too much like abandoning him.

I could be dead in the morning. Or Arya could disappear, never to be found again.

I tell myself those are the real reasons. But I also know this: my world is dangerous.

I've always wanted a son to be my heir. To inherit everything I've built. Everything I've bled and fought and killed for.

I have that now. He's right here in front of me. My legacy. The next don of the Romanoff Bratva. He could have an empire at his fingertips.

The question that's been torturing me is this: what if the very gift I give him is what will kill him? How could I forgive myself if that happened?

I couldn't.

So, as much as I want to take care of him, to raise him how he ought to be raised... the only way to do that is to remove myself from the picture. Death follows me like a shadow. The farther he stays away from me—the better.

So I stand and leave my son where he lies.

Even when it feels like cracking my chest in two.

As soon as I rise, Arya grabs the car seat. She winces as she lifts it up, so I take it back from her and walk the two of them up the stairs to the front door.

But this is truly as far as I go.

“Thanks,” she murmurs. Arya grips the railing hard. She needs this rest—badly. I can see it in her eyes, in the droop of her exhausted shoulders.

But she lingers anyways. Looking down at me. Waiting for something.

Fuck if I know what that something is, though. I didn't know what to say to Lukas and I sure as hell don't know what to say to Arya.

So I just nod one more time and leave.

It's easiest that way. If we don't pretend this was more than it was. She can go on her way, I can go on mine, and we can close the book on this bizarre and fucked-up chapter.

I'll never see them again, and that's for the best.

For their sakes.

And for mine.

ARYA

ERIK ARNAUD'S HOUSE—CHICAGO

“This room is typically reserved for Erik’s *overnight* guests,” Brigitte informs me, wagging her eyebrows suggestively. “But I made him change the sheets—you’re welcome—and get it ready for you and Lukas. Consider it your home away from home.”

Despite being friends with Brigitte for years, I’ve only met her brother Erik once, when he came to visit us in the city. He spent the last few years working overseas somewhere in Europe and didn’t make it back to the States much. I certainly don’t know him well enough to feel like his home could ever be mine.

But I’ll try. I need some semblance of home—badly.

“Take a shower, get settled, and come down for dinner.” Brigitte scoops Lukas out of his car seat and cradles him delicately against her shoulder. “I’ll watch the little guy for you.”

I haven’t been away from Lukas since he was born, so I’m hesitant to let even my best friend walk away with him. But I also feel straight-up disgusting.

I haven’t taken a real shower since he was born. Washcloth wipe-downs in a motel sink most definitely do not count. The thought of an actual shower, clean and with hot running water, is enough to bring tears to my eyes.

“Okay. I’ll only be a few minutes.”

“Take your time,” Brigitte says. “We’ll be fine.”

I rush through my shower anyway. When I’m clean, I throw on a pair of clean sweats and a large t-shirt Brigitte stole from her brother’s closet.

I feel weird wearing his clothes, but I can’t put back on my “Big Apple” sweatpants. Hideousness aside, there are too many weirdly thorny memories attached to those. Memories of Dima.

I wonder where he is now. I hope he’s found someplace safe to hide. Even if I’ll never see him again, I don’t want him dead.

He did right by me and Lukas.

I won’t forget that.

Lukas cries. I can hear Brigitte trying to soothe him. I quickly tug a brush through my hair and head downstairs.

This is a good reminder that my first priority will forever and always be Lukas. He needs me and I’m all he has. I can’t let him down.

Brigitte and Erik are both leaning over Lukas, who is lying on the floor, making faces and cooing at him. Lukas doesn’t seem to appreciate their efforts even the slightest bit. He’s wailing, red-faced, and angry.

“I think he’s hungry,” I explain, bending down gingerly to pick him up.

Brigitte sits down on the sofa. She already looks exhausted after fifteen minutes of babysitting. “Are you nursing? Formula is so much easier. And just as good for the baby.”

“Nursing is free,” I reply, making a show of unhooking my nursing bra to give Erik plenty of time to avert his eyes.

But he doesn’t.

It’s weird, but Brigitte said to make myself at home, so I will. That means nursing my baby in peace and comfort, not with a blanket thrown over both of our heads.

I’d probably be more bothered by Erik’s leering if I hadn’t just spent two days running from mobsters and being shot at. Compared to that, dealing

with standard male perversion is a walk in the park.

Plus, I'm thrilled to be sitting on a comfortable sofa with my feet up and a trashy television show on. It's not the same as being *home* home, but it's as good as it's going to get.

I'll take it.

Erik hangs around. He's a tall, stocky guy with a three-day beard and pale blue eyes that sort of wander around all the time. Theoretically, he's swiping through Tinder on his phone while Brigitte and I watch TV.

But I can't shake the feeling that he's got his full attention locked on me.

I try to dismiss the thought. Maybe Dima's constant paranoia was contagious.

Lukas eats and burps, but he doesn't go back to sleep right away. So I prop him up on my knees and play with his fingers and toes. Still, he seems discontented.

"Is he okay?" Brigitte asks. "Is he still hungry?"

"No. He stopped eating on his own. I'm not sure what's wrong."

He has been such a dream the last few days that I thought it would always be that easy. Exhausting, but simple. Now, however, I have no idea what he wants.

I walk around the room while swaying side to side, I sing to him, I check his diaper multiple times to make sure it isn't dirty. Nothing helps.

"I'm going to order food," Erik says, bailing for the kitchen. Brigitte follows a second later, murmuring something about helping him choose a restaurant to call in.

"What is it, babe?" I whisper to my boy, pressing my cheeks against his warm little face. "What's wrong?"

As if he wishes he could tell me, Lukas wails even louder.

I shush him and go upstairs to wander up and down the hallway some more. Only when I start to sing softly does he settle down somewhat and fall into an uneasy sleep. But it doesn't feel right.

And I can't help but think it has something to do with Dima not being here.

Dima's face was the first face Lukas ever saw. The first hands he ever felt. His introduction to this world.

"I know, baby," I sing-song, continuing to sway him so he doesn't wake up. "You miss your dada?"

As awkward and clunky as that word feels on my lips... something strange happens in my chest when I say it.

I don't know what to call that feeling or how to deal with it. So I shove it aside in that dark part of my heart reserved for things that shouldn't see the light of day.

Even though that part of me is getting awfully crowded.

And yet, right then, it hits me suddenly how many conversations we're going to have over the years about Lukas's "dada."

Dima, regardless of the fact he won't actually be in Lukas's life, is inevitably going to be in Lukas's life—in some form. He will always be the person who gave him half his genes. The person who holds the key to the other side of his family tree. He'll always be the person Lukas wants to know but can't.

For his sake, it would be best if I never tell him the truth. The truth of what Dima does—who he is—is far too dangerous.

I picture Lukas growing older and that haunted stormy look coming into his eyes the way it lives in Dima's. The look of a man who's seen bad things. Who's done bad things.

I don't want that for my child. Whatever Dima is running from, I'm determined to spare Lukas from the same fate.

The horrifying thought sends a shiver down my spine. I hug my baby a little bit closer.

It is best that my story with Dima ends here. I make myself a promise: from this point on, it will be as if he never stopped to help me deliver Lukas.

As if Fyodor and his men never came into my recovery room.

As if we were never shot at, never ran, never even left the hospital.

The real story will stay with me. Lukas never needs to know.

We'll all be better off.

ARYA

Erik orders Chinese food and Brigitte holds Lukas while I gorge myself on dumplings.

“We should have gotten a double order of dumplings, apparently,” Brigitte teases.

“I’m sorry. Nursing makes me so hungry.”

“I’ve also heard it helps you lose the baby weight, too. Though eating a family size serving of dumplings by yourself might undo some of that benefit.”

I kick her under the table, she winks at me, and we both laugh.

It feels like old times. Back in the days when we’d lounge on the couch with takeout and wine, trashy rom-coms on the television, not a care in the world.

“Don’t listen to her. Eat up, Arya. You need a good meal in you.” Erik says. He uses his chopsticks to pick up a dumpling from his plate and drop it on mine.

My laugh fades away awkwardly, though I thank him with a smile. He’s weird, no doubt about that. But he’s nice. Right now, that’s enough.

When I can’t possibly eat another bite, I glance up at the clock and realize how late it is. My internal clock is all kinds of screwed up.

Brigitte and Erik soon pad off to their rooms to crash. I grab Lukas and go to get things set up in our room.

The bassinet Dima bought is the same height as Erik's guest bed, so I can lay down and still see Lukas sleeping. Unfortunately, fifteen minutes after I get us settled in for the night, Lukas decides sleep is unnecessary. And just like that, another round of red-faced crying begins.

I do everything I can to help him. Nurse. Sing. Rock. Sway. I pull out every parenting trick I read about in blog posts and books before he was born. Not a damn thing works.

Questions race through my head. Is he sick? Is there something wrong with my milk? Am I not burping him enough?

"Come on, *malyshka*," I whisper in delirious exhaustion. I'm sure I'm butchering the pronunciation of the Russian pet name Dima used for him. But something about it feels right anyway. "Go to sleep. For Mama."

It's not magic and it's not immediate. But I could swear it takes the edge of his tantrum. Just a tiny little bit.

We coast gradually downhill from there. Full-throated crying turns to intermittent cries. Cries turn to whimpers. Whimpers turn to murmurs.

And then—sweet, blissful silence.

I'm scared to jostle him too much, but I carefully crane my neck back and take a look. Yep, he's fast asleep at my breast.

Praise the heavens.

Moving slowly, I settle him in the bassinet. I stand there for a full five minutes like a nervous bomb technician, waiting to make sure he doesn't go off again.

No sign of movement.

But my God, he looks beautiful there. Like the little stinker wasn't just bawling his eyes out.

I want to collapse back in bed and go immediately unconscious. But my throat is aching with thirst and my stomach is grumbling despite the dumpling carnage from dinner.

I remember seeing some cereal in Erik's pantry earlier. The mere thought makes my stomach growl again. Cereal it is.

Opening the door as carefully as possible, I leave Lukas where he is and tiptoe down the stairs.

Erik's house is dark, but surprisingly tidy for a man in his late twenties. Most guys at his age still have sports posters taped to the wall and at least one beanbag chair in the living room for gaming.

But Erik's furniture is... refined. Stylish. Sort of impersonal, too. It almost looks like a prop house that would be used to sell other similar-looking homes.

Probably a designer's influence, I guess. Or something he copied from a home decor magazine.

By the time I get to the kitchen, I'm too focused on the cereal I'm about to shove into my face to care about his milquetoast decorating skills.

The pantry is weirdly empty. As in, completely empty except for a box of cereal and an unopened container of hydrogen peroxide. Strange. But my hunger overrides my curiosity. I grab the cereal and pour myself a bowl.

I can't hear Lukas fussing upstairs—especially not over the sound of fizzing and crunching in my ears—but I still scarf it down quickly so I can hurry back up.

I imagine there are a lot of things I'll be doing quickly over the next few years. Without anyone else to help out, there won't be much time to take care of myself.

Dima's face pops into my mind again, but I push it away.

Running from attackers and leading a Bratva don't leave much time for taking care of a family, I imagine. Even if he could have stuck around, it wouldn't have changed anything.

We couldn't work.

This couldn't work.

The man who barged into my clinic with a gun can never be a father, a partner, a family man.

I say it to myself again: "It's for the best that he's gone."

When I'm finished, I wash my bowl, dry it, and put it back in the cabinet to hide the proof of my late-night cabinet raiding. Then I head back upstairs.

I'm tiptoeing down the hall so I don't wake anyone up. But as I reach for the doorknob, I realize there's a light coming from under my door.

That wasn't on when I left.

And I can hear a man's voice, too.

Flashbacks to the hospital root me to the spot.

Fyodor and his men.

That bald, glistening leer on his face.

"Don't fucking lie to me."

The slap.

I touch my face unconsciously. I can still feel the bruise where Fyodor hit me.

Terror slithers down my spine before I can even process what's happening. My primal instinct is to run. Run as fast as I can and don't look back.

Then—*Lukas.*

The thought of my son brings my fuzzy, panicked thoughts into focus. Whatever is going on, he's in there alone. He needs me.

I throw the door open and burst into the room. But it isn't mobster thugs in my room like I expected.

It's Erik.

He's standing over Lukas's crib, talking softly to him. He looks up when I enter the room. Doesn't even have the decency to look surprised.

"Sorry," I blurt, though I'm not sure what for. Erik is the one in my room in the middle of the night, talking to my newborn baby. *He* should be the one apologizing to *me*.

He doesn't do anything of the sort, though. "It's fine," he mumbles. He turns from Lukas to face me and crosses his arms over his chest. "Couldn't sleep?"

"A little restless, all things considered. It's been a hectic few days."

I try to remain calm. I'm a guest here. Brigitte is just two doors down the hall. Nothing is going to happen to me.

I'm safe.

I'm safe.

I'm safe.

Still, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Even more so when Erik takes a step towards me.

"But since Lukas is asleep now, I think I'll try to sleep, too," I add. "'Sleep when the baby sleeps,' they say, right?" I offer a nervous chuckle and move away from the door so Erik can leave.

But he doesn't budge from his position at the end of the bed.

"How do you get anything done for yourself if you're sleeping every time the baby sleeps?" he asks in a soft voice. "What about *your* needs?"

Something about the way he says the word "needs" makes me shiver.

"I needed a bowl of cereal, so I went and got one," I joke, forcing another awkward laugh. "That's all I need right now."

His mouth quirks up in a smile and his eyebrow raises. He looks so much like Brigitte. I didn't see it before, but that devious, *'I just got a bad idea'* face? I recognize it.

Brigitte has made the same face before every dumb, disastrous thing we've ever done together.

I don't like the look of it on Erik now.

"I remember meeting you in New York," he remarks. "Brigitte told me to keep my distance, so I did. But now... here you are."

"On the run," I retort, none too nicely. "Hiding out. I'm only here because I'm desperate."

He shrugs and looks me over. His eyes are dark and he's silhouetted by the lamp behind him. He looks like a living shadow standing in front of me. I have the urge to flip the light switch to cast him away.

"Worse things have brought people together."

My tone grows icier even as fear starts to claw through my stomach. "We aren't being 'brought together,' Erik. Brigitte told me I could hide out here, but if I can't, then—"

"Oh, you can," he says quickly. "You certainly can." He waves his hands as if to calm me down, though his smirk only serves to make me more on edge. "But nothing comes for free in life. You know that."

He's not saying what he wants explicitly. But it's not difficult to puzzle out what he means. Especially when his eyes keep drinking me in like that.

The whole situation is made even more bizarre by the fact that I'm two days post-birth. I still look six months pregnant and I'm wearing his oversized clothes. I'm not exactly at my most desirable right now.

Plus, I physically *can't*.

"I gave birth to a human two days ago," I say, pointing to Lukas as proof. "Whatever payment you think you're owed, I'm closed for business for at least six weeks."

Erik shakes his head. "I'm disappointed in your lack of imagination. Your mouth seems to be working just fine to me. Your hands, too."

My stomach knots up painfully. I shake my head, backing away from him. “This is ridiculous. I’m getting Brigitte.”

“Be my guest.” He shrugs.

I don’t want to leave Lukas alone with him, but he’s sleeping and I don’t have any real belief Erik is out to physically harm my son. Besides, I’m only going just down the hall.

I spin out of the room and knock on Brigitte’s door.

Surprisingly, she answers right away. Her eyebrows raise when she sees the panic on my face. “What’s up?” she says in a clear voice without a trace of sleepiness to it.

“Your brother is being weird. I don’t know if he’s drunk or high or if he’s just delusional, but he’s asking me to have sex with him and I want him out of my room. Can you help?”

Weirdly, Brigitte just sighs in frustration. Not surprise, not alarm—frustration. Almost as if this isn’t the first time she’s been forced to deal with this kind of thing.

She marches past me, grabbing my arm to haul me along behind her. She pulls me into the room, depositing me next to the dresser, and stands in front of the door with her arms crossed and a deep scowl on her face.

“Not appropriate, Erik.”

Her brother shrugs, unperturbed.

What the fuck is wrong with this guy? My skin is crawling and my heartbeat is pounding in my ears and the palms of my hands are slick with a cold, frightened sweat.

“This is not why Arya is here,” Brigitte continues. “She isn’t your plaything.”

I nod along in agreement.

Thank God for Brigitte.

Thank God for friends.

Thank God for—

“You were supposed to knock her out before she even woke up. Now, you’ve made things more difficult. Typical.”

My breath catches in my throat. I turn to Brigitte, jaw hanging open. “What?”

When Brigitte looks back at me, her scowl has shifted into a devilish smile. I almost don’t recognize her. The woman staring at me scornfully isn’t my best friend. She’s barely even human.

She’s a fucking monster.

“Erik was supposed to knock you out while you were sleeping so you’d be unconscious while we tied you up and got you ready for transport,” she explains. “Now, you’ll put up a fight, and even though you won’t win, it will still be more difficult than necessary.”

“What are you talking about?” I wheeze.

The words coming out of my throat don’t even feel like mine. I’m struggling to breathe. It feels like my lungs are being squeezed too tightly. I grab the edge of the dresser to keep myself standing.

Brigitte rolls her eyes. “Always so dramatic. That’s what got you into all this mess in the first place, remember? Your drama ended with you in deep debt, and now it’s finally time to pay up.”

This can’t be real.

None of this can be real.

“But I called you,” I stammer, trying to make sense of things. “I invited you to the hotel. This can’t be a plan because—”

Then I remember Brigitte trying to get me to leave the motel with her.

Even after Dima arrived, she tried to convince him that I should ride with her. After that, Then she found a place for us to hide out, but Dima was allowed to come.

Brigitte, my best friend—*alleged* best friend, soon-to-be-former best friend—tricked me. She manipulated me into... well, into whatever the fuck is

coming next.

And it was all so fucking easy.

Because I trusted her.

“You lied to me,” I whisper, almost to myself.

Brigitte laughs and walks over to Lukas’s bassinet. She lifts his tiny body and lays him across her shoulder. I try to stop her, but Erik moves to cut me off, a manic warning look in his eyes.

“Say goodbye to Mama,” Brigitte croons in a baby voice. She lifts one of Lukas’s hands in a mocking wave.

I’m in no shape to fight. I’m exhausted to the bone and choking with a panic attack and my body has been ravaged by childbirth and mysterious masked gunmen and two days of driving.

But the sight of her touching my son overrides all of that.

I let out an animal scream and throw myself at Erik.

I claw his face. Skin rips. Blood spatters.

For a wild moment, I almost think that I can take both of them down.

Then he grabs my head and promptly slams it as hard as he can against the solid wooden bedpost.

And everything goes black.

DIMA

SOMEWHERE IN CHICAGO

As soon as I drop Arya off, I dial a number I haven't called in ten years.

My brother's.

"Dima," he answers on the third ring. "What a surprise."

He doesn't sound surprised at all. Then again, why would he? Ilyasov is a cold-blooded bastard. As cold as they come.

As cold as me.

It's how we were raised. It's why we knew—ever since that blood-soaked night all those years ago—that we could never coexist.

It's why we separated our territory into two kingdoms, one for each of us.

He got Chicago.

I got New York.

And it's why we've done our damndest to stay out of each other's way in the decade since we parted ways.

But things have changed now.

"Ilyasov," I breathe.

A musty silence ensues. Crackling with unspoken secrets. With long-buried memories.

Eventually, I clear my throat and explain what the fuck I'm doing in his city.



A Little While Later

Ilyasov kept it short on the phone. He told me where to meet him, and as I walk up to the address, I realize it's a club.

A line of women in tight dresses far too revealing for the weather and men dripping in gold chains stretches around the corner. Just like Ilyasov told me to do, I move to the front of the line and face the bouncer.

"The fuck you want, buddy?" he snarls around the toothpick in his mouth. "Line's that way."

I sigh. "You're not very smart, are you?"

The man stands up from his stool. He's fat and tall and reeking of sweat and cheap cologne. He snatches the toothpick from between his lips and snaps it in his fist—like that's supposed to intimidate me.

"You'd better get walking, amigo."

"No, I don't think I will."

"You got a death wish?"

I laugh bitterly. "Even if I did, I don't think you're the man to fulfill it for me."

His face wrinkles in confusion and anger. "I'll give you three seconds to get the fuck out of my face before I hit you. The kind of hit you don't get back up from."

"I wouldn't do that," I suggest.

The man laughs and cracks his knuckles. "Why the fuck not?"

"Because I'm Dima Romanoff."

My words have the desired effect. His beady eyes bulge. Instantly, all the violence whooshes out of him like water down a drain. He staggers backwards and gulps hard.

“My apologies, sir. Please forgive me. Right this way.”

“That’s better.”

Inside, the jarring, pulsing music is harsh on my ears. The flashing strobes are equally as annoying. I grit my teeth and try to ignore it all.

As I do, a silly little memory flashes through my head.

Arya’s eyes, soft in her lap. Her hand on my shoulder. “I hate silence.”

I wrench myself back to the present. I can’t afford to lose focus now.

I scan the room, looking for my brother. But before I can finish a whole sweep, a hand taps me on the shoulder. When I turn around, it’s a man I don’t recognize. Bald with meticulously groomed facial hair cut into sharp lines around his jaw and mouth.

Definitely one of my brother’s men. He looks like a classic Ilyasov stooge—equal parts brainless and violent. He curls his finger for me to follow him.

The man leads me through a side door and into a narrow hallway. I touch my hip when his back is turned just to make sure my gun is in place.

As soon as the door closes behind me, the music fades to little more than a distant murmur. This area is well-insulated. “So no one can hear my brother’s guests screaming, I bet,” I growl under my breath.

The goateed man looks over at me with narrowed eyes but says nothing. He walks to the far end of the hallway, raps his knuckles twice on a door, and then pushes it open for me to walk inside.

I pause at the threshold.

Ilyasov Romanoff is sitting behind a desk.

His feet are kicked up on the wooden top and he’s leaned back in the chair, arms crossed over his chest, a big smile on his face.

“*Mladshiy brat*. Little brother! How nice to see you.” Ilyasov throws his arms wide but makes no move to get up. When I don’t respond after a few seconds, he gestures to the chair across from him. “Sit.”

I move forward, but I don't sit. Not yet. Behind me, the door to the office clangs closed.

Ilyasov looks so much like he did the last time I saw him—and yet completely different at the same time. He has the same boxy build as our father, short and broad. And the same close-cropped hair he's worn from the time he was a teenager.

His eyes are as calculating as ever. They see everything. Miss nothing.

The rest of him, however, is changed. He's covered in tattoos that peek out from beneath the collar and cuffs of his starched white dress shirt. Even his face is tattooed.

If Mother could see him, she would weep. It's a good thing she's dead.

"I must say, I was surprised to hear your voice," he comments. "I almost did not believe it. After all this time, what could Dima Romanoff want from his pathetic big brother?"

"Your words, Ilyasov. Not mine."

He wags his finger with a playful frown on his face. "Nah, nah, those are *your* words. Big brother can forgive, but he never forgets."

"It's been ten years."

"Ten years of silence. Ten years of estrangement. How can anything be solved without communication, little brother?"

I'm not sure what angle he's taking here. We both know damn well what happened ten years ago. Why things were left the way they were.

I choose my words carefully. "I think I communicated things to you pretty clearly ten years ago, *starshiy brat*. It is not my fault that you didn't like what I had to say."

Ilyasov's smile tightens at the corners. His relaxed position suddenly looks strained, rehearsed. "Who's blaming? I'm not. Besides, blame for what? We found our own ways, did we not, brother? I hold no grudges."

Bullshit. But if he wants to pretend, I'm happy to play along.

“Nor do I.”

“Bah!” Ilyasov runs his tongue over his teeth and waves his hand dismissively. “Enough talk of the past. Let’s move forward. To what do I owe the pleasure? You just miss me so much you had to drop by?”

I’d be shocked if Ilyasov doesn’t already know what’s going on with the Bratva back in New York.

But yet again, I play along. In this world, it’s easiest that way.

“Not exactly.”

His smile sours. His voice lowers, cools to an icy snarl. “Then what the fuck are you doing in my office, Dima?”

I sink to the seat he offered when I walked in. I lean forward, put my elbows on his desk, and look my brother in his eye.

Then I say what I came here to say.

“I need an army.”

Silence follows. Just my own brother looking back at me. His face so similar that it’s like staring into a mirror. I see the same cruelty in his eyes that I recognize in my own. The same stubbornness. The same arrogance.

But something else, too. Something darker. Something deeper.

Just a flash of it—then it’s gone. Like a creature disappearing under the surface of darkened waters.

And then he starts to laugh.

It’s a slow chuckle at first, barely audible. But soon it morphs into a full-on guffaw.

He leans back in his seat, chair wheezing, as he laughs until tears stream from his eyes. I sit coldly in place and watch as the fit finally passes through him.

“Oh, brother, of all the things I expected, that is not among them,” he says at last as he wipes the tears away.

“I appreciate the warm reception,” I drawl. “I’ll go.” I stand and start to head for the door.

“Don’t be such a drama queen!” Ilyasov grouses. “Come back, come back. Sit.”

I sigh, turn in place, and fix him with a wary glare. “It has been a long few days, brother. Perhaps I shouldn’t have come here at all.”

“There you go again with the histrionics. I’m asking you out of brotherly love, Dima—won’t you just sit?”

I eye him for a moment longer before I relent and slump back into the chair across from his desk. Ilyasov is fishing around in one of his desk drawers. I hear the clink of glass and then he resurfaces with a bottle of premium vodka and a pair of tumblers.

He fills each of them and hands me one. “A toast,” he proposes. “To our beloved father. Who gave you what should have been mine.”

My grip on the glass tightens. For a moment, I wonder if it will shatter in my hand.

Ilyasov’s eyes are dancing with more laughter. And then there it is again—that flash of something else. That predator swimming in the ocean of his irises.

The silence stretches for one moment too long to be friendly before Ilyasov dials back the intensity and sips on his drink. But his eyes never leave mine for a second.

“An army,” he muses softly, almost to himself. “What for?”

I have a feeling he knows *exactly* what for. But I’m in his territory. I have to play his games.

For now.

“A group of rebels in the Bratva are causing trouble for me. They’re working with the Albanians. They took control of the armory.”

Ilyasov stares at me for a long while, weighing my words and sipping on his vodka periodically until it's drained. Then he stands up. "Come with me."

I want to ask where we're going, but I know he's trying to assert his dominance. He's changing the location of the meeting on the fly to keep me on my toes.

Acting uncomfortable would only give him what he wants. But fighting back won't give me what I want.

Play his game, Dima, I counsel myself. For just a little bit longer.

He strides back down the hallway I was led through earlier. Men dressed in black with earpieces stand at attention outside various doorways. They don't say anything as Ilyasov walks out the door and back into the main area of the noisy club.

The music pulses louder than ever, sending vibrations through the floor and into my feet. People grind in a mass of exposed flesh on the dance floor. Women gyrate on upraised pedestals, nearly naked.

It's an orgy of sin.

And Ilyasov Romanoff is the one who makes it all happen.

Ilyasov waves to a waitress and, without coming close, she nods before rushing off towards the bar. A moment later, she meets us at a large corner booth with a tray of drinks.

"Good to see you, sir," she says in an indecipherable accent. Her legs are exposed in tiny black shorts with fish net stockings beneath them. Glitter is painted across her flat abs. As she places the drinks on the table, she bends over, giving us both an intentionally clear shot down her shirt at the surgeon-enhanced tits within.

Ilyasov waves the girl away and then turns to me. "These girls work for me," he explains. "Everyone here works for me. This is my club."

"Nice place."

It's exactly the kind of place Ilyasov would enjoy. Loud, flashy, in your face. Subtlety has never been his flavor.

“You like this? You should see the private rooms. We rent them out by the hour, but I’ll give you one for free if you’d like. The girls are on the house, of course. Pick any two you like. They’ll show you how to lighten up, take some stress off your shoulders.”

He lifts his arm and snaps his fingers. Instantly, another girl appears. This one has bright pink lips and breasts that have been squeezed and lifted into a tiny black corset top.

She gives us each a sultry smile. “Yes?”

Ilyasov tips his head to me. “Show my brother a good time.”

Without hesitation, the girl walks over to me, grabs the booth on either side of my head, and pulls herself up until she’s straddling me. Her eyes lock on mine and she rolls her hips over me with obvious skill.

From afar, she looked like a mirage. Pure sex. Pure temptation.

But up close, the illusion cracks. She smells like leather and hairspray. I can see the cakey layers of makeup across her skin. Sweat beads on her forehead and drips down her neck. Mottled bruises and hickeys range all over her body. Perhaps even a few teeth marks—from her previous patrons this evening, no doubt.

Like Ilyasov said, this woman works for him. She does what she’s told to do for the men who pay her boss the right price.

I’ve never wanted anyone less.

Inexplicably, Arya’s face appears in my mind.

I picture her lying back on the table at the vet clinic, her eyes screwed shut in pleasure, her mouth wrapped around a moan as I fill her with a savage thrust.

That was authentic.

That was real.

This bullshit? It’s all show with no substance beneath. The façade of a crumbling building with nothing within. Pixie dust on a corpse.

I push the woman roughly off my lap and away from me. She doesn't look offended or surprised—she looks frightened.

But not frightened of me. She casts nervous eyes over at Ilyasov, wondering what he'll do now that she failed.

"I'm not in the mood," I tell my brother. "Tell her she can go."

Ilyasov sends the girl away as quickly as she appeared. She doesn't hesitate—just scurries away from the booth. "It's rude to refuse your host's gift, you know," he remarks to me.

"I think an exception can be made when that gift is a person."

He rolls his eyes. "How could I have forgotten? You don't use people. My morally upstanding brother."

"I do use people. We all use people. It's how the world turns."

My brother places a fist beneath his chin and looks at me, feigning interest. "Is that so?"

"It is. You use the women at your club to make money and impress your guests. Those women use the patrons here to pay their bills. The patrons use the women to help themselves forget about whatever shit is going on in their lives," I say. "I'm fine with using people—as long as those people are getting something out of the deal as well. What you do, what the Albanians do... there is only one winner. And many, many losers."

I know Ilyasov doesn't give a flying fuck about my theory. He sits back in the booth and takes a long drink of whatever the waitress brought us. "And you're willing to give up your Bratva over those principles?" he asks.

"So you *have* heard what's going on in New York City, then," I remark.

"Of course I have," he snaps. "I may have left the city, but my last name is still Romanoff."

"Does that mean you'll help me?"

At that, my brother's mouth tilts up into a smirk. The rose tattooed on his cheek is lost in his dimple. "See, I like what you said about everyone using

everyone else. It's only fair so long as everyone is getting something out of the deal."

I bite back a grimace. "You would get a stronger relationship with your brother and protect your family's name. If the Romanoffs can go down in New York, people may think they can go down in Chicago, too."

Ilyasov shakes his head. "No offense to you, brother," he purrs, "but my men are loyal to me. They have been for years. I do not need either of the things you're offering."

"Then what do you need, Ilyasov?"

"A favor," he says with a casual shrug. "I just need you to run an errand for me. Take care of something I've been meaning to take care of."

Anyone else might be fooled by my brother's tone. But, ten years of estrangement or not, I see the glint in his eyes.

I clench my jaw. "Who do you want me to kill?"

His smirk turns into a full-blown smile. "That's why I admire you, Dima. You always get straight to the point. No pussy-footing around."

"I wish you'd do the same."

The moment for niceties is over. The bargaining chips are on the table. It's time to negotiate.

Ilyasov's glare sharpens. "Just a man who has been bothering me. I won't bore you with the details. Should you accept, I'll give you the information you need to know."

"I need to know what he did."

My brother wags his finger. "No, *sobrat*, that's where you're wrong. You don't need to know what he did. You just need to do as I say. If you want my help, you'll help me first. That is the deal."

I tighten my fist at my side. "If I do this, you'll lend me an army? As many men and weapons as I need?"

He plants his elbows on the table and leans forward. “If you do this for me, I’ll make sure you take back the Bratva our family built. Whatever it takes.”

I’ve come this far. Ducked bullets. Killed men who would’ve killed me if they could. This is the last hurdle to reclaiming what is mine.

What is one more rotten life snuffed out?

Grudgingly, I hold out my hand to my brother.

And, with that shadow rippling through his eyes once more, Ilyasov clasps our hands together.

A deal with the devil I thought I’d never see again in this world.

ARYA

SOMETIME LATER—SOMEPLACE ELSE

I'm drowning. That's what it feels like, anyway.

My body feels heavy, almost waterlogged, and the world is coming to me through a dense haze. Just a blurry, diffuse light through my closed eyelids.

At least there's light. Which means that I'm alive. And if I'm alive...

Then I need to get the hell up.

There's an urgency in my mind I can't explain. I still don't know where I am or what happened—hell, I can't even remember my own name right now. But my instincts are propelling me to move. To assess. I need to figure out what's going on and figure out what to do next.

My body responds before my eyes do. I lift my torso slightly. Literally a millimeter or two.

Instantly, every nerve ending gets napalmed with pain. Stomach. Head. Between my legs. All of it burning like the world is ending.

But it's a clarifying pain. It brings details with it. Memories.

My name is Arya George.

I just had a baby.

His name is Lukas.

He is...

Where is he, actually?

That's the thought that finally does it. Pries my eyes open and beats back the tide of pain.

The room I'm in is a wash of bars of light and deep shadows. I blink away the haze and try to make sense of the objects that surround me.

Whatever this place is, it's square. Small. Concrete. A basement room or bunker, maybe. I can make out the rough shape of a doorway. But there's no handle to open the entrance. No way out.

My heart begins to race. Panic brings more memories flooding back.

Erik in my room. Threatening me.

Brigitte coming in. Plucking Lukas from his crib.

Lifting his little hand in a wave. "Say goodbye to Mama..."

Same as I did back then—whenever the hell that was—I let out an animal scream, a howl of pain and anger and betrayal.

A scream for my baby, wherever he is.

"Hello?" I cry out. "Help me!"

My voice cracks in agony and fear. I fumble to my knees—that's as much as I can manage right now—and crawl across the cold stone floor.

"Who's there? Where am I?"

My words echo uselessly off the cement walls, reverberating around the room and through me in a way that's almost physical. I can feel them vibrating in my bones.

"Lukas!"

He's too small to understand or answer even if he could understand, but logic isn't at play right now. Fear is choking me like a pair of hands around my throat. I just want someone to explain to me what is going on.

I drop back on my haunches and try to remember what Brigitte had said. Something about my debts. About how it was time to pay up.

But what did Brigitte have to do with any of that? She knew the real story. She knew what Jorik had done to me—and what I'd done to him.

After all, Brigitte was the first person I told about the drugs.

“All women need these days is a man to take care of them. Jorik will take care of you. You'd be stupid to leave him,” she'd said to me when I filled her in on all the horrors I'd discovered my ex-fiancé hiding.

Something in my gut hated that advice. Rejected it outright. But I had no money and nowhere else to go. So I stayed.

Then the deaths started.

Newspaper headlines about a slurry of overdoses all linked to the same supplier began to appear rapid-fire. Every day, the body count grew. A mountain of dead. All with the same poison running through their veins.

Jorik played it off at first, waving away the news as nothing more than fear tactics.

Then Altin died.

I didn't even know my friend was a user. Altin was a fellow bartender, back in the days when I was still working at the club, slinging drinks and dealing with rowdy, haughty, mob-connected patrons. He had kind eyes and a bright laugh.

But when paychecks landed each month, he went to Jorik and bought everything he could. Then he went home and pumped it all into his arm with a needle.

Until he ended up in a city morgue, like all those other poor, faceless addicts. Those kind eyes staring up at the fluorescent ceiling. That bright laugh silenced forever.

The night I learned that Altin was dead, I left work early. Ran home, locked myself in the bathroom, and cried until I felt like I was going to vomit.

The tears stopped eventually. I fell silent.

That's how I heard Jorik barging into the apartment we shared. He was yelling at someone on the phone. "Am I supposed to care that a bunch of amateurs don't know how much they can handle? Since when is the dealer at fault? They don't arrest the bartender when some alkie motherfucker's liver turns to jelly."

A pause followed. I pressed my ear against the door, trying to hear more. Jorik never talked to me about work. He liked to keep those parts of his life "separate," he said. *For my own good.*

That was the lie. I wish I could say I didn't swallow it whole.

Finally, he sighed. "I'm only giving the laced stuff to new clients. People we've been working with for years are getting pure. It's the only way I can justify not raising prices. So if you want to tell our best customers we'll be charging them extra, be my fucking guest."

Laced stuff? My heart dropped. I knew it at once. In my bones, really.

Jorik killed Altin. Sold him the poisoned shit that ended his life.

And from there, it was an easy jump to understanding the greater horror: Jorik had killed all those people. Every day, when another batch of overdose deaths hit the front page news, it was my fiancé who'd supplied the fatal hit.

I was engaged to a mass murderer.

What happened next that night it all came to light was mostly a blur. I stayed put in the bathroom until Jorik stormed back out. I packed my things. I got ready to leave forever.

But one moment amidst all that chaotic haze stands out clearly.

With a bag in my hand holding the essential things I owned, I went into the room he warned me never to enter. Into the closet he made me swear I'd never open.

Even though I knew what I'd find there, it still came as a numb shock.

Box after box filled with kilos of laced heroin. The poison running through the veins of the city.

And even though I knew what I had to do, I still hesitated. For one long moment, I stood there, looking at hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of drugs. It wasn't the money that I saw there, though.

It was the lives they would cost. Altin's and a million others.

In the end, that's what broke through my daze. That's what made me act.

I took the first kilo to the shower. Turned the water on. Sliced it open with a pair of kitchen shears and dumped the shit down the drain where it belonged.

Then the next.

And the next.

And the next.

Until my fiancé's livelihood was swimming in the Hudson River and he couldn't hurt anyone else.

Then I ran from him.

For so long, I thought I'd gotten away. Turns out... I was wrong.

Suddenly, I hear footsteps just outside the door of the cell. I'm hungry and aching, but I push myself to standing and then back up until I'm flat against the cement wall, as far as possible from the door.

A shiver moves down my spine as it opens. "Lukas!" My eyes move to him instantly, homing in on my son being carried in someone's arms. A cry lodges in my throat, and I reach my arms out, desperate to hold him.

Then—Brigitte.

She's the one holding my son. The expression on her face stops me cold. I've never seen her look so callous, so unfeeling. Her red-painted lips are pinched in a scowl and she wrinkles her nose at the sight of me. As though I actively disgust her.

"You stink," she says.

“Where am I?” I demand, taking a step towards her. “How did I get here?”

She holds out a hand to stop me and then reveals the gun just inside the waistband of her jeans. “Don’t come any closer.”

“Brigitte, what—”

“Don’t come any closer,” she repeats, her tone lashing out like a whip. “I’m only here so you’ll stop screaming. You’re going to wake Lukas.”

His eyes are open. He’s already awake. “Where am I? Why am I here?”

“Because your past catches up with you, Arya.”

“This is for Jorik?” I shake my head in confusion. “You’re working for him?”

“I’m working *with* him, you stupid bitch,” Brigitte snaps, laying her hand protectively over Lukas’s bundled head.

I want to break her fingers for touching my baby. But I force myself to stand still.

For now.

“I saw him first, you know,” she reminisces casually. “Before you. I met him at the bar and I liked him, but he was drawn in by you. By your...” She gestures to me, her hand tracing half of an hourglass shape in the air. “He learned his lesson and came to me after you betrayed him.”

My mind can’t wrap around what my best friend is saying. *I betrayed Jorik?* That isn’t what she said night after night when I sat on her couch, drunk on wine and fear, recounting the horrors of the monster I’d escaped. Horrors I’d buried, hoping to forget.

I told Brigitte about Jorik coming home, high and angry. About him slapping me around. I told her about his moods and his temper. The way he threatened me to do things I didn’t want to do. *It’ll be easier if you just say yes.*

But *I’m* the traitor?

“You two are partners, then?” I ask, still not fully understanding.

“Christ, you’re stupid. Do I have to spell everything out for you?” Brigitte drawls scornfully. “We’re together.”

My stomach roils. I’m not sure if it’s from pain, hunger, or shock. Probably all three. The world doesn’t seem to be right side up anymore. I’m not sure if it ever will be again.

“When you left him, he asked me to keep an eye on you. To monitor your movements. So I let you stay at my house.”

I squeeze my eyes closed, as if I can block out the reality of what she’s saying. But I can’t.

She keeps talking. “When you moved into your new place, I gave Jorik the address. I told him where you worked. I showed him every text, every voicemail, every picture you ever sent me. All of it went straight back to Jorik. So he could keep an eye on you.”

“So why wait?” I spit, my shock giving way to anger. “Why let me go on living my life for years without doing anything? Why act now?”

Brigitte’s hard expression softens. She looks down at Lukas, a distant smile on her lips. “You got pregnant.”

What the fuck? Just when the pieces were starting to fit together, she drops that bomb, scattering them to the corners of the earth again.

I stammer, “What the hell does my pregnancy have to do with anything?”

“We didn’t know who the father was at first,” Brigitte continues, her upper lip curling in distaste. “But it didn’t matter. When I told Jorik, he decided that could be how you repaid him.”

My body goes numb. I can’t feel my fingers or toes. All the blood in my body seems to have rushed to my head.

“You... you want Lukas?”

Her eyes find mine. They’re brewing with viscous, uncut hatred. “Have I never told you I can’t have children? A medical condition. Barren until the day I die.”

Her bitterness hits me like a tidal wave. As do more memories.

All the times Brigitte brought me ginger ale and crackers when I was nauseous in the first trimester flash in my mind. I remember coming out of my doctor's appointments to her anxious texts, wondering how things had gone, what the doctor had said.

She had seemed so concerned for me. Without a partner to go through pregnancy with, I was so grateful for her support. I thanked her too many times to count for being there for me. The pillar I would fall down without.

Now, I know the truth. She wasn't there to *help* me.

She was there to *watch* me.

To monitor my progress. To make sure Lukas was fine...

So she could take him as her own.

The dizzying rush in my head begins to fade, giving way to dangerously clear thoughts for the first time in hours.

I may be locked in this cell. I may be weak and confused and outmaneuvered from every angle.

But I know one thing for damn sure: no one is taking my baby from me.

I shove myself off the wall and run as fast as I can across the room. I'm in pain and still healing from giving birth, but that doesn't matter right now.

What matters in this moment is getting my son back from this psychopath.

Brigitte has a gun, but it's shoved in the side of her pants. She can't hold onto a baby, grab for her gun, and hold me off all at once. And I'm betting on the fact that she won't drop Lukas to go for the weapon.

When Brigitte realizes what I'm doing, she lets out a yelp and moves her hand to the gun, but I'm on her too fast. I claw at her arm before she can release the weapon.

It's a strange dance, fighting her while also trying to keep Lukas safe, but I do the best I can. I grab a handful of Brigitte's hair and drag her further into the room, away from the door. That way, she can't escape and slam the door

shut on me.

“Help! Help!” she screams.

Lukas is crying along with her. And so am I, I realize. Shrieking like a banshee as I unleash everything I have on this traitor, this monster.

I try to grab the gun from her waist, but she twists her body away from me. I lift my foot and bring it down hard on Brigitte’s knee. Something crunches in her. She wails out in pain.

Something crunches in me, too. The blow sends a nasty jolt surging through my own body. I feel like I’ve ripped myself open.

Brigitte crumples to the floor and I fall with her, grappling blindly because I’m afraid of what will happen if I let go.

Will she grab the gun and shoot me? Will she run away and take Lukas with her? Will I ever see him again?

So long as I have a hold on some part of her, Lukas is still here. Still with me. For as long as that lasts, at least.

My body is ravaged completely. My head is still throbbing and tender from where Erik smashed me into the bedpost. And, lest anyone forget, I just gave birth three days ago. I’m a fucking wreck.

But that doesn’t matter. I can’t let it stop me.

“Get off of me!” Brigitte snarls, swinging at me with her one free arm. She lands blows to the top of my head, my neck, and my back, but I barely feel them. Compared with everything else going on in my body, they are nothing.

“Give me back my baby!” I find her throat and squeeze. My nails tear at the skin of her neck.

She does the same to me. Both of us strangling the life from the other. Lukas crying. Brigitte crying. Me crying. Chaos and pain and screams bouncing from wall to wall to wall to wall.

Only one of us will emerge alive.

The other woman is going to die.

But before that can happen, guards appear in the doorway. A blur of men rushing into the room and tearing us apart.

It only takes one of them to detain me, holding me in a headlock, my arms pinned and disabled. That doesn't stop a second guard from throwing a nasty punch that lands squarely on my jaw. My head snaps sideways with the blow.

I feel like I'm going to be sick. Not only because of my pain level, but because I know I lost.

Whoever these people are, they won. They're going to take Lukas away from me.

I'm going to lose him forever.

Brigitte and Lukas are rushed out of the room between another pair of armed thugs. I watch through tear-filled eyes, but I don't even catch a tiny glimpse of him.

No last look.

No parting wave.

Nothing.

He's just gone. And then I'm left alone in a cell with strange men wearing all black.

When I start to cry, the guard drops me to the ground. I land in a groaning heap on the cold floor, shock and anguish warring for a prime spot in my heart.

Jorik and Brigitte wanted Lukas. Now they have him.

Part of me doesn't care what these men do to me next. Why should I? Lukas is gone, so how could I ever go on without him?

Still, somewhere deep, the fire for survival still flickers. There are embers of something like a will to live burning inside of me that can't be extinguished by this crushing blow. No matter how I feel now, I don't want to die. Not like this.

And I know why.

It's not just biology, that innately human desire to persevere no matter what.

Not just stubbornness.

Not just hope.

But because Dima would expect more from me.

That's the thought that stays in my head as the guards look down on me in disgust for a moment longer before they too turn and leave through the door.

Dima would expect more.

That's the thought that stays in my head as the door clangs shut and I'm left alone once again.

Dima would tell you to fight.

It's what he would do. Hell, it's what he did already. He fought again and again for us.

Keep fighting—for Dima.



I huddle on the bed and close my eyes. I don't know how long I lay there, but at some point, I manage to fall asleep. The dreams I have are a mixture of fantasy and real life.

I'm still in the cement box of a room, but in this illusion, Dima is there, standing next to me. Huge. Bearded. Hooded, just like he was when we met. More shadow than man.

He bends down next to me and whispers in my ear. "I'm going to get you out of here." He picks me up in his arms and cradles me against his chest like a baby. Kisses my tears away.

His beard is rough against my face. But his smell is heaven itself...

That dream flickers away. Another fades in in its place.

Lukas is brought back into the room. Immediately, just as I did after he was born, I bring him to my breast to feed him, to care for him.

But he cries out. Pushes me away from him. Like I'm not good enough for his needs.

Then Brigitte slinks back in like a snake. She plucks him from my trembling hands.

"You're not his mother anymore," she hisses.

I scream and scream and scream as they retreat back into the shadows she emerged from...

But no one hears me.

No one cares.

DIMA

As soon as the deal with Ilyasov is struck, I get the fuck out of there.

That place is teeming with unsettling vibes. Seeing my estranged brother after ten years of utter silence didn't help. Too many damn skeletons in the closet, I guess.

Or maybe I'm just fucking exhausted. I haven't slept in God-only-knows-how-long.

By the time I get back to my car, the dawn sun is starting to peek over Lake Michigan. I could go looking for a hotel. Or I could hunker down inside Arya's car on a deserted side street and close my eyes for a few hours.

The latter option is easier, but it's also more dangerous. I'm exposed out here. Vulnerable.

I don't have any reason to believe I'm being followed—no one has pointed a gun at me in a few hours, which is refreshing change of pace after the last few days. But I'd rather have a solid door with a bolt between me and the outside world when I go unconscious.

A hotel it is, then.

I'm climbing into the front to set out on my search for a lowkey hotel room—when I notice a patch of bright blue in the back seat, illuminated by the streetlight.

It's Lukas's blanket.

At once, I feel as if there's a fishhook in my chest and someone is yanking at it like a motherfucker. The weirdest feeling I've had in a long, long time.

"*Malyshka*," I murmur under my breath in the empty car. *My baby boy*.

I grind my teeth against this onslaught of unnamable emotion. It's fucking ridiculous. I have a war to fight. Enemies to slaughter. And yet I'm sitting here, getting all torn up over the sight of a little blue blanket.

It's totally impersonal. Hospital-issued. Every baby in the goddamn country gets given the same one.

But there's only one *malyshka*.

There's only one Lukas Romanoff.

The city beckons ahead of me. A hotel. A shower. A bed and a few hours of hard-earned sleep.

Instead, I whip the car around in a screeching U-turn and head back towards the suburbs.



Outside Of Erik Arnaud's House

Coming here was a bad idea.

What if someone picked up my trail? What if reports have spread about the car I'm in? I could be bringing enemies right to their door.

"Just put the goddamn blanket down and leave," I growl to myself.

I'm standing on the front stoop to Brigitte's brother's house. The sun still hasn't fully risen. The sky overhead is mottled gray and black.

The house itself is dark. No lights in the windows. No one awake or moving.

It's like I'm the last human being on the planet.

The blanket in my hands is the only thing that feels real. Warm and soft, it smells vaguely like my son.

I repeat my command to myself: "Put it down and leave, motherfucker."

Why is that so difficult?

The house number gleams in front of me in the headlights of a passing car. Unlucky number thirteen.

I'm not superstitious, but you don't make it as don without learning to trust your gut. And something deep in my chest is throbbing like an alarm right now.

The house looks innocuous enough. Clean, white-painted bricks, a small fake tree on the left side of the door, a mailbox on the right. It's a suburban dream. Picture perfect. Not a twig out of place in the hedges or a blade of grass growing wrong in the lawn.

So why do I feel so uneasy?

That's when it hits me.

It doesn't look lived in. It looks like a set house built for a movie. Fake. Composed. A mirage in the night.

The throbbing intensifies.

Arya is in there.

My son is in there.

And something very, very bad is in there with them. That's what my senses are saying to me. Or rather, screaming.

Kick in the fucking door and check on them.

Make sure they're safe.

Make sure they're alive.

As soon as the idea enters my head, I shove it aside. Coming here was stupid enough. Busting in like a one-man SWAT team would be making things ten times worse.

I take a deep breath and exhale my burgeoning tension. I'm just deliriously exhausted. All this shit I think I'm sensing? It's bullshit. Made-up. My own mind betraying me.

I need to sleep and then I need to refocus on what matters: separating Zotov's head from his shoulders and taking back my goddamn city.

But Arya... Lukas...

"Enough!" I hiss through clenched teeth. I growl in frustration and hurl Lukas's blanket onto the porch in a heap. Then I turn and stomp down the path towards the sidewalk.

Halfway there, I stop.

And turn around.

Slowly...

Slowly...

I almost didn't see it at first. A sign, wedged behind a shrub at the side of the house. It's white. Blends in with the bricks. The foliage had hidden it from view, but a breeze must've knocked it loose. It's visible now, peeking out

from between the leaves.

Most of it is obscured. But I see two words stand out in red block letters.

FOR SALE.

I sprint over, a nauseating feeling rising up in my stomach, and rip the sign from behind the bush. It's a For Sale sign with a blonde realtor's face smiling beneath it. Attached to the side is a stack of brochures with a picture of house number thirteen on them.

"This show home is ready for you. Easy clean, low-maintenance, luxury vinyl floors spread across the main floor with plush carpets in the three bedrooms upstairs. New appliances, washer and dryer included—"

I crumple up the brochure in my fist and race up to the steps to bang with both fists on the front door. I don't care if Lukas is sleeping. I don't care if I wake up every sleeping baby within a ten-mile radius.

Something isn't right. I'm going to figure out what that is.

I knock a few more times and then try the handle. It's unlocked.

"Arya!" I'm shouting her name before I'm even inside. "Arya, where are you?"

The inside of the house looks as bland and perfect as the outside. A small table in the entryway has another fake plant on it, along with a coffee table book of Vogue covers. What kind of bachelor has a book like that lying around?

It's wrong. It's all wrong.

Fuck. Fuck. "Fuck!" I roar as I run up the stairs.

The beds are mussed, the blankets pushed back like people just recently went to sleep. But they're empty now.

"Arya?"

I run to each of the rooms. When I see the empty bassinet next to the bed, that fishhook sensation in my chest multiplies a hundred times over.

My brain is in a fog. My thoughts are flying around, totally disconnected from each other.

It's a far cry from what I'm accustomed to. I've been in the thick of battle, bullets flying, and still managed to keep a clear head.

But now, all I can think of is Lukas and Arya. What happened to them. Where they might've gone. There's no plan—just a blind, raging panic as I tear through the house looking for anything at all that can tell me what happened.

Maybe Zotov or the Albanians caught up to them.

Maybe those motherfuckers followed me when I dropped them off and decided to go for revenge rather than outright killing me.

But if they did, they would have called me by now. They would have notified me of what they did—to taunt me, if nothing else. And yet, it's been quiet since I got to Chicago. Radio fucking silence. Quiet enough that I have to believe I wasn't followed.

They can't possibly know where I am.

So then who the hell took my son?

Arya's sweatshirt is in a heap by the door to her bedroom. I pick it up, as if the answers I'm looking for can be transferred to me by touch. As if I could look into the past and see what happened here.

But it doesn't tell me a fucking thing.

Frustrated, I drop the sweatshirt and tear through the rest of the house. I rip open drawers, trash closets, and flip mattresses upside down, turning the show home into a nightmare in a desperate attempt to find a single shred of evidence.

Then, in the living room downstairs, I find it.

A receipt for Chinese food on the table, surrounded by half-empty takeout cartons. The name of the soon-to-be-dead man is printed across the top.

“Good to meet you, Erik Arnaud,” I whisper under my breath. “Can’t wait until we meet again.”

ARYA

THE CELL

When I wake up, my breasts are pulsing and full. I palm them and groan with pain.

As I'm doing it, breast still exposed, the door to my room suddenly opens. A guard stands in the doorway, taking up most of the frame with his wide-set shoulders.

He chuckles when he sees me. "I've heard milk is best straight from the tit. Care to give me a taste?"

"That's fucking disgusting." I pull my shirt down to cover myself.

The man just laughs again, pleased with himself.

"What do you want?" I croak. "Where's my baby?"

"You don't have a baby anymore," he barks. "He belongs to someone else now. Just like you will."

I frown. "What does that mean?"

Apparently, it's not for me to understand. The man doesn't say anything else as he hauls me up by my elbow and drags me out of the room.

For a brief second, I'm relieved to be out of the small room. I was growing convinced I would die in there.

Then I realize we are in a windowless, gray hallway.

Wherever I am, I'm still trapped, still underground, and still probably going to die. My circumstances haven't changed.

The guard pulls me up by two others dressed just like him at the end of the hallway. One of them grabs my other arm roughly. They drag me, feet dangling, into yet another cement box.

The walls of this one are riddled with shower heads. Before I can fully comprehend what is happening, they're dropping me onto my hands and knees and retreating.

Then ice cold water spurts out of every shower head on the wall.

The guards slam the door. There is nowhere to escape the icy spray. It bites against my exposed skin and soaks into the clothes I borrowed from Erik, dragging the sweatpants down my hips.

"Strip!" a guard orders through the door. "You can't come out until you're clean."

I don't want to get naked in front of these strange men, but what choice do I have? So I let the heavy sweatpants fall to the floor and peel off the borrowed hoodie.

"All of it!" another guard bellows. His voice is deeper, but I can hear the enjoyment in it. "Panties and bra, too."

I raise my middle finger to the door, my small act of rebellion, and strip entirely nude.

My stomach is still extended from having just given birth, and I can see dark stretch marks on my upper thighs and my side.

I look how I feel: utterly ruined.

Tiny bottles of hotel shampoo and body wash get thrown through the slat in the door to me. When I bend over to pick them up, a guard whistles.

I close my eyes, grit my teeth against the cold, and wash myself.

I can't imagine they would be getting me cleaned up for death, so I take a small amount of solace in the fact that they want me to look presentable.

After I shower, I'm given a thin, itchy towel and walked down the hallway to another cement room. A black dress is hanging from a rafter, floating like a shadow in mid-air.

The command is unspoken but clear: *put it on*.

I dress with frozen, fumbling fingers, grateful at least to be covered again.

After a few minutes of anxious waiting, the guards appear again. They walk me to the end of the hallway. Down here, I hear voices.

When they open the door, the sight is enough to make me think I've lost my mind.

A gaggle of women fill the room. They're bunched together, dabbing each other's cheeks with blush, brushing their hair, and dolling themselves up in cracked mirrors. For some reason, I'm imagining I'm a contestant in a beauty pageant.

But when the guards push me through the door and close it behind me without explanation, it becomes obvious I'm not dreaming.

The women all stare at me for a second, and then go back to their work, quietly. A few of them are crying.

Definitely not a dream.

More like a nightmare.

Whatever is going on, I know I'm not amongst enemies right now. Based on the fear that lanced through the group when the guards appeared, they are victims, too.

Victims of what? I'm not sure yet.

My hair is still dripping wet, so I use the towel I dried my body off with to squeeze the water out of it. When it's passably dry, I find a brush on a nearby table and run it through my long locks. The strands around my face are already drying in curls.

"You can use this." A rail-thin woman with blue-shadowed eyelids and dark purple lipstick hands me a plastic bag of make-up. "It looks like you need it."

You have bruises.”

I’m too stunned to do anything but accept the bag and open the compact mirror.

She’s right. I do need it. The punch from the guard is already changing from red to purple on my jaw and the bruises I earned from Fyodor in the hospital a few days ago are fading, but still a nasty greenish-yellow color. I look like I’m about to be sick.

“I don’t want this,” I say quickly, closing the compact and handing it back to the woman. “Thanks, but... I don’t want it.”

“No one here does,” the girl whispers. She’s missing a few important teeth and she has the tell-tale scars of drug abuse etched into the hollows of her face. “But it’s for your own good.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know what you mean.”

The girl looks annoyed that she has to explain it to me and slightly nervous that the other women might get upset with her for doing so. Her eyes dart around the room before she leans in, whispering. “The prettier you are, the more money they’ll spend. The more money they’ll spend, the better off you’ll be.”

My stomach bottoms out. Suddenly, I don’t just look like I’m about to sick. I *am* about to be sick. I clutch my abdomen and turn away, certain I’m about to spew everywhere.

Thankfully, the feeling fades before I actually vomit. The woman lays a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry. Even with the bruises, you’re one of the prettiest girls here. You’ll be fine. The auction goes quickly.”

An auction.

I’m at an *auction*.

When Dima told me, even as don of the Bratva, he didn’t participate in human trafficking, a small part of me had been impressed. As if he was doing something noble, something good.

Now, I realize it was just basic human decency. Who could look around this room full of human beings and think about selling them for a profit?

Dima didn't stay away from human trafficking because he was a saint.

He did it because he wasn't the fucking devil.

The powder is a couple shades too light for my skin tone, but it's better than nothing. I powder it across the bruises on my cheeks and jawline and then dab on some bright pink blush.

I don't bother with eye shadow or mascara. Enough of the women in the room have black streaks running down their cheeks from crying that I don't see the point. Very soon, I won't be any different.

It feels wrong to do, but I try not to think of Lukas. Right now, my goal is survival. Staying alive. I want Lukas with me more than I've ever wanted anything in my life, but I can't do anything for him right now.

What I can do is focus on the task ahead of me and getting through it. I can focus on staying alive. And that's much harder to do when I'm heartbroken and weeping over my baby.

So I push his precious chubby cheeks and blue gray eyes from my mind.

It's the only way I'll survive to see him again.



When the guards come back, the women are ordered to get into a single file line. We are marched from the room with a flurry of armed men on either side of us. They lead us down the hallway towards a door at the far end.

When it opens to reveal a staircase, my spirits lift for a moment.

Up. Out of this dungeon. Sunlight.

Not exactly, as it turns out.

My hopes were too high. The windows on the floor above have all been blacked out with paint or tarps.

We are led through the hallways and past several sets of double-wide doors to a smaller entrance. Through there and up a short flight of stairs. Then out into an open space.

I immediately recognize we are on a stage. Ropes hang haphazardly above us, holding up ancient, rusting lights that look like they could fall at any moment. The red velvet curtains are moth-eaten and dusty.

We are marched to center stage, the curtains still drawn so the audience is hidden from sight. Muffled voices murmur unseen on the other side. My heart lurches as though it wants to escape from my body.

The guard who made the joke about milking me earlier breaks away from the group and stands in front of us, his face twisted into a scowl.

“When the curtains open,” he announces, “you’ll step forward one at a time. Walk forward, spin, and walk back. Anything else and you’ll be punished on sight.”

Surely, they wouldn’t punish us in front of an audience, I think—before I remember what we are here for. Anyone who would sit in a crowd and bid on women surely wouldn’t care if they were beaten in front of their eyes. Many in the crowd have worse things in store for their prizes, I’m sure.

I shiver.

And then it begins.

The curtains open—and I black out.

Not actually. Or at least, not physically. Physically, my body is working well enough. It does what it’s supposed to. I stand, waiting my turn. When the girl next to me steps forward, turns, and then steps back into line, I know that’s my cue. My legs move me forward automatically. I spin—numbly, slowly—and then retreat back to my place in line.

Mentally, however, I’m gone.

I don’t see the faces in the crowd.

I don’t know who says what or what any of it means.

I don't process a damn thing until the curtains close and the women who were purchased—me being one of them—are pulled into a separate line.

As we're marched off of the stage, I hear cruel laughter. For some reason, that breaks through my fog.

I look over just in time to see Brigitte.

She's standing backstage between two layers of curtains. Her eyes fixed on mine. She grins and waggles her fingers at me in a mocking wave. My son is nowhere to be seen.

Then an anonymous shove in the back sends me stumbling down the stairs. I hit the wall, headfirst, and wince in pain.

No one stops to ask if I'm okay. No one fucking cares.

More unseen hands propel me down the hallway. One of the guards in black takes hold of me by the crook of my elbow.

"Time to meet your new owner, sweetheart," he hisses sourly in my ear.

And just like that, I'm on my way to hell.

DIMA

SIX WEEKS LATER—EVENING—BURNHAM PARK IN CHICAGO

Six weeks.

Six. Fucking. Weeks.

I shouldn't still be in Chicago. I should be back in New York City beating Zotov Stepanov into a fucking pulp.

But nothing has gone according to plan.

For six long weeks, I've plagued this city like a ghost. I've cornered and beaten down every low-level mob fuck I can find. Looking for clues. Looking for answers. Looking for a way to get to the man I'm supposed to kill.

And it's all been for fucking nothing.

Apparently, The Butcher is goddamn untouchable.

The man I'm supposed to kill changes safehouses monthly. Never hangs out at the same place two nights in a row. He cycles through bodyguards relentlessly, a fresh crop of them every week. His security is airtight. I haven't gotten so much as a look at the bastard.

All I have is a bullet with his name on it and nowhere to fire.

It's the most frustrating goddamn thing I've ever done in my life. Since the day I took over the Romanoff Bratva, if I wanted a man dead, all I had to do was snap my fingers and his head would be delivered to me on a silver platter

before the sun was down.

But Zotov stole that from me.

I'm back to what I was when I started all those years ago—a lone wolf.

As I wait and hunt, I try not to think about Arya and Lukas. Not because I don't care. And not because I'm not looking for them.

But because when I think about them, I see red. Blood pulses behind my eyes, my fists clench, and I can't function without wanting to throttle someone. None of those reactions are conducive to getting shit done.

I'm not used to these emotions. Usually, I compartmentalize. I control. But with this, I can't rein my anger in.

My son and his mother are missing and I don't have the power and reach of my Bratva at my fingertips to remedy the situation.

Instead, my key resources are being controlled by a reckless, spineless fuck who hasn't had the courage to come out of hiding in six weeks.

If Zotov had reared his head, Gennady would know where he is by now. We would have formulated a plan for how to get rid of him.

As it is, we have to wait.

And I'm getting very fucking sick of waiting.

As if on cue, my phone rings. It's Gennady. I lean back against the park bench where I'm sitting and answer his call.

"You have news?" I bark.

"Hello to you, too," Gennady cracks. "I'm doing great and thanks for asking."

"Gennady, cut the shit."

"Someone's in a pleasant mood this morning. To answer your question, yes, I have news."

"Fucking finally."

“I know. I’m sorry. Shit has been a mess here. It’s like chasing ghosts, Dima. No one knows who’s doing what. Who’s calling the shots. Who’s working for who.”

I grit my teeth, imagining the mess I’ll have to clean up when this is all over. “What *do* you know?”

“We already knew Zotov allied with one faction of the Albanians, thanks to our run-in at the diner a few weeks back.”

“Six weeks,” I remind him. “Down to the day. It’s been six fucking weeks.” The words grind out between clenched teeth.

“Right. So they’ve been allied for a while, but I finally found out what they’re working on.”

“Well?” I ask, keeping my voice low.

“What do you think it is?”

“I don’t fucking know,” I snap. “You’re my eyes and ears right now.”

I’m tired of hiding in an unfamiliar city. Tired of picking up scraps of information like a fucking pigeon.

So I don’t want to play guessing games. I want Gennady to tell me what’s going on.

“Women,” Gennady fills in with a dark edge in his voice. “I heard rumblings of trafficking a few weeks ago, but now, it’s obvious. They are... young, Dima. It started with the usuals. Runaways, junkies, that kind of thing. But it’s getting worse. Some of them barely legal, some of them not even that. Girls just getting snatched up off the streets. It’s fucking bleak, to say the least.”

I squeeze my eyes closed in silent rage. “What are the cops doing?”

On his end of the call, Gennady sighs bitterly. “I haven’t heard anything yet. I’ve spoken with a few of our contacts in the police force and they aren’t on Zotov’s side. You know how the blue can be. They don’t trust change or new leadership. None of them are willing to risk their careers covering for a don they don’t know.”

“He’s not a don,” I growl.

Gennady clamors to correct his mistake. “Right, obviously, but that’s what he’s calling himself. He’s claiming to be the new leader, but the police aren’t going for it. Not yet, at least. So, there’s no guarantee anyone will cover our shit if someone gets suspicious about the influx of prostitutes in the red districts. Or the increase in overdoses. If Zotov doesn’t cover his ass and keep things inconspicuous, we could have a full-scale raid on our hands.”

“Overdoses?”

Gennady sighs. “Oh, right. Something else I learned. Apparently, he’s cutting our drugs now.”

“Fentanyl?”

“That’s the stuff. It’s only been a couple weeks, but I’ve already heard of a few long-time buyers getting the body bag treatment.”

I curse in Russian under my breath. An elderly *babushka* feeding the birds on a nearby bench gives me a dirty look.

I turn away from the old woman and lower my voice. “He’s going to destroy our reputation. The Bratva’s reputation. *My* reputation.”

“Zotov doesn’t care about any of that,” Gennady says. “He’s all about the end game.”

“That works—until the game ends. Until everyone’s dead or in jail.”

“Try telling Zotov that.”

“How about I kill him instead?”

Gennady chuckles darkly. “Works for me. I’ll help.”

The sound of footsteps on the end of the gravel path draws my attention. I look up—and freeze.

There’s a man entering the park from the southern perimeter. He’s tall, thin, pale. A scar running jagged down his cheek.

And a contingent of bodyguards encircling him on all sides.

This is no politician. No run-of-the-mill rich bastard.

I know it in my bones—it's him. The Butcher. The man I'm supposed to kill to earn my army.

I'm distantly aware of Gennady's voice in my ear. "Dima? You there?"

But I ignore it.

I've hunted for weeks to get close to this son of a bitch. And now he just *strolls* right into my goddamn line of sight?

Part of me is wary. Is this a trap? A setup?

But the other part of me has a gut feeling that this is no ploy. This is the real thing. Opportunity falling into my lap through sheer dumb luck.

The squadron of men meanders past me without sparing so much as a glance in my direction. I watch them go. The knife in my pocket is pressing into my thigh like it knows the time is now.

All I have to do is get through one, maybe two of those bodyguards. Then I'll be on The Butcher before he knows what to do.

This is it. This is the moment.

Kill the bastard.

Lead my brother's army back to New York.

Reclaim what's mine.

They round the bend in the park. I start to get up. My breath coming quick as adrenaline surges through me.

And then I hear it—Gennady's voice roaring on the phone. "Dima! Dima!"

I pause, raise it back to my ear, and growl, "What?"

He's breathless. "Dima, I just got a text. The man we hired in Chicago... he found her."

I freeze. My blood goes from burning hot to icy cold in an instant. "What did you just say?"

“He found her, Dima. He found Arya.”

ARYA

THE HOME OF UNDERBOSS TARAS KRESHNIK—CHICAGO

The men are in the drawing room. That's where they always go after their dinners. They drink, smoke, laugh in a way that's almost scornful. I never knew laughter could be so full of hate.

I never knew a house could be so full of hate, either. This whole mansion is brimming with it. Like it lives in the walls. Percolates throughout the air.

Hate.

Anger.

And most of all, fear.

I've lived with all three of those emotions every second of every day of the last six weeks.

I wake up and I hate the people who brought me here. I want to claw their faces to bloody ribbons and scream with pure rage. But I fear what would happen if I put so much as a toe out of line.

I've seen the consequences firsthand. Witnessed what happens to the girls who don't listen, who don't follow orders.

They get hurt. Badly.

Some of them never return.

My roommate, Rose, is probably the only reason I'm still alive. The first day I arrived, when the burly goons who ran the auction dragged me into this house, bound and cuffed and gagged, her face was the first one I saw.

Red hair, vibrant and alive. Smooth alabaster skin with a smattering of freckles. Pretty, petite—and so haunted that it took my breath away.

She looked like she'd seen the worst humanity has to offer. And that sight had seared itself into her retinas in a way that was unforgettable. It had scarred her to the core.

But there was sweetness in there, too, despite the horrors she'd endured in the home of the man who'd bought us both.

"His name is Taras Kreshnik," she explained to me that first day, helping me to a seat on the thin twin mattress that would become mine. I was trembling so bad I could hardly breathe. She held my hands. Shushed me. Stroked my hair until I finally managed to draw in a gulp of air.

"Who—who is he?" I'd managed to gasp.

"The devil," she answered in a quiet murmur. "He's the goddamned devil."

She was right about that.

More specifically, he is an underboss for the Albanian mafia. A key player in the hierarchy. The men who are cackling like hyenas right now in the drawing room are his underlings, his runners, his capos. They come here regularly to pay fealty. To beg for support. To negotiate for cash, guns, drugs —

And most of all, for women.

To anyone passing through, it looks like all of Kreshnik's slaves move freely around the house. We aren't kept in chains. We aren't being whipped. Our chains and whips are invisible.

Well, mine are—for now.

That's not quite the case for the women who serve Taras's intimate needs personally. Those chains are very much real. They're just kept locked away until night falls.

For six weeks, every night when the sun sets, there is a knock at the door. Rose always answers it. And every night, standing on the other side is Taras.

Some nights, he is dressed up in a suit, fingers flashing with jewelry and a haughty look in his eyes.

Other nights, he is in a bloodstained undershirt and drunk off his ass.

Either way, the end result is the same.

Rose goes with him silently. For an hour, the house quivers with her pained moans and pleas for mercy. And then she comes back, battered and worn, and collapses onto her bed.

Rose said Taras is the devil. The longer I've been here, the more I think that might've been too generous.

Even the devil was an angel once.

Taras Kreshnik has never been anything but a motherfucking animal.

One of the men in the drawing room glances up and catches me peering in through the open doorway. He frowns, but before he can say anything, I'm gone. Scurrying back to the tiny quarters I share with Rose.

She's in the room when I get back. Lying prone on her bed, face in the pillow. She doesn't look up as I enter, but she mumbles, "The doctor came to see you."

I freeze in the doorway. "What did he say?"

"That he'd be back in a half hour," she says, voice flat. "That was fifteen minutes ago."

I squeeze my eyes closed and take a deep breath, trying to ease my nervous stomach.

It's been six weeks since Brigitte sold me into this nightmare. Six weeks since Taras snarled that sour breath in my face and told me I'd be his personal sex slave.

It has also been six weeks since the Albanian doctor who looked me over after the purchase—as if I was a cow he needed to inspect—told Taras I

wasn't in any kind of shape for sexual activity.

Taras blew his lid when the doctor said it would be six weeks before anything could be done with me. At the time, I thought that was my saving grace.

Surely, I wouldn't still be here after six weeks.

Surely, I'd be saved by then.

Now, six weeks later, my grace period is over. The drip of pain meds has all dried up. My body has healed, more or less. I don't need to see the doctor to know the truth—I'm fine.

Which means Taras is coming to get what he paid for.

Rose can sense my anxiety. "You have to relax," she counsels, rolling over. "Being tense only makes it hurt worse. Just sit back and do what you're told. It'll be over soon enough."

I'm actually going to be sick. I hurry into the small bathroom we share and grab the wastebasket, clutching it to my chest as I sink to the floor. I'm shaking like a leaf from head to toe. There's a metallic taste in my mouth.

Nothing feels real. Truthfully, nothing's felt real since the moment Brigitte ripped my baby away from me.

I don't hear Rose walk over to me, but she lays a hand on my shoulder and I feel her warmth press into my side. "Sorry," she whispers. "I sometimes forget not everyone is as damaged as I am."

"You're not damaged," I croak.

Rose barks out a laugh, clearly not convinced.

I look up at her over my shoulder and sigh. Her skin is tight, gaunt, pale. Still, she's beautiful. Or, at least, she was once. Her hair is long and red and full. She has big eyes and a trim waist that flares into graceful curves.

"You don't have to lie to me," Rose murmurs. "I know what I am. Even before I came here, I was damaged."

She's told me her story in bits and pieces over the weeks. A high school pregnancy left her sixteen years old and already a mama. The father was a

deadbeat from the start. Jailed for murder. A gangster, a no-good scumbag. “Human trash,” she always calls him. He left Rose as a single mother caring for her own sick mom, trying to support their fucked-up family of three on a cocktail waitress’s salary. She went to help a friend run an errand, and before she knew it, she found herself on a stage in front of a crowd of violent men.

The similarities to my own life made me retch.

Accidental pregnancy by a mobster? Check.

Single mother? Check.

Sold out by a so-called friend into a living nightmare? Check, check, and check.

We’re two peas in a sickening pod.

“Does Taras hurt you?” I ask in a hoarse whisper.

Rose twists her mouth into a knot at one side and shrugs. “Sometimes. If he reaches into his toy chest, that’s a bad night. But if you pretend it gets you off, he finishes faster.”

My stomach flips again. I clutch the wastebasket even tighter to my chest, certain I’m going to vomit.

“I don’t mean to scare you,” she apologizes.

“No.” I wave my hand. “I need to know what to expect. I don’t want him to see me like this. I don’t want him to see that I’m scared. I need to be ready.”

I’ve tried not to think about anything since arriving in Taras’s house. It’s easier to focus on my current situation than to dwell on the past or the future. But I can’t help but wonder if Brigitte knew what fate awaited me.

I don’t want to believe it. How could my best friend sell me out like that?

Because she wasn’t your best friend, I remind myself for the hundredth time. It’s an impossible pill to swallow.

Rose pats my shoulder reassuringly. Then there’s a gentle knock on our door. Rose gets up to answer it, and I know it’s Dr. Bardhi before she even opens up.

I go lay down on my bed, familiar with the routine by now.

“Arya,” Dr. Bardhi says gently, tipping his head in greeting. “Good to see you.”

I say nothing. It’s not exactly a mutual feeling.

The exam goes the same way it has every few days for the last six weeks. The prodding fingers, like someone testing fruit for ripeness. The *hmms* and *mmms* of a somber man who knows exactly what his job entails.

When he’s done, he goes into our bathroom to wash his hands. I get dressed again. I’m blinking back tears, knowing already what he’ll say.

But I don’t ask.

He has to say the words. I won’t say them for him.

As soon as he is sitting across from me, his mustache graying at the corners, Bardhi’s eyes crinkle with a sad smile. “Your body is healthy, Arya.”

The words hit me like a physical blow to the chest. Nausea roils inside of me. I don’t need a mirror to know I’m a violent shade of green.

He sighs and grabs his black bag from the floor. But before he stands up, he lowers his head and his voice, not looking at me as he speaks. “I’m sorry, Arya. I really am. But I can’t protect you anymore.”

And then he’s gone.

Back through the door he came in.

I see him turn to the left—towards Taras’s private quarters—and I know he’s headed to tell the Albanian monster that his latest prize is finally ready to consume.

ARYA

Not even fifteen minutes after the doctor leaves, a maid slinks into our room with a red silk dress draped over her arm.

She hangs it on the wardrobe and leaves without a word or a shred of eye contact. As if what's about to happen to me—what's been happening to Rose night after night after night—is contagious.

Like if she gets too close, she'll find herself in Taras's room, too, screaming for help that will never come.

“We're doing great. Thanks so much for asking,” Rose snarls with vicious sarcasm at the woman's retreating back.

I know she wants to share some of her bravery with me. But I'm too busy trying not to pass out to care. Trying not to scream. Trying not to melt down into a quivering puddle of fear.

The silence in the room is all-consuming. We both know what happens next.

A knock on the door.

An invitation to “dinner.”

Rose leaves most nights to “have dinner” with Taras. I knew all along what it meant. I knew where she was going and what she was doing. I knew why she didn't come back until late at night or, some nights, not at all.

But I allowed myself not to think about it. I allowed myself to be numb to it.

Now that it's my turn, I'm a mess.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, rolling over and burying my face in my pillow. "I'm so fucking sorry."

"For what, babe?" Rose croons.

"For..." I don't know how to say it without it coming out wrong. "For not being more sympathetic the last six weeks. You just always left this room so confident, your head held high. I guess I didn't let myself see how much he was hurting you."

"Good."

I look up at her in confusion. Her eyes blaze.

"I don't want anyone to see how much I'm hurting," she says fiercely. "Not you or Taras or anyone else. I hold my head high because if I don't, then I'll collapse into a puddle. I miss my daughter every day, I miss my mom, and I miss being free. But I'll never let Taras fucking Kreshnik know that for a single goddamn second."

I don't feel any better, but Rose's words give me the motivation I need to stand up. To lift my chin. To power through whatever is about to happen.

I stand and disrobe quickly, then slip on the dress.

It fits sickeningly well. Like a reminder that my body doesn't belong to me anymore. Thin straps, a plunging neckline, and a far-too-short hem that skims the tops of my thighs.

Rose helps me brush and curl my hair and dabs matching red lipstick on my lips. "You've got great lips," she says, standing back and admiring her work. "Beautiful."

It's a nice compliment. But we both know it doesn't mean a whole lot right now.

"I know it's hard to doll up for that slime ball, but if you don't, it's so much worse," Rose advises. "Laugh at his shitty jokes, bat your eyes at him, and smile as much as you can. If he thinks you're having a nice time, he'll be gentler. It's the fighters who get broken, Arya."

“Go along to get along,” I rephrase, nodding my head in understanding. “I can do that.”

She bites her lip. “It’s harder than it sounds. Especially for a fiery girl like you. But you can do this. Just stay focused.”

Focused on what? I want to ask.

But there isn’t time.

Before I can ask, a guard throws open the door and stands silently in the hallway. His command is clear enough that it doesn’t need to be spoken.

Come with me.

Rose gives me one last hug and kisses my temple before I leave.

I hope to God I make it back.

DIMA

BURNHAM PARK, CHICAGO

Gennady's words are ringing in my ear.

We found her.

We found Arya.

I can't believe it. Six weeks of absolutely nothing. And now both of my targets get dropped into my lap like fucking Christmas presents. I'm going to kill The Butcher. I'm going to rescue Arya. I'm going to save my—

“...but you have to go right now, Dima.”

I snap back to reality. “Now? Are you kidding me?”

“The man sounded terrified. He said that she's gotten mixed up with some really bad people. He gave me a name and a bar where these guys will be tonight. You have to go right now if you want to get her.”

I growl in frustration and squeeze the burner phone so hard I think it might snap.

My target is disappearing into the distance. But Arya is out there somewhere. She and my son, with no one else in this world who gives a fuck or even knows about them. I'm all they have.

But I have to choose.

The Butcher or Arya?

Arya or The Butcher?

The names go around and around in my head like a fucked-up carousel. I can't have both.

So choose, you son of a bitch, hisses that voice in my head. *Pick your poison.*

I sigh and close my eyes. To Gennady, I say, "Give me the name of the bar."

And in the fading dusk, The Butcher vanishes from sight.

ARYA

AT DINNER WITH TARAS

When Rose said faking good humor was harder than it sounded, she really undersold it.

Plastering a smile on my face while I'm sitting across from perhaps the most appalling man in the history of the known world isn't just hard.

It's damn near impossible.

Like pretending that being burned alive on a stake merely tickles.

Everything in my body is telling me to run, to hide, to claw this man's eyes out and hurl myself out the nearest window. Instead, I'm sitting quietly, cutting daintily through baked chicken I can't stomach eating right now, and smiling as Taras talks to me about... whatever the hell it is that he's talking about.

"...Patience is a virtue, and tonight, we'll both be rewarded," Taras crows, lifting his wine glass in the air. He smelled strongly of liquor when I arrived and he has only gotten drunker as the dinner has dragged on. His teeth are stained with red wine. "The moment I saw you on that stage, I knew I had to have you. I like beautiful things and you were the most beautiful woman in the room."

He means to flatter me—I think. But he's discussing the worst moment of my life as if it was our romantic meet-cute. As if I should be honored he deigned to look at me.

I'd rather he choked and died right this fucking second.

I force my lips into a smile and lift my glass. *Go along to get along*, Rose advised me. I'm trying. I'm trying so damn hard. But my hand is shaking so violently with rage and fear that wine sloshes over the edge of the cup. I quickly set it back on the table.

"It's normal to be nervous," Taras says, raising his voice to be heard from all the way across the room. We are seated at the opposite end of a long, formal table. King and queen of this fucking nightmare. "Everyone is nervous on their first night. That's why I brought out the good wine. It will loosen us both up. Make the experience more enjoyable."

Only a lobotomy could make the experience more enjoyable.

I smile again, showing teeth this time. My lips feel dry and stiff and my chin is wobbling. Despite my best efforts to tamp down my emotion, tears are brimming just below the surface.

But I won't let him see me cry. I'll be like Rose—strong in the face of horror.

"Horror" doesn't really do the man justice, though. Taras is twice my age, at least. He wears a harsh comb over of what's left of the hair on his head. No beard—just bald, quivering jowls like pats of half-melted butter.

His eyes are sharp and beady. They're not stupid though. For all his faults, stupidity is not one of them. This son of a bitch is cunning.

"Do you have any questions before we begin?" His words are slurred already. The look in his eye is flashing menace, but it's blurry with the liquor. I'm not even sure he'll be able to find his own dick in ten minutes.

Dima's face flashes in my mind, furrowed in rage. I was stupid to ever leave him. I should have stayed. He never would have let this happen to me.

Does he know what happened to me and Lukas? Probably not. Why would he? He dropped me off and I basically told him I didn't want to see him again. I told Dima I wanted to keep Lukas safe.

But I willingly walked us both straight into a trap.

So much for keeping him safe. I don't even know where he is. What Brigitte and Jorik might be doing with him or to him.

Hopelessness threatens to pull me under. It claws at my throat and burns behind my eyes. I fucked everything up so bad and I don't know how to fix it. I don't know how to make it better.

Eager to shovel a little more misery in my pit of despair, Taras pushes back from the table and rises shakily to his feet. "No? Then I believe dinner is over. Would you care to retire?"

He's speaking with a vaguely aristocratic accent, as if this is a real date. As if he is really wooing me.

It's sick. Fucking sick.

And there's nothing I can do but smile and play along.

Taras walks over to a heavy wooden door just behind the table and opens it. I can see a four-poster bed in the other room, black silk sheets dripping over the sides and pooling on the floor.

I feel light-headed. Faint. But I stand up. I walk over to him. When he holds out his hand to escort me, I hesitate for only a second before I place my fingers against his damp palm and let him lead me inside.

The bedroom is warm, almost balmy. Vaguely feminine. Hints of coconut and vanilla. I realize with a start that Taras isn't just trying to fool the women who enter this room.

He's trying to fool *himself*, too.

It's clear he wants this to feel like a seduction, not an assault. He doesn't want to look in the mirror every day knowing he's a man who rapes women. He wants to convince himself that they want it. That they like it.

The realization shocks me.

And infuriates me.

Rose told me to play along. To pretend. But isn't that only feeding into the problem? The more women who walk into this room and give him what he

wants, the more that will come after. I won't be the last. Neither will Rose.

More women will be bought and sold.

More women will be forced to traipse around his house in next to nothing, being leered at by his guests.

More women will be subjected to this sick man and his perversions.

It won't stop until he stops. Or until someone stops him.

Taras closes the door and bolts it, turning around slowly to face me. His eyes rake over my body. "The dress fits you beautifully," he says, licking his lower lip. He stares at me for another moment before walking forward slowly, one foot in front of the other in a seductive stalking.

I retreat unconsciously without even realizing I'm doing it. Goosebumps sprout across my skin and a cold sweat settles on my chest.

Until the bed hits the back of my thighs. I sit down on it with a surprised *oof*.

When I look up, Taras is paused a foot away. Watching me, his forehead resting against the corner post of the bed.

Then he growls low in his chest like a pig in heat. Striding closer, his fat hands land on my knees and he pushes my legs apart, stepping between them. His fingers drag up my thighs, slipping under the silk hem of my dress.

Go along to get along.

Smile.

Fake it.

Pretend.

Rose's advice echoes in my mind. But my body can't be so easily swayed. Before I can stop myself, I bolt up and zip to the far corner of the room. By the time Taras follows my movements and turns around, I'm pressed against the wall next to the window.

The view is beautiful, a clear shot of the river and the cityscape. Skyscraper lights reflect off the water like a million floating stars. Under different

circumstances, it would be beautiful.

Tonight, it's anything but that.

"Oh, I see. I like a little chase," Taras whispers, moving towards me. He presses his body against mine. I feel his hardness on my lower back. His breath is hot against my neck. "This is one-way glass, you know. I could fuck you right here and no one down there would be the wiser. Would you like to try it?"

His hand scraps up the back of my thigh, lifting my dress. He starts grinding himself against my ass.

I whimper, which Taras takes as encouragement, but when he reaches up to grab my panties, I spin away from him again.

This time, it pisses him off. It seems his love of the chase is fading.

His face is red and he lets out a sharp, angry huff. "Listen, whore. I have been nice. You drank my wine, yes? Ate my food? You are wearing my dress?"

"How romantic," I mutter, forgetting myself.

His bleary, bloodshot eyes come alive, turning sharp and piercing. "You are mistaken, *kurwa*. You belong to me. You do as I say. If I tell you to drop to your knees, you ask, 'Cock or balls?' Are we clear? Do you fucking understand?"

The mask of the rich gentleman is slipping. Beneath it is a greedy pig eager to feast. I won't make that easy for him. If the punishment is being beaten, then I'll take it gladly.

Let him hurt me. I won't sacrifice my dignity to spare a little pain.

"Cock or balls?" I ask, biting temptingly at my lower lip.

Taras smiles. "Both."

I step towards him, slow and seductive. "Gladly."

Then I kick him as hard as I can between the legs.

Something crunches. Taras's eyes go wide. He drops to his knees, his hand cupping his crotch and bleating with an ungodly, animalistic cry of pain.

He bolted the door when we came in, but the guards outside must have the key because it's ripped open in a second and I'm being hauled back towards the door and out of the room as Taras Kreshnik, my owner, curses me with gasping breaths.

"You no-good fucking bitch! You stupid whore! You will pay...!"

I can hear him swearing all the way through the dining room, into the hallway, and all the way back to my room.

The guards throw me in through the door and I collapse on the floor.

Rose waits until they're gone to jump up and grab my arm, hauling me to my feet. "What happened? Why are you back so soon?" She runs her hands over my arms like she's checking for bruises.

"I'm fine. He didn't hurt me," I say, grabbing the thin blanket from my bed and wrapping it around my shoulders to stem the trembling. "I can't say the same for him, though."

Rose blinks at me, silent for a few seconds. "What did you do?"

"You were right. Pretending is a lot harder than it seems. It was horrible."

She freezes. "What did you do?"

I relay the "date" for her, sparing no detail. When the story is over, she gapes at me, mouth hanging open. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

I nod. "I kicked Taras in the dick."

She shakes her head. "Not tonight, but... in the future. He's not going to forget this, Arya. He'll think of a punishment."

"He was already going to rape me. What punishment could be worse than that?"

"You don't know what it can be like."

“Maybe not,” I admit, laying a hand on Rose’s arm. “You’ve been here longer and I trust you know what you’re talking about. But I can’t bottle my emotions inside the way you can. I would rather be beaten every single night than let the man think for even a second that I like what he’s doing to me. It’s too much.”

We’re quiet for a while. In the last six weeks, I’ve come to know Rose well enough that I can tell she’s mad, but I’m not sure why.

I’ll be the one who gets punished for what I did, right?

“I’m sorry I didn’t take your advice,” I say, breaking the silence. “But I can’t live like this without fighting back.”

“And what about the rest of us?” Rose asks, cutting me off. “What happens when Taras is pissed and takes it out on everyone else in the house?”

“He won’t do that. Why would he?”

Rose stands up and fists her hands at her side, her teeth clenched. “If one of us pushes back, Taras has to remind everyone who is in charge. If people see you standing up for yourself, they might get ideas.”

“Good! Let’s start a revolution. Let’s get out of here.”

“God, Arya.” Rose turns around and plants her palms on the small desk against the wall. The legs wobble. “I’ve told you already: there is no escape. You don’t think people have tried? You don’t think people have *died* trying?”

Before I can answer, the door bursts open again, banging off the wall and shaking the room.

I dive sideways on the bed, certain the guard is here for me. Whatever the plan is, it’s not going to be pretty.

But he doesn’t touch me.

Instead, the hulking man stalks across the room and grabs Rose.

“The boss wants to see you.”

Rose whimpers. When she looks over at me, her eyes are wide and desperate. Terrified.

“Wait, what about me? Take me—” I try to argue, but it’s pointless. The guard has his orders, and he isn’t going to change his plan because of me. He drags Rose out of the room, slams the door closed, and leaves me alone.

I pace around the room like a wild animal in a trap. I want to do something, anything, to save my friend, but I don’t know how.

Maybe I could go and apologize. Offer myself up as a sacrifice. Maybe it’s not too late to fix my mistake and spare Rose.

But when I go try the door, I find it locked.

There’s nothing I can do.

This is all my fault.

ARYA

An hour later comes the knock I've been dreading.

I sprint to the door. Fling it open. And my heart plummets.

Rose is standing in the hallway, her shoulders stooped forward like she can't bear the weight of her own body. Her lip is split in the middle and shiny with spilled blood. Her right eye is bruised and swelling by the second and her arms are covered in nasty welts that look like they came from a whip.

"Rose!" I move to wrap an arm around her and help her in.

But suddenly, someone pushes her from behind.

She crashes into the tile floor face-first, not breaking her fall at all. That's when I realize she isn't alone.

Taras is standing behind her, a lopsided smile spread across his doughy face. "I wanted to ensure Rose made it back to her room okay. She's a little... oh, shall we say, a little *tired* tonight."

Rage boils inside of me, hot and venomous. I feel like I could spit acid at him right now. "Why didn't you take me?"

His drunken eyes gleam with a savage cunning. "I've been in this game longer than you have, little whore. I know your type. You fancy yourself a hero."

He casts his bloodshot gaze over to where Rose is crawling into a sitting position, her hands wrapped tightly around her stomach.

Then he looks back at me. “Do you feel like a hero now?”

DIMA

THE CRIMSON EAGLE BAR

I drop into a stool at the corner of the bar.

The place is Albanian through and through. Albanian flags hanging from the rafters. Albanian soccer on the television.

A few patrons, white-haired old Albanian men with stooped backs and lined faces, argue in their native tongue. The younger ones speak English loudly and look around to make sure the other drinkers are noticing how alpha they are.

The man to my right belongs to the latter group. He glowers in every direction and yells at the game on the TV. Like he wants every guy in the bar to see how big and scary and fucking tough he is.

He doesn't scare me in the slightest.

Men who want you to know they're violent are never worth worrying about. It's the ones who don't give a shit what you think that you need to look out for.

The information that Gennady's spy gathered was scant. Erik Arnaud was mixed up with the Albanians in some shape or form and the trail pointed here. He didn't know much more than that.

But it led him to this bar, and here, he learned something about Arya. Something that spooked him. Sent him running for the goddamn hills.

I don't like operating off such shitty intel. But it's all I have.

The door to the bar swings open. Raucous laughter comes with it. And then a crowd of men burst in. As soon as the other patrons see who it is, they put their gazes right back in their laps.

That's all the clue I need to realize: these are the men I'm looking for.

I angle towards them slightly. Trying to assess. To scan. To find my target.

But before I can get a good look, one of the men staggers towards the bar. He clobbers into it right next to me and bellows in my ear, "*Hajde majmun!*"

He's yelling for the bartender. I don't have to speak much Albanian to understand that his manners are lacking.

He glances down at me. His eyes are bloodshot and pinwheeling drunkenly in their sockets. "The fuck you lookin' at?" he slurs.

I don't bother answering. Just lean away from him and turn aside, trying to ignore the noxious fumes spewing from his mouth.

"Oi!" the man says, jabbing me in the shoulder with one fat finger. "I'm talkin' t'ya."

I sigh. Grimacing, I turn to face him. "That's a fucking pity."

His eyes whirl wildly for a moment as he processes the insult. When it clicks into place, he frowns.

I have to resist the urge to laugh. He's the ugliest goddamn Albanian I've ever seen in my life. Fat cheek droop downwards. The last wisps of his thinning hair waft in the air conditioning. His shirt is a patchwork mess of stains and rips.

"What'd'ya say to me?" he mumbles. He's swaying on his feet. Clinging to the bar like a sailor on a rocky ship.

"What I *said* was, 'That's a fucking pity,'" I enunciate clearly. "What I *meant* was, you smell like you just got face-fucked by a sewage pipe and you need another drink like I need a hole in the head."

He's slow to process that one, too. I sit patiently and wait.

“Take your time,” I reassure him. “That was a lot of long words at once, I know.”

He totters back and forth. His frown sours even further. Beady eyes knot together beneath bushy eyebrows. Then he opens his mouth and I sigh again. My hands are twitching with energy, ready to block a blow or knock his ugly face in if need be.

I’m raring for a fight. My thinking is that, if I take this repulsive bastard out back and beat him to within an inch of his life, he might spill some useful information.

It seems like it’s all going to work out perfectly.

Until he says something I don’t expect.

“I know you,” the man burps.

I freeze. *Fuck.*

I’ve grown out my beard and my hair in the six weeks I’ve been stranded in Chicago. I barely recognize myself.

But somehow, this drunk moron found something he recognizes.

That’s not good.

That’s not good at all.

“No,” I say, “you don’t.” I turn away in a hurry and face the back of the bar again.

But the man’s eyes stay locked on the side of my face. He only looks away when the bartender comes over and slaps a beer down in front of him. Then, after one more searing glance, he stumbles over to the corner where his buddies are all lounging.

I hear them start to jabber in rapid-fire Albanian. And my adrenaline ticks up a notch.

I can’t afford to lose this lead, however thin it may be. But I can’t afford to let a bar full of mob-connected Albanians figure out who I am, either.

I just need to duck out of sight for a few minutes. Let the heat die down. Then I can come back in and find a different victim.

The bathroom is down a long hallway that takes a sharp right turn behind the kitchen. I go in and breathe. Running cold water from the tap, I splash some on my face.

“Get your fucking shit together,” I growl at my reflection.

The man in the mirror looking back at me is grim. Haunted. My cheeks are gaunt, my eyes deeper and darker than ever. But the fire that burns all the way at the bottom of them... that’s never left me. It never will.

I piss and wash my hands. Straighten up. Get ready to go back out there.

One of the other men in the group looked like he might be a talker. A thin, ratty-looking little shit. If I can just find a way to isolate him—

The bathroom door bangs open. I look up and see my ugly drunken friend.

“I know where I know you from,” he snarls.

I shake my head. “Fuck off, man.”

“Romanoff.”

I freeze again. Just for a split second. A fraction of an instant.

But it’s enough.

Enough to give me away.

“That’s what I thought,” the man says, snapping his fingers and smiling like he’s solved a puzzle. He doesn’t seem nearly so wasted anymore. “You’re Dima Romanoff.”

This is bad news...

For him.

“What are you doing in an Albanian bar in Chicago?” he wheezes with a laugh on the edge of his voice. “Don’t you have enough troubles back home?”

He laughs again. Slaps his knee like it's all a big fucking joke.

He doesn't know everything. But he knows enough to cause problems.

I start to inch around towards the door. Not to run—but to prevent this bastard from escaping what's about to happen.

“I'm meeting with Erik Arnaud,” I say coolly, tossing my paper towel in the trash can and shifting another inch towards the door to block his exit. “Or rather, I'm supposed to be. He didn't show.”

“Why the fuck would someone like you be meeting with a nobody like Erik?” He's just drunk enough to be brutally honest. Perfect.

“Tell me where I can find him and I'll fill you in.”

He opens his mouth for a moment, considering, but then he shakes his head. “Nah, man. I can't tell you shit. You shouldn't even be in here.”

“Wrong answer.”

I ball up my fist and jab him in the throat. He gags and stumbles back against the tiled wall in shock and pain.

I follow him, pinning him to the tiled wall with both hands.

He reaches up to try and free my hands from around my neck, but even stone-cold sober, I'd be able to overpower him. He's blubbery and slow, like a walrus on two legs.

He doesn't stand a fucking chance.

I dodge a few misplaced kicks, angling my lower half away to avoid getting kicked in the balls, and squeeze harder.

I've killed people with my bare hands before. It's not the most efficient way to get the job done, but it certainly requires less equipment.

And it's quiet. No one in the bar will know a thing. As soon as the man is dead, I'll shove him in a closet and leave.

By the time they find him, I'll be long gone.

His movements grow weaker. His fingers scratch at my hand, but I barely feel it. There's too much adrenaline pumping in my veins for him to hurt me right now.

As his legs give out, I lower him to the floor while maintaining a strong grip around his neck. My hands start to throb. There's a lot of neck to choke on this fat pig.

But I keep going. So many people stop strangling before the person is dead. To do it right takes several minutes. I intend to do this right.

Until I hear voices in the hallway.

There's a chance it's a bar employee going into the kitchen. But based on how loud they're being, I'm guessing they are drunk patrons coming into the bathroom. And I'm squatting on the floor with my hands around an unconscious mobster's neck.

"Durak neschastnyi," I curse in Russian.

I have to act quickly.

I grab the man's limp arms and drag him across the sticky bathroom floor to a stall. The doors here go all the way down to the floor, thank the fucking Lord, so there's no risk someone will see this asshole's body puddled beneath the crack.

I step us both inside and pull the door closed just as the bathroom door opens. A pair of voices follows.

"I need a goddamn line," the first man rumbles.

"You and me both, brother," agrees the second.

"Today has been one shit storm after another. Ever since the boss moved back to New York, I've been managing the business here, right?"

The other hums his understanding.

"I'm glad to be put in charge, but shit, the fucking busywork! All I want at the end of the day is to eat a good meal, get drunk, and fuck someone senseless."

“The dream.”

“Right? That’s what I thought when I went to that auction a couple weeks ago. I bought the most beautiful *lodër* in the line-up. I planned to spend a week doing nothing but fucking her senseless, you know? Break the bitch in. She has the most perfect tits you’ve ever seen and thick dark hair you just want to wrap your hand around.” He sighs. “Then my fucking on-call doctor told me she’d just given birth.”

My blood chills in my vein. I can hear my heart pounding in my ears.

Ba-boom.

Ba-boom.

“You’re fucking kidding.”

“I wish,” he snorts. “This bastard says I cannot touch her for six weeks. *Six weeks*. I told him, ‘Go fuck your mother!’ But he says I can kill her if I do it wrong. Bah!”

“So what did you do?”

“I waited! What else can I do? No point in spoiling a good whore after one fuck, am I right?”

“A man should be able to take what’s his, though,” the second man scowls.

“Yes, he should. Yes, he should, indeed. It was torture, but I waited. And you know what tonight was?”

I hear the second man chuckle. “Six weeks, eh?”

“Six fucking weeks,” agrees the man who’s been talking the most. “Tonight, I intended to crack her open like a goddamn egg.”

They both laugh together—until the bragging man’s voice grows somber again. “But I should have known it would not work. Women... So fragile.”

“So you did not get to bed her?” inquires the other.

“If I had a fresh whore to fuck, you think I would be in a goddamn bathroom snorting cocaine off the counter with your ugly ass?” he jeers.

Both of them bust up in hysterics at that. Laughing like fucking hyenas.

But I feel like I have ice in my veins.

They're talking about Arya.

It has to be her. Today is six weeks since she has given birth. What are the odds it's someone else?

Both of the men snort another line. Then the first one speaks again. "Christ, even laughing hurts. I chased this bitch around the room and she fucking kicked me in the balls. You believe that? I will ache for days."

"Black and blue balls are not so funny, are they, Taras? I'm sure you taught her a lesson."

"I did not have the energy for it. I had the other girl brought in instead. I'll get back to breaking the new bitch after all this mess in New York has finished."

I hiss an inward breath. I'm boiling with rage. The thought of this fucking pig laying a single finger on Arya makes me want to slit his throat and bleed him dry.

But the thought of her kicking him in the balls makes the corner of my mouth twitch up in the slightest of smiles.

As if I needed any more proof that the girl this monster bought was the mother of my son.

My next step is clear, though. I'm going to find where this son of a bitch lives.

And then I'm going to burn his world to ashes.

While I wait for the two men to clear out of the bathroom, I'm running through plans in my head, trying to figure out who will have the information I need and how I'm going to tear this "Taras" a new asshole.

I'm so lost in thought I don't notice the man on the floor beginning to wake up.

The first time I realize something is wrong is when the fat bastard lifts his fist and pounds weakly on the stall door.

I bite back a curse and grab his arm, pinning it behind his back. But it's too late. The laughter outside the stall dies at once.

“Who's there?” one of them demands.

The men walk towards the stall. I know they aren't going to let this go. If I were in their shoes, I sure as hell wouldn't. They'll ferret me out and make sure I'm not a threat.

I *am* a threat, of course.

These men are about to learn that the hard way.

I can hear them just outside the stall door. All at once, I bring my boot up and stomp on the ribs of the man on the floor. At the same time, I unlatch the stall door and hurl it open violently.

The man on the floor groans from the kick just as the flying door smashes into the face of the first man outside the stall. He spins around, both hands clamped over his face as blood explodes between his fingers.

“What the fuck...?” snarls the last one.

This is the one who was speaking. The one who tried to hurt Arya.

He's a pudgy, middle-aged man with jowls and bloodshot eyes. The thought of him buying Arya, touching Arya, harassing Arya? It makes my vision red.

How fucking dare he?

I bury a fist in his smug face. The crunch beneath my knuckles is satisfying, but I want more. I want to make him hurt so bad that he begs for death—just so I can deny that mercy to him.

But there isn't time.

The other man is starting to yell for help, and it won't be long before the entire bar is crowding in here to lynch me. I may be able to take these three drunken idiots without a hitch. I don't intend to try my chances with their whole damn crew, though.

And now that I know where Arya is, I can't let myself be captured. I have to escape and save her.

Even if that means letting Taras go.

For now.

Taras is starting to get his wits about him again. I don't wait for that to happen. I burst out the door and down the hall at a headlong sprint. I don't stop when I emerge into the main bar area and bowl into someone, knocking drinks to the floor.

Some men gasp. A few of the women scream.

I keep going. I hit the sidewalk. Head down, dig my heels in, sprint harder.

I've got two goals in my head.

The first: find Arya and my son.

The second: make everyone who touched them wish they'd never been born.

ARYA

ROSE & ARYA'S ROOM

I stroke Rose's long red hair in silence. The necklace on her throat catches the dim light. A half-heart, simple and unadorned.

I asked her about it once. "A gift," she'd explained simply. "My mother gave it to me when my daughter was born. She said a child always has her mother's heart. No matter what."

I feel my own heart breaking at the sight of it.

This woman should hate me for what I've done to her. Maybe she does hate me, but she's simply too weak from Taras's beating to do anything other than lay on the floor. That's okay, though.

Because no matter what, I'm getting us both out of here.

It's been a few hours since Taras left. I've been thinking. Planning.

Rose said escaping the house is impossible. She might be right, but I'm not willing to carry on without trying. I'm not willing to live in this prison day in and day out, servicing Taras Kreshnik, without making an attempt to get my life back. To escape and reclaim my child and my freedom.

And I'm not leaving without her.

"Rose?"

She snuffles and lifts her head slightly.

“I have a plan.”

I tell Rose what I’m thinking in a quiet voice. The walls in this part of the house are thin and I don’t want anyone to hear what I’m saying. Taras has created an environment where the women on his staff tattle on one another to earn favor or more privileges. If anyone heard what we’re planning to do, they’d alert the guards immediately for the chance at a new bottle of shampoo or a bag of candy.

He’s got everyone chained up like monsters. So they act like monsters.

I don’t want that to happen to me. Or to Rose.

She listens, blinking up at me, her expression blank. I truly can’t tell what she’s thinking. Is she horrified I’d try to fight back so soon after my last attempt got her beaten?

I debated telling Rose at all, thinking it might be best to carry out the plan and drag her along. But my fear is that she’d get lost in the shuffle because she won’t understand what I’m doing.

I don’t want that to happen. If I get out of here, Rose gets out of here, too. I won’t have it any other way.

When I finish explaining, I watch her, waiting for her to tell me to fuck off. I wouldn’t even blame her. I’d completely understand.

Rose sits up, wincing as she stretches out her bruised limbs. Then she turns to me and nods once. “Okay.”

“You want to?” I whisper. “Are you sure?”

“I can’t do this anymore,” she says, gesturing to her swollen face. “I’d rather die than live like this. And I do think we’re going to die if we stay. I want out.”

“We aren’t going to die, Rose. This will work.” I hope I sound more confident than I feel because, as we begin setting the plan in motion, I’m nervous. Trembling with an intoxicating mix of terror and adrenaline.

Rose lays down on her bed, facing the wall, and I go into the bathroom.

Every possible weapon or suicidal instrument has been removed from the room, leaving it depressingly bare. But there's one thing in the bathroom Taras and his guards didn't think of. One thing that could be the difference between life and death.

I climb up onto the small sink, my feet on either side of the basin. Then, after a silent countdown, I thrust my elbow straight into the mirror above the sink.

Shards of glass rain down into the sink and on the floor.

I take one more deep breath before I jump off of the sink, landing hard on my heels, and begin to scream. I wail and carry on even as I grab a large piece of glass and cut a line into my thigh. Blood blooms over my skin. I begin spreading it around, making the damage look worse than it is.

I hear a guard sprinting down the hallway. When the door to our room is thrown open, I'm lying on a layer of shattered glass on the bathroom floor, my bloody leg pulled to my chest.

"Help! Help!" I dissolve into hysterics.

The guard, as I hoped, has no idea what to do with me. Taras's men are used to inflicting pain, not curing it.

"I... I'll get Dr. Bardhi," the man stammers.

He runs out from the room. Rose lifts herself out of bed and slides her bed frame two feet closer to the closet door while I scream and shout to cover the sound of the metal legs scraping across the tile floor.

Dr. Bardhi runs into the room a few moments later. "My God! Arya, what happened?"

I start to wail even louder and try standing.

He stops me at once. "No, don't stand," he orders. "You could have opened an artery."

"I want my bed," I sob, limping into the room where Rose is once again curled in a ball on her mattress.

Poor Dr. Bardhi isn't equipped to handle with my level of hysteria, so he follows me into the room, holding me up by the elbow. Halfway to my bed, just in front of the closet, I stumble. I cry out in pain and spin in his arms, groping at his mid-section and the waistband of his pants.

When my fingers feel the carabiner holding his keys, I quickly slide it from his belt loop and fall to the floor, clutching the evidence against my chest.

The keys on this carabiner open the front door. The door that leads to outside. The door that leads to freedom.

"Arya, please. Lay still," Dr. Bardhi says, sounding frustrated. "You are going to hurt yourself so much worse with all this flailing. I have to check and make sure you haven't broken anything or punctured an artery."

It's a low bar, but Dr. Bardhi is the closest thing to a good man here. That won't save him, though.

And it sure as hell won't save me. No amount of guilt could stop me from escaping this hellhole.

Rose and I are getting out.

I'm finding my son.

And then I'm taking us all far, far away from here.

"Now!" I cry.

At my command, Rose shoves the man with all her strength and he falls into the small closet head first. Rose then slams the door closed on him, and together, we slide my bed the last foot so it barricades the closet door, trapping Dr. Bardhi inside.

The man begins to shout, banging on the door and the walls. We ignore him.

Let him see what it feels like to be trapped.

Rose and I hold hands as we run down the hallway that has been our prison for so long now. My feet ache and bleed, but I could care less. The pain in my body is nothing compared to the pain in my heart.

The main house is quiet. If Taras is back from his night of drinking, he is already asleep. If he hasn't, then it means we need to move fast. There's no room for hesitation. We have to get through the door and as far from this house as possible.

We race through the foyer. The front door beckons.

And at the final threshold, Rose hesitates.

She grinds to a halt and tugs me with her. "They'll find us on the road," she whispers fearfully. "This is a mistake. They're going to catch us."

I dig my fingernails into her arm. I refuse to lose her at this point. "I can see the front door, Rose. We're almost there. Just a little further."

Every footstep across the floor sounds like a clap of thunder. I'm sure we're waking up every other person in the house.

But we're close. We're so fucking close.

We're halfway across the foyer, standing in the direct center of the room where the tiles converge into a spiral pattern—

When I hear a key in the door.

DIMA

THIRTY MINUTES EARLIER

Once I'm certain there is no one on my trail, I double back. I keep to the shadows, walking around the corner and down the alley.

Through one of the grimy windows, I catch a glimpse of Taras and his men huddled in a corner booth. But I focus my attention on the small lot behind the bar.

One parking space is taken up by a black town car with tinted windows. It's idling.

Exactly what I was looking for.

I walk up to the car casually, hands in my pockets, and lean down to look in the window. I can't see anything because of the tint, but I know he can see me. I offer a friendly smile.

The window cracks a few inches and a pair of eyes, glowing white in the street light above, gleam out at me. "You need something?"

"Just tryin' not to freeze to death," I say, pitching my voice with a skewed flair to hide my accent. "It's startin' to piss rain out here."

"You waiting on someone inside?"

I nod. "Boss doesn't like to leave home without at least one guard. Paranoid."

"I hear you. All of them are. Always convinced someone wants to kill them."

I laugh. “You’re tellin’ me. But whatever pays the bills, I guess. I just don’t want to catch pneumonia while I’m doing it. Mind if I sit in the front seat?”

The window rolls down a bit more. I can see the driver is in his thirties, at most. He’s got his phone resting in the crook of the steering wheel, watching the same soccer game that was on the bar TV inside. There’s a gun, still in the holster and hanging halfway off the passenger seat.

“Taras wouldn’t like it...” he says cautiously, glancing up towards the bar. “Bah, fuck him, though! He’ll call when he’s ready for me to drive around and pick him up. What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

The doors unlock with an echoing click. I smile as I walk around to the passenger seat.

This man was wrong, though.

What Taras doesn’t know is about to hurt him very, very badly.

The man starts chatting idly about how underappreciated he is. How little the Albanian mob thinks of him. He wants me to commiserate, but I don’t offer much aside from a few sympathetic hums.

“...these fuckin’ pigs keep all the cash, all the girls for themselves. Share the wealth, brother! Am I right?”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “You’re right.” My eyes stay trained on the man’s gun holster. It’s slung casually over the middle console and part of my seat. I finish my cigarette and throw it out of the window onto the damp ground.

As soon as my window is rolled up again, the driver’s phone rings. “Yes,” he intones into the phone. “Yes, sir. Be right there.” He hangs up and gives me a tired shrug. “That was the boss,” he explains. “Time to roll. Good luck out there. Hopefully, you won’t be waiting much longer.”

He leans over to adjust his seat back upright, but when he does, his phone clatters to the floor. “Fucking fuck...” he curses.

That’s when I make my move. By the time he fishes it from the floorboards and straightens up again, I’m pointing his own gun in his face.

He jumps and curses. “Fuck! What the fuck, man?”

“I’m not getting out and you’re not going to tell Taras I’m here. Got it?” The folksy accent earlier is gone. My native Russian coldness seeps through again. Sharp and merciless.

“What do you want?” the driver breathes in terror.

I move the gun closer to his head. “I want you to drive this car and keep your mouth shut. If you so much as breathe wrong, I’ll put a bullet in your head.”

“Are you after Taras?” he asks.

I nod as I sink down into the well in front of the passenger seat, keeping my gun trained on the driver.

“He isn’t so paranoid after all,” I comment. “Now shut up and drive.”

The man mutters Albanian curses under his breath as he reverses out of the lot and drives down the alley. His eyes are darting all around and the car is moving jerkily.

We pull up in front of the bar. The back door is wrenched open and Taras slumps into the rear seat, his eyes closed. He reeks of vodka.

I duck lower and tighten my grip on the gun.

“Fucking hell,” Taras scowls. “What a shitty night. Take me home.”

The driver takes off wordlessly, merging into traffic and navigating the city streets. A few times, he glances down at me and the car jerks slightly. As if he’s surprised each time at the sight of me and the gun.

“Have you been drinking, too?” Taras mumbles. “Drive the fucking car straight.”

“Sorry,” the driver says, his voice clipped.

I wave the gun, reminding him what’s at stake.

After a few minutes, Taras sighs loudly. “Have you talked to anyone at the house?”

“No one,” the driver says. “Not since we left.”

“I wonder how that bitch is doing.” Taras lets out a humorless laugh. “God, if I’d known what I was going to endure tonight, I would have had more fun with her before beating her to shit. Once they’re beaten, the sex isn’t nearly as good, you know.”

My finger hovers over the trigger, aching to rise up and shoot Taras between his bloodshot eyes. He deserves that and so much more. But I quash down my rage, deciding instead to save it for later.

He’ll get what he deserves when the time is right.



As we get to the edge of the city, the streetlights become fewer and farther between. Taras must live in a gated community.

The driver turns into a long driveway and stops. “Should I get your door, sir?”

“I can get my own fucking door,” Taras snarls, fighting with the handle for a second before the door opens. He gets out and slams the door behind him.

When the driver reaches to throw the car into park, I pull myself back up into the front seat. “Pull into the garage,” I order.

“I don’t park in the garage,” he balks.

“Today, you do.”

If I accost Taras in the driveway, there’s a chance I’ll never get into the house. I have to surprise him inside. Pulling the car into the garage is the only way I can assure I get in without being spotted first.

The driver glances nervously towards the house and then follows the curve of the driveway further down. He hits a garage opener clipped to the sun shade. I hear the mechanical workings of the door lifting up.

The garage is wide, large enough for half a dozen cars. There’s a door to my right that looks like it leads into the main house.

I climb out of the car and stretch out my legs. “Make yourself scarce, unless you want to be involved in this,” I tell the driver.

He eyes me for one second, as if he’s considering trying to intervene on his boss’s behalf.

“Out of pure courtesy, I’m giving you this chance to run,” I say to him acidly. “If I were you, I’d take it.”

One look at the murder written in my face and he knows I mean what I’m saying. He turns and flees into the night.

I slip into the main house, gun still held at the ready. A short hallway leads me to a kitchen. The room is dark, but I can make out the marble countertops and stainless steel appliances from the glow of the neon clock on the wall.

Everything is silent.

Everything is still.

Until a gunshot pierces the night like a metallic scream.

For a second, I think it’s coming from behind me. Maybe the driver wasn’t as cowardly as I thought. Maybe he came back. Maybe he’s shooting at me.

I whirl around—but the shot didn’t come from back there.

It came from inside the house.

ARYA

Rose and I both freeze. The key cranks. The door is thrown open...

And reveals Taras standing on the threshold.

He's tucking his keys back in his pocket, so he doesn't notice anything at first.

Then he looks up and sees us. I watch his face purple with anger.

Rose whimpers. I bite my lip.

This is where my plan ends. We don't have a weapon. Neither of us are in a state to fight.

It's over.

The realization that we won't be escaping washes over me. It nearly brings me to my knees. But I refuse to bend. I'll stand tall. I'll face whatever wrath Taras wants to rain down on me. I won't let him—

The thought dies in my head as Taras reaches into his waistband and pulls out a gun.

The milliseconds stretch into hours. As he lifts the gun, aiming it at us, I feel like I'm in a movie. I blink, and then—

Bang.

I wait to feel the pain, to feel the warm rush of blood and the embrace of death.

But there's nothing. Just the smell of gunpowder.

And then Rose's hand slips from mine.

My friend, still swollen and bruised from Taras's last attack on her, drops to the floor with a gunshot wound in her forehead. A spray of blood covers the floor behind us.

I can't even scream. My entire body is locked in place. Locked in horror. One question beating around in my skull.

What have I done?

What have I done?

What have I done?

"Rose?" Her name slips out of my mouth. A question that will never be answered.

When Taras walks towards me, murderous intent shining in his eyes, I don't even have it in me to fight. I don't run or cower.

I face the death that has been after me for the last six weeks. For the last few years. Hell, since the day I was born.

I always knew, deep down, my life would end in violence.

And here it is. My destiny come home to roost.

Taras stops a few feet in front of me and raises the gun once more.

I close my eyes and wait for the final bang.

DIMA

I abandon my silent approach and sprint inward. Caution be damned. I've been without Arya and Lukas long enough. I'm not going to lose them now.

I hear a distant voice. Just a single whimpered word, weighted down by unimaginable sorrow.

“Rose?”

It's Arya.

I follow the sound of her voice down a long hallway to a round foyer. The floor is a checkered white and gray tile that swirls into a central circle. Arya stands in the middle of it. A body is sprawled on the floor next to her. The dead woman has red hair and a matching puddle of blood blossoming behind her head.

Arya is in a red silk dress and has blood dripping down her leg and all over her arms. Her face looks thinner than the last time I saw her. Actually, everything about her looks thinner. More fragile. I can see the pointed bones of her knees and her elbows. Her spine is visible all the way down to where the dress dips at her lower back.

Anger rushes over me in a molten wave. People took her from me. Starved her. Hurt her. Scarred her.

And now this son of a bitch Taras has a gun pointed at her.

Arya doesn't move. Doesn't even flinch as the gun is lifted in her direction. In fact, her eyes flutter closed with grateful exhaustion. As if she's been tired for so long and now she'll finally get to sleep.

For a brief moment, I contemplate what would have happened if I hadn't been here.

But I *am* here.

And I know what happens next.

I run into the room, lift my gun, and pull the trigger before Taras can do the same. My aim, as always, is perfect. There's just enough time for Taras's drooping eyes to widen in shock.

Then the bullet destroys his face.

His massive bulk crashes to the ground. The house shakes.

Arya doesn't move for a second. She holds perfectly still, her hands in fists at her side. Then her eyes blink open.

She lifts her hands to her chest, her stomach. She runs them over her face, like she's searching for the bullet hole.

When Arya sees what's happened to Taras, she stumbles backward with a gasp. She trips over her dead friend, but manages to catch herself before falling in the pool of blood.

Then she lunges forward, drops to her knees, and grabs Taras's gun from his limp hand. Without hesitating, she spins around and aims it at me.

I hold up my hands, the gun in my right. "You wouldn't kill the guy who saved your life, would you?"

She blinks at me, her green eyes shining with fear and disbelief. My chest clenches with an emotion I've never felt in my entire life.

I see recognition spark in her eyes. "Are you... are you real?" she whispers.

"I'm real," I tell her.

Then Arya drops the gun and runs into my arms. I grab a fistful of her hair and crush her against my chest. She feels hollow in my arms, too light to be real.

But her desperate grip around my neck says otherwise. Arya clings to me like she's afraid I'll disappear if she lets go.

"I'm here," I whisper, smoothing my hand down her back. Her skin is cold and prickly with goosebumps. I try to rub warmth into her. "I came for you. I found you."

She buries her face in my neck and breathes me in. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

"I knew I'd see you again," I tell her. "I wasn't going to stop looking until I found you."

She pulls back and looks up at me, and fuck, she's beautiful. Even bloodied and terrified and thin, Arya radiates beauty. How could anyone stop looking for a woman like this?

All at once, though, a cold chill goes through me. A realization I haven't let myself consider yet.

I look around the room. But aside from us and the two bodies, it's empty.

"What?" Arya asks, looking around, suddenly nervous. "Is there someone else?"

"Arya, where is he?"

"Where's who?"

I know the answer already. The fact that she doesn't know who I'm talking about tells me all I need to know. Still, I can't stop myself from voicing the question in its entirety.

"Where the fuck is my son?"

ARYA

Where the fuck is my son?

It takes me a long time to figure out how to answer.

“He’s gone,” I finally whisper in a voice so soft and fragile it doesn’t feel anything like my own. “They took him.”

Dima’s jaw clenches. “Who?”

“Brigitte and Erik. They took him and sold me here. That’s all I know.”

His face is a tapestry of rage. I feel horrible that he has to find out this way. But I can’t stop looking at the body on the floor.

Not Taras’s, of course. Fuck Taras. If I never saw him again, it would still be too soon.

It’s Rose I can’t tear my eyes away from. That awful bullet hole in her forehead...

Her eyes are open, staring up sightlessly at the ceiling above. It crosses my mind that she looks oddly at peace. For once, no longer haunted by her nightly demons.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to keep the bile in my stomach from heaving up.

Dima lays a heavy hand on my shoulder. “We’ll get him back.”

I let the words skim over me, like a flame moving close to the skin, warming it without burning. It's comforting. But if I think about what he's saying, if I let it penetrate the wall I've built around my heart, it hurts. It scorches.

Because I don't know if it's true.

It's been six weeks. Lukas has been away from me longer than I had him. How are we supposed to find him? How are we supposed to get him back?

The thought breaks my heart. I shove it away. I can't deal with that right now.

"We have to get out of here," Dima says, looking around. "There's a car in the garage with the keys in it we can take to escape. Let's go."

He takes my hand and I turn with him, but then I stop.

Rose. I look back at her.

Dima reads my mind. "We can't do anything for her, Arya. She's dead."

My voice trembles. "We can't just leave her here."

"We have to go, Arya."

"We can't. I can't. I swore I'd get her out. Please," I beg him. "Please don't make me leave her."

He clicks his tongue, thinking. Then something occurs to him.

He drops my hand and marches over to a small wooden table sitting against the far wall. With a swift kick, he breaks the front leg off of it.

CRACK.

Then the other three, one at a time.

CRACK.

CRACK.

CRACK.

"What are you doing?"

“Two birds, one stone,” he says, dragging Rose’s body over towards the wall and leaning the wooden legs over her body like a teepee. “We’ll give your friend a poor man’s Viking funeral and we’ll cause a distraction at the same time.”

Dima grabs an antique chair from another corner and breaks it like he did the table, then slips into the kitchen and fishes around in the cabinets. He emerges with a bottle of vodka. Uncorking it, he pours the alcohol over the assembled shards of wood stacked alongside Rose.

It shouldn’t be comforting, but in the weirdest way, it is. At the very least, it’s something to do. Some way I can give Rose a proper ending. One that isn’t violent and bloody and horrific.

More than anything, it will take her body away from here.

They won’t be able to touch her anymore.

Just as he goes to light the match, I stop him and rush forward. Rose is buried under the wood and debris, but I uncover her body and unclasp the heart-shaped necklace from her around her neck.

I look up and catch Dima watching me.

“It’s special to her,” I explain in a hollow croak. “A gift from her mom when her daughter was born. If I ever find her family, they’ll want it back.”

Dima nods solemnly. There’s understanding in that nod. There’s room to breathe.

Then, with a clenched jaw, he throws the match into the pile.

It goes up easily. Flames lick at the paper, the books, the wood we assembled. A trail of torn pages leads to the wallpaper. The fire runs down there and catches.

I tighten my fists in fierce pride. I want as much of this horrid house to burn as possible.

I want this hellhole to be reduced to ashes in the wind.

No one else should ever step foot in this place ever again.

“It’s done,” Dima says quietly, wrapping his arm around my waist as the heat starts to bake our skin. “Let’s go.”

I look at the pyre one more time. Rose isn’t visible beneath it. I know she’s gone, but I still want to tell her I’m sorry. I want to tell her I wish she was the one escaping instead of me.

There’s a million other things I want to say, too.

But all I can manage to voice is one word.

“Goodbye.”

ARYA

We get into one of Taras's cars and slip away. I see the first peals of smoke rising up in the rearview mirror.

"Goodbye," I whisper again. "And good fucking riddance."

We drive for a while, then ditch the car somewhere downtown. I'm moving on pure autopilot. Dima has to touch me and guide me down the sidewalk. Neither of us says much.

He leads me to an old brick building with cracks running diagonally from every window and a rusty fire escape barely hanging onto the side. The buzzers at the front door don't seem to work and a rock is wedged in the door to keep it propped permanently open.

"This is where I've been staying. It's not quite the Romanoff Mansion," Dima explains, ushering me inside. "But you'll be safe here."

I'm not sure I know what "safe" means anymore. I thought I was *safe* in New York City. I thought I was *safe* with Brigitte and my job and my little apartment. I thought I was insulated from the life I'd escaped with Jorik, from the mistakes I'd made in my past.

I had no idea danger was lurking under my nose the entire time. No idea I was surrounded by enemies at every turn.

And I certainly had no idea that the only person I could really trust would turn out to be the stranger who broke into the clinic and fucked me like our

lives depended on it.

The universe has a cruel sense of humor.

The elevator is broken, so we climb four flights of stairs to Dima's makeshift safehouse. By the time we get there, the cut on my leg is bleeding again.

"Come," he instructs. "I'll clean you up."

Dima looks up and down the hall before he unlocks his door. Once we're in, he locks the door again, slides a bolt into place, and shoves a chair in front of it.

Then he turns to face me.

He looks massive in the tiny apartment. The ceilings are low and sagging with water damage and the entryway is barely wider than his shoulders. Like he's standing in a dilapidated dollhouse.

I reach out and touch his arm softly with a fingertip. Just to confirm he's here. He's real. This is all real.

He said he was when he first burst in to save me from Taras. I'm just having a hard time believing it.

He looks me over, blue eyes assessing. "Come on," he says again, in a voice softer than anything I've ever heard from him before.

He spins me around gently and pushes me by the shoulders down the hallway and into his bathroom.

"Sit." He gestures to the closed toilet.

I do as he says. Still numb. I'm not quite thinking, but I'm not quite not-thinking, either. I'm just lost. In body. In mind. In spirit.

Nothing makes sense anymore. Nothing but this—Dima's touch. His smell. His eyes, bright and piercing and assured despite everything that's happened to us and because of us.

He kneels down in front of me and washes my cuts with a warm cloth. Rivulets of blood drip down my calf.

“How did this happen?” he asks as he works.

“It’s a long story...” I begin.

He smiles at me. It’s soft and sad and tight and makes me want to cry all over again. “I’m listening.”

So, with a shudder, I start from the beginning. I tell him about my escape plan, how Rose and I were going to run into the night together. How we were going to find our families and start over.

“...We were going to—”

But the thought of it brings the pain of her sudden death to the forefront, and I drop my head into my hands and let my words die on my lips.

“It was a good plan,” Dima murmurs, rubbing my back. His voice is deep and steady. “There’s too much blood. Take off your dress.” He must feel me stiffen, because he adds, “I’ll give you some privacy.”

He starts to stand. To leave.

But as he does, I realize something suddenly: I never want to be alone again.

I want him here.

I need him here.

“No!” I cry out. I latch on his hand. He looks down at me, surprised. “No,” I say again, quieter. “Don’t leave. Please stay. Help me.” After everything that has happened, I need to touch him. I need to feel him.

I look into his eyes for a moment. They’re churning with dark storms. Like he’s weighing what this might mean.

I want to tell him that nothing means anything anymore. Everything I once took for granted is now dead or gone or both.

All we have is this. All we have is each other.

“Please,” I say again in a hoarse whisper. I pirouette slowly until my back is facing him.

His fingers graze up my side and find the zipper of my dress. At the merest touch, a shiver glides down my arms.

“You want this?” he asks in a low, rough rumble.

“I need it.”

“You want me to reclaim you? You want me to make you all mine again?”

“I’m begging you, Dima. Please, please, please.”

Dima slides the zipper down my back and I’ve never been more relieved. I want this garment gone. Burned up. Along with every trace of Taras Kreshnik.

The dress puddles to the floor at my feet. I’m naked without it. I stay still and hug myself, eyes closed, goosebumps prickling over my skin. Dima reaches around me and turns on the shower.

Steam rises immediately, fogging over the mirror. Dima holds my hand. Helps me step over the rim of the tub and underneath the warm flow of the water. The blood sluices off of me and down into the drain.

Other stuff flows away, too. Six weeks of sleepless nights. Of pain. Of wondering who has my son. If he misses me. If this is destroying him.

Nightmares and fears and agonies drain away. Not gone forever—but gone for a moment, at least.

For one pure, blissful moment.

My eyes are still closed, head tipped back in the spray, when the curtain opens and Dima steps in. It felt so good I almost forgot he was there.

My eyes pop open—and my God, he’s gorgeous.

I realize all at once that he’s seen me naked, but I haven’t seen all of him yet. He kept his clothes on at the clinic all those months ago and there was no reason for him to undress in front of me while we were on the run.

Moments ago, I felt ready to collapse. But now, my body is alert. Alive.

I drink him in. Dima's shoulders are broad, rippled with muscle and tattoos. His chest tapers down to a trim waist and a deep 'V' that arrows right towards his massive cock. His skin seems to glow and the tattoos inked all over him seem to move like they're alive.

"Are you okay?" His voice is a low rumble that I feel deep in my belly.

I nod. "Getting there."

Dima turns around and grabs a bottle of shampoo. He squirts some into my hand and I lather the soap into my hair, scrubbing at my scalp, desperate to get to a new layer of skin. One that Taras has never touched.

When I feel a hand glide down my stomach, my body tightens. I look up. Dima is watching me carefully. His gray-blue eyes are cautious, but not uncertain. His hand is sudsy and he starts smoothing body wash over my skin. The callouses on his fingertips scrape gently over me, and I want to feel him everywhere.

"Dima, I..." I bite my lip and go back to washing my hair. My consent is written in the way I arch my body towards him for more.

My hands barely work. I try to scrub at my hair, but with every brush of Dima's hands, lower and lower on my belly, around my waist, on my back, I feel like I'm losing my coordination. My body jerks, my nerves unsure how to handle this influx of pleasure.

Then his hand slips between my legs.

I gasp and part my thighs. Needy for him. For this.

He washes and rinses me gently, slowly. Then his finger slides between my folds and the thoughts in my mind dissolve into babble.

I lean back against the shower wall for support. It feels like we are hiding under a waterfall, insulated from the world.

And when Dima circles two of his fingers over my center, the world ceases to exist altogether.

It's been so long.

So long since I felt good.

So long since he touched me last.

So long since I moaned the words that sealed my fate, all those nights ago.

Harder.

Touch me.

Make me come.

Every time I slid my own hand between my legs in the nights that followed, Dima was on my mind. Even when I didn't know his name, even when I didn't know his face, I could remember his scent and imagine his hands on my body.

Now, they're finally touching me again—and I'm completely falling apart.

Dima slips two fingers inside of me, curling them against my flesh, coaxing sensations out of me I didn't know existed anymore. My legs tremble and I scrabble my hands against the tile wall, trying to find something to hold onto.

He pulses into me, his thumb circling over my center. Merciless. Relentless.

And I break.

There's no gradual climb and release. No ebb and flow. It's just a sudden onslaught. A tsunami of warmth and pleasure. My thighs clamp together, trying to hold him inside of me for as long as I can.

When I finally float back down to reality, Dima slides his hand free and keeps washing me. He cleans my legs and my feet. And when he's done, he washes himself.

I watch him, still pressed against the tile wall, too dazed to move or care that I'm openly staring.

When he turns off the water, Dima climbs out and then offers me a hand, helping me over the high edge of his tub. He has a small stack of towels under the bathroom sink, and he grabs two and hands me one.

It smells clean. I wrap the soft material around myself. Now that we're out of the warm sauna of the shower, my teeth chatter with cold.

"Come on."

Dima walks me into the small apartment. I'm overwhelmed with the scent of him. It's everywhere.

The room is sparse and tidy. He has a dresser, a nightstand, and a bed on a cheap metal frame. His sheets are rumpled and I want to dive into the blankets and drown in the smell of him.

He pulls out a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt and tosses both on the bed. "You can wear those."

I rub the fabric between my fingers and then turn around. Dima is already looking for something for himself to wear. I'm not sure what he's thinking. The sexual energy from the bathroom seems distant now, but I'm not ready for it to be over.

My heart races as I turn around and face him. "I don't want these," I tell him.

Dima looks over his shoulder at me. I slowly unwrap my towel. His eyes spark.

"I want *you*."

I walk towards him slowly and he turns to face me. I push the towel from his waist. Immediately, it's clear that he's not as calm and collected as he seems. He's erect and, when I reach down to smooth my hand along his length, he twitches.

"I don't want to rush you," Dima says in a rough whisper. "You've been through a lot."

"Then make me forget it, Dima."

I circle my hand around his length, enjoying the feel of his velvety skin in my palm, but before I can reach his tip, Dima grabs my wrist.

I look up at him, surprised. Dima shakes his head. He picks me up by the waist and throws me back on the bed. Then he falls over me, caging me in

with his arms.

“I’ll fuck you until you forget everything,” he promises me. “Your name and mine. Where you’re from. Why you’re here.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?” I tease.

He pauses. Smiles. “It’s whatever you want it to be, *krasavitsa*.”

Then he lowers his mouth to my breast and swirls his tongue over my nipple and starts to make good on everything he swore he would do.

I moan and roll my hips against his body. Dima licks his way down my torso, sucking and then nibbling sensitive places, blowing cool air across my still-damp body. I’m made of goosebumps. Every cell in my body comes alive when he touches me and I can’t seem to get close enough to him.

He kisses a line down my stomach and over to my hips, nipping at the swell of flesh there. Then he dips below my waist. His breath is warm against my center. I want to tell him to stop. That it’s my turn to make him feel good.

But when he swipes his tongue over me, I’m helpless.

I grab a handful of his hair and hold him to me as he flicks and sucks on my center, drawing noises from me that don’t seem entirely human.

Within a matter of minutes, I’m bucking against his mouth, shaking to a release that I feel in my toes.

He looks up at me. His lips are damp with my juices. As I watch, he licks them.

I grab his shoulders and he lets me pull him up my body and flip him over onto his back. When I straddle him, he places his hands around my waist and I feel his length settle against my ass. I move gently up and down, massaging him.

“Fuck me...” Dima curses.

I lean forward and kiss his lips. “Not just yet.”

I crawl down his body, my hands dragging over the hard planes of his chest and stomach. My fingertips curl through the dark patch of hair at the base of

his belly and his stomach jumps.

Harder. Touch me. Make me come.

The words I spoke almost a year ago come back. I almost forgot them.

I also almost forgot how much Dima liked it when I told him what I wanted.

I look up at him from beneath my lashes, my mouth hovering just above him. “I want you to fuck my mouth.”

Dima’s eyes are blacker than I’ve ever seen when he thrusts his hips up, pressing himself against my mouth. I take him in, tongue swirling, and go down.

He’s too large for me to take in all at once, so I massage his base with my hand, circling my fingers around him and thrusting up, meeting my lips part way. I’m fully in control, but I like his shallow thrusts. I like that he wants more.

His breathing grows ragged. I lift my other hand to his chest and place my palm just above his heart. It’s racing. “Tell me if I should stop,” I whisper.

Dima groans. “Never, *krasavitsa*. Never fucking stop.”

Before I can continue, though, Dima reaches down and grabs me under the arms. I yelp as he settles me on his lap and then reaches over his head into the bedside drawer next to the bed. He pulls out a condom and waves it in the air.

“Not forgetting this again.”

Lukas is a painful reality between us, but I’m not ready to feel it yet. Not fully. I can’t.

Instead, I focus on watching Dima roll his fingers down his length, and I focus on the way he bites his lower lip when I lift my hips and position him at my opening. We both watch as our bodies connect.

It’s the first time I’ve been with anyone since I gave birth. The first time I’ve been with anyone since I got pregnant.

It feels right that it’s Dima both times.

Part of me worried it wouldn't feel the same. That something in me would be different.

But when our bodies finally connect and I'm filled with him, it feels as good as I could ever imagine. I tip my head back and moan. "Oh, Dima..."

"You're so tight." Dima rocks himself against me gently, letting me accommodate to him. "It's unreal, Arya."

I press my palms against his chest and lift my hips, bringing me to the very tip of him before I slam back down.

We both shudder.

So I do it again. And again. And again.

Until Dima's fingers are digging into my hips and his teeth are gritted with the effort not to come.

"It's been so long," he growls, grinding me against him when I come down. "I only wanted you."

I lay forward on his chest and suck his lower lip into my mouth. "You have me," I tell him breathlessly. "I'm all yours."

Dima grabs my ass and pounds into me. My body shakes. I gasp. Writhe. Cry out louder and louder.

I may be the one on top, but Dima is firmly in control. He's guiding me onto him, pulsing into me quickly and pulling out slowly, luxuriating in every delicious second.

I feel when his composure begins to break. His breathing becomes uneven. His movements jerky. I clench myself around him and the moment he spasms inside of me, I come along with him. Hard.

We twist and moan together. Dima wraps his arms around my back, binding me to him, and I keep making love to him, milking every bit of pleasure out of his hard cock with the roll of my hips.

When we're done, I collapse on his chest, breathing heavily.

He pulls on the ends of my hair, twisting it around his fingers. “Am I really the only one you wanted?” I whisper.

I learned a long time ago that men say crazy things during sex. They’ll say anything to get themselves off, even lies. So I try to guard myself in case it wasn’t true.

But I still have to ask.

“Yes.” He answers easily. Confident and clear. “That night at the clinic, I thought you were one of the most beautiful women I’d ever seen. And then, my God, the sex. You were wild.”

My cheeks flush. I bury my face in his chest with a shy giggle.

“It’s a good thing,” he reassures me. “A very good thing. I couldn’t get you out of my head. But you were an innocent girl. A nice girl. A good girl. I’m not a good man, Arya. I didn’t want to bring my dangers into your life. Of course, little did I know, I already had.”

“I don’t regret it.”

His hand stills on my back at once.

I lift myself onto my elbows, looking down at his square jaw and dark stubble, at the blue-gray eyes our son inherited from him.

“I don’t regret it,” I say again. “I don’t regret you or Lukas for a second. How could I?”

“Because I’m the reason you were kidnapped. The reason Lukas is missing. I’m the reason—”

I cut him off with a kiss. “The reason Lukas exists in the first place. And that is worth everything else, okay? Everything.”

He nods and his expression turns grave. “I’m going to get him back for you. For both of us. I’m going to save our son.”

“I know you are,” I whisper, tears burning at the backs of my eyes.

We lay in silence for a while, Dima stroking my back while I regulate my breathing to the rise and fall of his chest. Eventually, once I think he’s

dozing, I peel myself away and go clean up in the bathroom.

When I come back in the room, his eyes are open.

“Did I wake you?” I ask.

He shakes his head, looking slightly offended. “You think I’m spent after one round?”

“I am,” I admit, rubbing at my eyes. I peek through the curtain over the window. “It’s almost dawn.”

“Come to bed,” he says, beckoning me with his silky voice and a curl of his finger.

I reach down to grab the sweatshirt he lent me before, but before I can, Dima grabs my arm and pulls me into bed. His hand skims across my hips beneath the blankets and curls around my breast. His thumb brushes over my nipple, which is pebbling more every second.

“I’ll leave you alone—for now,” he whispers, as he flicks my nipple back and forth gently. “You can go to sleep.”

I play at closing my eyes, but when Dima dips his head beneath the blankets and sucks my breast into his mouth, I give in to the heat building low in my belly. I pull him up to me and kiss him, wrapping my arms around his neck.

The foreplay this time is short because neither of us need it. I feel him, hard and needy, pushing at my opening. I’m dripping in anticipation.

This time, I open the condom and slide it down his length. “Fuck, you’re something else,” he growls fiercely.

When I reach his base, he grabs my wrists and pins them above my head, while, in the same instant, he thrusts into me.

I cry out, still shocked at the way he fills me.

He holds both of my arms with one hand and uses the other to draw devastating circles over my center, filling me with an aching kind of need that only he can fill.

When I come, my body goes tight like a bowstring and then limp. I sag into the mattress, dissolving into a puddle of warmth.

Dima kisses my lips, my cheek, my forehead, and then rolls me over onto my belly. For a second, he slides himself against my ass. He grabs my cheeks and pinches them together around his length, groaning as he saws against me.

Then he lifts my hips and presses inside of me.

I feel like I should be spent, but the embers burning in my belly catch aflame as soon as he's inside of me again. It's like a trick birthday candle. No matter how many times you blow it out, it lights back up.

Now, though, Dima isn't gentle.

I've had my release.

This is for him.

Our bodies crash together, the noise echoing around the room. I press my hips back so I can open up for him, give him as much of myself as possible.

He knots his hand in the back of my hair and jerks me towards him. I gasp and arch my spine as he presses his lips to my ear.

"Forget his fucking name," he orders.

He thrusts hard. I have to stifle a scream.

"Forget his fucking face."

Another thrust. Another scream.

"Forget everything that's happened since the moment I walked into that clinic."

Thrust. Thrust. Thrust. I can't hold it back anymore—I'm crying out every time his hips slam into mine.

"You're mine, Arya, do you understand that? You belong to me. You're my fucking *krasavitsa*. Now be a good girl and come for me."

He releases me and presses my face into the sheets. I reach around and grab his thighs, drawing him closer as Dima grabs my wrists and uses my arms to leverage himself into me. It's rough and dirty and I will never get enough.

I tilt my hips a little more. The next stroke is like an electric current zinging through me. It touches things I didn't know could be touched, and I wail again into the pillow.

Dima thrusts faster. In a matter of seconds, my thighs are trembling, and yet another orgasm rips through me. My body clenches around him.

I feel Dima's movements stutter. His thrusts become more purposeful, and when he finally releases, he collapses forward and rides out the last waves of his orgasm pressed against my back.

I've never felt quite so satiated or so exhausted. I thought I was tired before, but it's nothing to the stupor that comes over me when we're finished the second time.

I'm barely aware of Dima grabbing my towel from the floor and cleaning me up.

When he climbs in bed next to me, he pulls the blanket up under my chin and kisses my cheek. I smile and try to say something, but the words are lost in sleep.

After weeks of nightmares, I don't have a single dream.

ARYA

I can't breathe.

There's something around my neck. Hands, strong and clammy.

They're Taras's hands—I know it without even having to look. Choking the life out of me.

I thrash around, but my own hands are bound by my sides. I'm sweating and panicking and I want to scream so fucking badly but I can't even draw in a breath to let it out—

My eyes open.

It's not Taras.

It's not anyone, actually.

I free my hands from their bindings—which turn out to be Dima's sweaty bedsheets, not cuffs—and scrabble at my throat.

I was being choked, funnily enough. But it was Rose's necklace doing the choking.

I'm safe. Taras is dead and gone.

I look to my side. Dima is slumbering. He's as huge as ever, but there's something so graceful and calm about him as he sleeps. His chest rises and falls, tattoos rippling with the motion. The ever-present downward sloping V

of his eyebrows is smoothed out, softened.

He looks at peace.

I breathe out a long sigh and look down at the thin silver chain in my hand. The pendant dangles on the end of it. A half heart. Jagged where it's broken down the middle.

A reminder that Rose's world was split in two.

The image of her body lying slumped at the center of that tile spiral on Taras's floor flashes before my mind's eye.

All that blood.

And the green of her irises, so blank and vague and emotionless...

I shudder. And as I do, I feel a huge palm come to rest gently on my hip.

"Bad dreams?" Dima murmurs sleepily. His voice is husky, ragged, delicious.

"Something like that," I answer with a sigh.

"Welcome to the club."

I wonder what that means. But he doesn't offer an explanation.

He shifts around in bed to face me. Even with his hair mussed from sleep, he looks effortlessly beautiful.

Still savage and masculine, of course—that part of him radiates like an aura at all hours. But there's gentleness in his eyes. In the way he looks at me. In the way his scarred, calloused fingers linger on my thigh.

The necklace in my hand is warm from my body heat. "This was hers?" Dima asks.

I nod. "Yes."

"What was her name?"

"Rose," I whisper in the tiniest voice imaginable. "Her name was Rose."

“And she was trapped in there with you?”

“Yes. But worse than me. She’d been there longer. And Taras, he... He spared me. Or really, the doctor did. He said Taras would kill me if he tried to use me the way he did Rose. So he left me alone. Used her instead. Until... Until last night.”

Dima’s lip twitches in a vicious snarl. When he looks like that, it’s obvious to me why he is who he is. The expression alone is terrifying. I can’t imagine being a victim to the violence that would follow it if I ever betrayed him.

“That poor girl,” he says.

I shake my head. “No. Don’t pity her. She wouldn’t want that. She wasn’t pathetic. She was brave and strong. She looked the monster in the face and said, *‘Is that all you got?’* And she did it again and again. Night after night. She was... She was...”

I only notice I’m crying when Dima reaches out and strokes the tear away from my cheek.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs. “We don’t have to talk about it.”

I push myself more upright. “We *do* have to talk about it. She deserves that much. She had a life, Dima. She just wanted to get back to her mom and her baby girl. That’s all she wanted. And I... I... I got her killed.”

He sits up with me. “You did what you had to do to survive, Arya. You have a son to get back to, too.”

“We *both* should’ve survived!” I cry out. I surprise even myself with the force in my words. “That son of a bitch took that away from us. And how many other girls came before me and Rose, huh? How many other people did he hurt?”

“He’s dead now,” Dima says comfortingly.

I wish that was enough. I wish watching that motherfucker burn to a crisp was satisfying enough for me to forget about him. But I know that I’ll see his face in my nightmares for a long, long time.

At least I'll get a shot at a happily-ever-after, though. Rose won't even get that.

"It's not enough," I say, shaking my head. "She deserves more."

I finger the necklace around my neck. I wonder where the other half is now. What the little girl looks like who wears it all the time, thinking of her mother. Missing her. Loving her. Needing her.

And then I think about my own son. Lukas is out there somewhere, in the arms of a pair of violent psychopaths. My ex-fiancé and my ex-best friend coming together to steal the only thing that's ever truly mattered to me.

I ask myself, *What would Rose do if our roles were switched?*

I know the answer immediately.

Rose didn't like to talk about her family much. Mentioning them brought her too much pain. Despite how often I assured her she'd see them again, Rose never really believed it. She knew, deep down, that she'd die in Taras's house.

And she was right about that.

Every time I close my eyes, Rose's death haunts me. I hear her knees cracking on the floor. I see her scream and collapse. I see the blood. And it always leads to the same inevitable conclusion.

Her death was my fault.

I'm the reason Rose died in that house.

I'm the reason she never saw freedom again.

I'm the reason her family will mourn her.

So as difficult as it will be, I have to be the one to tell them what happened to her. It's not much, but it's something. It's the least I can do.

"I'm going to go find her family, Dima," I say fiercely, eyes blazing. "They deserve to know what happened."

He entwines his hand with mine and lowers his eyes to stare at me. We're silent for a moment.

Then he rumbles in that voice of his, the deep, husky snarl that penetrates to the core of me, "I'm coming with you."

DIMA

Arya goes to take a shower while I phone Gennady. If we're going to find Rose's family and provide them with some closure on their missing loved one, we're going to need some direction.

Gennady picks up on the second ring. "Dima? Is that you?"

"No, it's your other don," I growl sarcastically.

"Hmm. Tough to know for sure. Say the code word so I know you're legit."

"We don't have a code word, *dubiina*."

"Got me there. No need to be rude, though. Alright then, what's your favorite color?"

"Gennady..."

"This is simply security protocol, Dima—if it really *is* you. Can't be discussing Bratva matters without clearing your identity first."

"I'm going to clear you off the face of the fucking planet if you don't cut this shit out," I snarl, though part of me wants to laugh despite all the shit that's happened in the last two months.

"Fine, fine," he concedes. "I would've accepted 'blue,' though. And if we ever do get in a situation like this again, let's go with code word 'starfish.'"

"If you think I'm ever going to say 'starfish,' you've lost your fucking mind."

“Ah! Ah! You already said it! My work here is done.”

I sigh and rub the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. War or famine, hell or high water—none of it can make my righthand man be serious for any length of time. “Focus. I need you to do something for me.”

“I’ve told you a thousand times, Dima; I’m not shaving that hairy back of yours.”

“I swear to God...”

“Okay, now I’m done for real. What do you need?”

“I need you to find someone for me.”

“I’ve got a *great* therapist; you’re gonna love her. Not sure if she’ll feel the same way about you...”

“It’s a little girl and her grandmother, Gennady.”

He sobers up. “Oh. Okay.”

“I don’t have much to go on...” I rattle off all the information that Arya could remember. The little girl’s name, Rose’s name, a vague description of the house in Albany that Arya remembered from a story Rose told her. Something to do with frogs.

“That’s tough, Dima,” Gennady warns when I’m finished. “Not a lot of specifics there.”

“I thought you were the best in the business?”

“I am,” he bristles. “Of course I am. I just... fuck, how soon do you need this?”

I check my watch. “How about now?”

“Oh, sure, *now* you get a sense of humor. Funny how that works.”

“This is just a minor detour,” I rumble. “Arya needs this for... for closure. But we can’t let the Butcher slip through our fingers again. The sooner we get to him, the sooner we can find that Arnaud bitch and her brother and get back my son. Then we can move onto slaughtering Zotov.”

“About all that...”

My jaw clenches and my fist tightens on the bedsheet. “About what, Gennady?”

I can hear him wincing. He doesn’t want to tell me the next bit of news.

“I can find the girl, no problem,” he says. “I need an hour at most. But that’s easy. Those are civilians. These other targets... they know how to hide, Dima. We got lucky seeing the Butcher once. We won’t get that lucky again. So I need time. I’m working as fast as I can.”

“They have my son, Gennady,” I remind him coldly. “Those motherfuckers have my boy.”

“You think I don’t know that?” he snaps uncharacteristically. His voice is weary and strained. “I haven’t slept more than fifteen minutes at a time in days. I’m running from motel room to motel room, calling in favors older than I am. This shit isn’t easy, Dima, but I’m fucking slaving for you because that’s what I do. That’s what I always do. Don’t ever question my loyalty or my effort.”

I pause, taken aback. In all the years that I’ve known Gennady, he’s almost never spoken to me like that. He’s always respected who I am. What our relationship must be.

He must be exhausted. Mentally, physically, spiritually. This war is weighing heavily on everyone.

“I’m sorry, friend,” I tell him as gently as I can. “I’ve never questioned your loyalty even once. You’re my brother-in-arms. I wouldn’t want to go to battle with anyone else.”

He sighs and relents. “I know. Likewise and all that. You’re just a crotchety old bastard, you know that?”

I bark out a laugh. “Tell me something I don’t know, *sobrat*. I’m trying to be better. We all are.”

We say our goodbyes and hang up the phone.

Afterwards, I'm buzzing with adrenaline. Itching to lay waste to all the people who've wronged me. Who've wronged my family.

I want to stack bodies high—Brigitte's, Erik's, Zotov's, the Butcher's. But I'll have to wait until the moment is right.

For now, we have something else to do. A different kind of wrong to avenge.

Then I can return to my city and take back everything that belongs to me.

ARYA

ONE DAY LATER—A TRAILER PARK OUTSIDE OF ALBANY, NEW YORK

The trailer park is depressing.

The color scheme never left the 1980s and four decades of harsh New York winters haven't done the paint job any favors. The plots are crudely demarcated with bricks buried in lines in the dead grass. Most of the windows are rusted-out and boarded-over.

The home I'm standing in front of, however, is well-maintained.

It's easy to see the fading paint around the windows and the sagging wooden porch. But obvious love and care have gone into the hand-painted "Welcome" sign by the front door and the arrangement of ceramic frogs of all shapes, sizes, and colors sitting on a short stepstool by the stairs.

Fancy or not, this is their home.

My heart aches at the sight of it.

Dima left me here while he went into town for some things, preparing to return to New York. He offered to come with me, but I told him I needed to do this myself. Rose's blood is on my hands, not his. This is a task for me and me alone.

So, with a sigh, I walk up to the door and knock.

At first, there's nothing. I stand in place, fidgeting nervously and wondering if I'm doing the right thing. Just when I am about ready to flee and reconsider this whole plan, I hear shuffling footsteps inside.

The door opens.

The woman who answers is on the back side of middle-aged, but she looks much, much older. Her back is perpetually hunched over and her eyesight is so bad that she squints constantly, creasing deep lines around her eyes and cheeks.

My breath catches at the sight of her.

Rose told me her mother was in poor health, so I'm even more certain I have the right place. But being here now, in front of this woman, is so much more devastating than I ever could have imagined.

“Yes? Hello?”

I swallow past my suddenly-parched throat and fumble for words. “H—hi, hello. I'm so sorry to bother you, ma'am. My name—uh, my name is Arya. I was a... friend of your daughter's, I believe? Rose? We met at—well, we met at...”

My words fail me. I don't know how much Ernestine knows about what happened to Rose or where she was taken, but as soon as I mention Rose's name, she ushers me inside immediately. I'm given a cracked mug of tea and a cheese and bologna sandwich on wheat bread.

Neither of us says a word.

I'm starving, but I can't eat. Not with the news I have to deliver. It sits in my stomach like a stone.

Steadying myself, I look around the house. The kitchen is small. The counters are clean and bare aside from a cookie jar in the shape of a unicorn and salt-and-pepper shakers that look like gnomes. A dish towel embroidered with apples hangs from the handle on the oven.

There are a million pictures on the refrigerator. Every inch of the dated cream-colored appliance is covered in photographs, magnets, and crayon portraits of a woman holding the hand of a red-headed child.

One in particular catches my eye: a yellow frame that says “Beachside Bed and Breakfast” with a big frog in the corner. The picture is of Rose and her

daughter. They're nearly identical and both are smiling wide like it's the best day of their lives.

It breaks my fucking heart.

"You have a lovely home," I croak awkwardly.

Ernestine smiles, but there are unspoken questions in her eyes. I can tell she is holding herself back. Trying to give me time to say what I came to say.

I should have planned how I wanted to do this. I should have come up with a speech or written a letter. Instead, I'm sitting in front of my dead friend's mom without a single useful word in my head.

"You said you are a friend of Rose's?" Ernestine asks finally, lowering her head, looking up at me from beneath pinched brows.

"I am," I say, clearing my throat. "Or, I, uh... I was."

Worry darts through Ernestine's face, but before she can ask another question, I take off the necklace around my neck and hand it to her.

Her lower lip curls immediately. Her chin dimples.

The woman knows what it means.

I don't have to say anything at all.

"Rose fought to come back to you," I tell her, patting her hand as her shoulders shake with sobs. "She was trying to escape when... when it happened. I'm so sorry."

"You were there with her?"

"Yes," I say.

"With that... those men. The ones who took her."

"We were both sold to a bad, bad man. It was... It's a long story."

"If you were there with her, how did you get away?" Ernestine asks. Her question isn't accusatory. Just curious.

“He—Taras was his name—he was going to shoot us both. But then, uh... someone arrived and killed Taras before he could kill me, too. I wanted to bring you Rose’s necklace and tell you what happened to her. I didn’t know if you’d ever hear the news otherwise.”

In response, Rose’s mother pulls me into a hug, thanking me.

“I also feel responsible,” I say, the words nearly lost in the tightness of her hug. “It was my plan to try to escape, and—”

“And Rose agreed to it, didn’t she?” Ernestine interrupts sharply, her eyes gleaming with tears.

I nod, tears of my own starting to well up.

She gives me one of the saddest smiles I’ve ever seen. “Then it isn’t your fault, darling, okay? Rose was a fighter. Some fights, you just can’t win.”

Her eyes are glistening. Her face is so unbearably sorrowful. Just decades and decades of misery compounded into her expression. She’s had a hard life—that much is obvious.

And now this, on top of everything else? It’s brutal. It’s unfair. So unfair that I start to cry. On her behalf. On my own behalf. On behalf of mothers everywhere.

No mother should lose a child.

I think again of Lukas, though I’ve been trying so hard not to. And the tiniest image of his little fingers wrapped around my pinky breaks me.

I start to sob. Ugly sobs that rack me from head to toe.

Ernestine pulls me into her embrace. We cry together for a long, long time.

Eventually, we pull ourselves together. It feels like we’ve bonded. In a soft voice, Ernestine tells me about the story of how Rose was taken.

“...The police wouldn’t do anything to look for her. They told me she must’ve skipped town, but I knew she didn’t. She would never leave her baby girl behind. I was able to talk with people who worked at the bar with her, and they knew the guy she left work with that day. He was apparently a

known trafficker—not known to us, of course. From there, the trail went cold. I didn't know if she was in New York, if she was overseas, if she was dead. I thought I'd never know. So in a way, you coming here has been a gift."

"The worst gift ever," I mutter.

Ernestine shakes her head. "I'm devastated Rose's life ended this way, but at least we know. At least we can mourn her and maybe give her daughter something like a normal life. The poor girl has been waiting for her mom to come home for a long time."

I don't know what I expected from Rose's mother, but it wasn't this. Part of me thought she'd throw me out of the house the minute I told her the story. That maybe she'd refuse to believe me or think it was a trick or a scam.

Another part of me thought she'd try to hurt me in punishment for what I'd done. What I'd convinced Rose to do.

I never thought she would ply me with food and be the one offering comfort to me instead of the other way around.

Just then, the door opens. I turn and see who it is—and my heart plummets.

If I wasn't ready to confront Rose's mother, then I'm a million times more unprepared to confront her young daughter.

Seeing the girl there in the doorway is like a punch to the gut. It feels like looking at Rose herself. A younger Rose, of course, but still. They have the same flaming red hair, the same green eyes, and the same heart-shaped face.

She's beautiful.

June's backpack has sparkly pink straps and a rainbow key chain hanging from the zipper. When she looks from me to Ernestine and back again, her eyes are pinched together in concern the way her mother's so often were.

She's understandably suspicious of me. "Grandma?" she says in a low, quivering voice. "Who is this?"

I open my mouth to try and piece together some explanation that would make sense to this poor little girl. But before I can, Ernestine pushes herself to her

feet.

“Stay there,” she murmurs to me. “Let me handle this.”

Selfishly, cowardly, I’m grateful for the intervention. I didn’t have any idea what to say.

I move to the living room, which is only a few feet and a half-wall away from the kitchen, while Ernestine delivers the news.

Ernestine had accepted Rose’s possible fate a long time ago—that much was clear.

June, however, had not.

And the way she sobs lets me know that she’s old enough to understand exactly what it means when she hears the words, “Mommy isn’t coming home.”

The loss of her mother is a horrendous blow. I can’t help but feel her grief in my own chest. It hurts so much it’s hard to breathe.

Ernestine holds June, whispers in her ear, and strokes her hair. After a while, June walks through the living room and down the hall to her bedroom, her shoulders slumped forward.

I want to pull the girl in for a hug, but I don’t know her well enough for that. My touch wouldn’t be a comfort to her. But I desperately want to make things better for her. And for Ernestine.

I thought telling them the truth would be better, but now I’m not so sure. Maybe I should have sent a letter. It would have been impersonal and direct.

Or maybe I should have kept the information to myself. Maybe ignorance is better than heartbreak.

Still, selfishly, I’m glad I came. I hate seeing Rose’s family mourn her, but in a way, it brings me some peace. Knowing I’m not the only person who loved Rose... that I’m not the only one who misses her... It helps me remember that she was real.

“I should go,” I say, scooting to the edge of the sofa and getting ready to stand. “You all have a lot to process and I’m just in the way.”

Ernestine puts a wrinkled hand on my shoulder. “Sit, dear. Have a drink and sit with me for a little while. Is that okay?”

I hesitate. “No, no, I don’t want to impose...”

She shushes me and pats the back of my hand. “Any friend of Rose’s is a friend of ours.”

“But you’ve been so kind already. I’m grateful for—”

“And that’s why you have to stay,” she says more firmly. “Accept kindness. It’s the only way we can make it through this world.”

“Okay,” I whisper, conceding. If only she knew how hard that is for me. “I can try.”

ARYA

We talk for a while. The afternoon is dragging along. Dima said he'd call me when he was on his way back, but my phone hasn't rang. He must be busy.

After a few hours, Ernestine checks her watch. "Oh, dear. I have to go take my medicine," she says. "I'll be back in just a moment."

I give her a gentle smile. "I'll be right here."

She smiles back, pats my knee again, and then shuffles off down to her bedroom. I sigh and rest my head back on the couch.

The grief comes in waves. Some moments feel untouched by the tragedy and the next, it feels like my world is tearing apart.

Mostly, I just sit and try to breathe through it all.

Then I hear June's door open at the end of the hall, followed by shy footsteps. When she appears in the doorway, a rainbow blanket wrapped around her shoulders, I try to smile, even though it feels like the hardest thing I've ever done.

"Hi, June," I say.

June bites her lower lip nervously and stands at the mouth of the narrow hallway, saying nothing.

"My name is Arya," I explain. "I was... I'm a friend of your mother's."

The little girl looks so small as she tightens the blanket around her shoulders. “Did she say anything about me?” June blurts suddenly.

A tear leaks out of the corner of my eye. “She talked about you all the time,” I croak. “She told me how smart and brave and beautiful you are. And she was right.”

June shifts her weight back and forward on her feet. Then, as if reaching a decision, she scurries over to me and sits on the couch at my side.

I turn to face her. There’s wisdom and grief far beyond her ten years in her eyes.

“Did she tell you where she was going to go if she escaped?” Her words come out in a jumble, like she has to force them out. She retreats inward as soon as they’re spoken, protecting herself from the answer.

“It’s all she talked about,” I say honestly. “She wanted to come right back here to be with you and your grandma. It’s all she ever wanted.”

June’s lower lip trembles.

“Your mom loved you more than anything in the world, June,” I say, fighting through a wobbly voice of my own. “She’d be here right now if she could. I wish she were, in fact. If I could trade places with her, I’d—”

“No.” June lays a hand on my knee and shakes her head. “Don’t say that. Mommy wouldn’t like it.”

The girl came by her kindness naturally, but I’m still shocked by it. As the woman who came to tell her of her mother’s death, I expected hatred.

Instead, I found love.

“I wish your mom was here,” I say instead, nudging her gently with my elbow. “She was a good person.”

June wipes at her nose and nods, and then she snuffles and sits up straighter. “I’m really glad you came here. To tell us about Mommy, but also... just that you’re here. I’m glad.”

“I’m so happy to be here, too. Rose talked a lot about your house. She even told me about the frogs on the porch. That’s how I knew this had to be the right place.”

Neither Ernestine or June have asked many questions about what went on at Taras’s house or the exact details of Rose’s death. I’m grateful for that. I’m not ready to talk about it. I might not ever be ready to talk about it.

But it feels good to talk about Rose herself. To be with her family, in a world that hasn’t forgotten she existed.

June starts to ramble. “Mommy was the one who started the frog collection. One summer, we went to a lake for the day and a frog jumped in Grandma’s purse. She screamed and threw the whole bag into the water. I had to run and save it before it floated away.” June giggles at the memory. “Later, we went for lunch at a French café, and Mom bought me a croissant and then she bought Grandma a statue of a frog in flip flops at the gift shop. She also bought a picture frame with a frog on it. Now, everyone gets Grandma frogs because they think she likes them, but she doesn’t. They scare her.”

“Then why does she display them everywhere?” I ask.

June shrugs. “She doesn’t want to be mean.”

I laugh. “That sounds like your grandma.”

June sighs and lays her head back on the back of the couch. We’re quiet for a few minutes, somehow comfortable in each other’s presence. It’s nice.

“Mommy was trying to get us out of the trailer park when she was... when she went away,” June whispers, side-stepping the full truth of Rose’s kidnapping. “You probably know this, but my dad is in prison and he’s not very nice. Mommy was worried he’d come here looking for me some day, so she wanted to leave. She told me we’d get a place by the lake, near the French café. I was going to save my money and get goggles so I could see the frogs swimming underneath the water. But then she left and I was afraid she’d never find us again if we moved.”

My heart feels heavy in my chest. This little girl knows too much of the world. She has seen and felt too much. I want to take some of it away from her.

“Do you like the water?” I ask, changing the subject.

June grins. “I love it. In the summer, Grandma has an inflatable pool, and I practically live in it. Mommy always said she was afraid I’d grow gills. When I grow up, I’m going to move to the lake and eat breakfast at the French café every day.”

She says it fiercely. A promise to herself or to her mother or both.

And I believe her. I hope it happens for her. This little girl deserves a future. Both she and her grandmother do.

They’re broken, but so full of love that the breaks in their spirits don’t matter.

Ernestine and June are everything I’ve needed to see in the world over the last couple months. Seeing them gives me hope.

I don’t know whether they’ll make it to the water or the cafe. But I know I won’t forget these two women. Rose loved them enough to die trying to see them again. Now, I can see why.

Suddenly, there’s a knock on the door.

“Ernestine, someone is here!” I call as politely as I can.

“Would you answer that, dear?” she calls back. “I’m almost done. These darn insulin needles are always such a hassle...”

June gets up and goes to the bathroom. I feel weird answering the door of someone else’s home, but I get up to do it anyway. I’m assuming it’ll be a neighbor or a friend stopping by to say hello.

When I throw the door open, though, I know immediately the person standing on the porch is no friend.

The man is tall and skinny—the kind of skinny that speaks to a long history of addiction. His cheeks are sunken and pocked and his hair is greasy and pushed back away from his face. He has on a ratty black t-shirt and even rattier black jeans.

I can also see a gun sticking out of his front pocket.

His eyebrows raise briefly before he narrows his eyes, looking me up and down. “Who the fuck are you?”

Acting on instinct, I try to push the door half-closed, but the man wedges his shoe in front of it, keeping me from closing it any further.

“Who are you?” I ask, parroting the question back at him.

He spits on the porch and runs his thumb along his nose. “I’m not going to be asked those kinds of questions in my own house. So, bitch, who are you?”

I’m confused, blinking at him, when I feel Ernestine move up behind me.

She gasps. “Tommy!”

The man on the porch—Tommy, apparently—lifts his chin defiantly. “Let me in, Ern. I’m here to get June.”

“You can’t have her.” Ernestine motions for me to shut the door, but I can’t. Tommy is blocking it.

“Like fuck I can’t,” Tommy snarls, shoving himself into the entryway and forcing us both back. “She’s my daughter and she belongs with me.”

Suddenly, it all clicks into place.

June told me about her dad in prison, about how Rose was afraid he’d come to the house looking for them.

Clearly, Rose was right.

Here he is.

But there’s no way in hell he’s taking anyone anywhere.

ARYA

Tommy pushes his way into the trailer.

Being as hunched and weak as she is, Ernestine totters a few steps backwards before standing her ground in the doorway of her kitchen, arms crossed.

“You aren’t welcome here, Tommy.”

“I don’t give a shit what you think, old lady. This is my house more than it’s yours.”

“No, this house belongs to Rose.”

Tommy paces into the living room and surveys it all with a scowl. “Sure, if you want to call this dump a house. Is this really where my daughter has been living?”

“It’s better than anything you’ve ever had,” Ernestine snaps. “Especially since you never really had anything. You’ve stolen and grifted your way through life. It’s why you were locked up.”

Tommy narrows his black eyes at her. “I’m out now, you old bitch. It’s why I’m here. To get June.”

Ernestine laughs bitterly. “You don’t want June. You’re hoping I’ll give you money so I can keep her, is that it? Well, there isn’t any money, Tommy. There hasn’t been since Rose was taken and you know that.”

“Rose fucking left,” he barks. “She couldn’t swing being a mom, so she bailed. It’s about time you admit that and tell June the truth. It’s sick to make her think her mom is coming back.”

Suddenly, I speak up. “That’s not true.”

This is not my fight, but I can’t stand hearing anyone talk poorly about Rose. She doesn’t deserve it.

Tommy turns to me for the first time since I opened the door, and raises a brow. “And how the fuck do you know? I knew all of Rose’s friends and you ain’t one of ‘em.”

“I met her after she was taken,” I say, standing a bit taller. “I was abducted, too. We were being held by the same captor.”

Tommy blinks. I can tell he isn’t sure if he believes me or not. “She was kidnapped?”

I nod. “And sold on the black market.”

Without warning, he laughs. “If I’d known the bitch was worth something, I would have sold her years ago.”

My jaw drops. I want to snap this man’s neck. I’ve never hated someone so much in my life.

Tommy smirks at me. “You must not have known Rose long. If you did, you wouldn’t look so offended. She wasn’t good for much.”

“That was when she was with you,” Ernestine says. “You got her all strung out, but as soon as you left, Rose sorted her life out. She cleaned up and was doing good things.”

Tommy opens his mouth and then stops, his brow furrowing. “Was?”

Oh, fuck. He doesn’t know.

I look to Ernestine. She looks down at her feet. I can tell her chin is wobbling in her effort to hold back her tears.

To save her the heartache, I speak up. “Rose was killed trying to escape. She died a few days ago.”

For one solitary second, Tommy has the decency to look cowed.

Then, just as quickly as the humanity flickers across his face, it is gone.

He shrugs. “That means this house is mine then. So is June. Now that Rose is dead, none of this shit belongs to you.”

“Rose has a will.” I can tell Ernestine’s legs are shaking, so I walk over and help her sit down at the table. She thanks me and then glares up at Tommy. “Rose left a copy of a will with an attorney. She left me everything.”

“Everything? You make it sound like a lot.”

“June is everything to me,” she says.

I know she means it. They cherish one another. June would hate being away from her. I think the separation would kill Ernestine.

“Do you think anyone would side with you over blood? I’m her father!” Tommy roars. He stalks into the house. “Where is she?”

Ernestine lies instantly. “She’s at school. And you won’t be here when she gets back, Tommy. She doesn’t want to see you. She’s scared of you.”

I glance at the bathroom door. June will be coming out any minute.

“Why would she be scared of me?” Tommy asks, plopping down on the couch. “I’m her dad. I wouldn’t hurt her.”

“You already have hurt her. Over and over again. Just leave.” Ernestine’s voice is wobbly. She’s tired.

I get her a glass of water, moving slowly through the kitchen, trying to blend into the background. Tommy is volatile and I don’t want a physical confrontation.

“Who is this bitch again?” he asks, gesturing to me. “Are you taking in whores now? Has my house become a fuckin’ rescue shelter?”

“It’s not your house!” Ernestine says, slamming her hand down on the kitchen table. I lay a hand on her shoulder, trying to calm her, but she brushes me away. “Arya was a friend of Rose’s and she is our family now, too. She came to tell us what happened to Rose and she has been kinder to me and

June than you ever were.”

Her words touch me deeply, but I’m worried they’ll only put a target on my back with Tommy. When I look up and see the way he’s glaring at me, I know I’m right.

“Arya?” he asks. “Where were you ‘kidnapped’ from, Arya?”

A warning bell goes off in my brain. *Lie. Don’t tell him anything.* It’s Dima’s voice I hear in my head, coaching me through this situation.

“Florida,” I blurt. “Miami.”

“And where were you and Rose being held?”

Keep lying.

“A house in Kentucky. The guy was a mob boss. I never knew his name. He didn’t want us to know his identity.”

Tommy stands up and moves towards the kitchen slowly, his pockmarked face twisted into concentration. “You have a last name, Arya?”

Fucking lie!

“Arnaud.” I say the first thing that pops into my mind—Brigitte’s last name.

Tommy raises a skeptical brow. “Arya Arnaud from Florida, held by a stranger in Kentucky. I don’t suppose you have any identification on you?”

“I lost it all when I fled,” I lie. “I don’t have anything. That’s why I came here to find Rose’s family. She was my only friend in there and I hoped I would find a place with her family out here.”

Ernestine pats my hand affectionately. She knows I’m lying. I’ve told her everything about where Rose and I were held and who bought us.

But she isn’t giving a thing away. She’s a rock.

“Convenient,” Tommy drawls.

“Not exactly,” I laugh humorlessly. “Have you ever tried buying a bus ticket without a wallet?”

Tommy's eyes sparkle, the suspicion finally gone from his expression. "A girl like you, I'm sure you can find other ways to pay. I'm sure your captor taught you a thing or two."

My stomach turns. *I hate him, I hate him, I hate him.* But he isn't worth the drama. I just have to stay calm and help Ernestine get this asshole out of her house. I just have to—

"You need to leave, Tommy," Ernestine says again, "or I'm calling the police!"

"Come on now, Ernie," he drawls. "Be a little more welcoming, won't you? I just got out on parole."

"And your gun is a violation," she says. "You shouldn't have a weapon."

He saunters over to her, looking down his nose at the woman as if he's touch for standing up to her. "You gonna to turn me in, you old bitch? Because I think we both know what could happen to June if you decide to do that."

My stomach twists. No father—no *good* father—would ever use their child as a threat like that. Tommy is a piece of shit from top to bottom.

Ernestine doesn't say anything.

Feeling she's been put properly in her place, Tommy turns back to me. He lifts a finger, waving it in the air as he nods along.

"You know, I think you've been lying to me, Arya."

God, I wish Ernestine hadn't given Tommy my real first name. I would have made one up. I hate how it sounds coming out of his mouth.

"About what?"

He waves his hands in the air like he's revealing a magic trick. "Everything."

"I'm not," I insist. "But so what if I am? What does it matter if you know my real name?"

"Here's the thing, lady. People like to believe that bad guys get locked away in prison and it puts us all outta commission, but that just ain't how it works. There's a network of bosses and underbosses, informers and enforcers. And

every single one of ‘em talks. We know just as much on the inside as anyone on the outside. And you know what I heard while I was in lock-up?” Tommy wags his brows at me. “I heard that a big, important Russian guy named Zotov is looking for a little lady who looks an awful lot like you. Skinny chick, dark hair, couple scars on her jaw just like those right there.”

My heart seizes in my chest. Almost as if it stops beating for one, two, three seconds.

When it finally starts again, I feel like I’m going to black out. But I manage to keep standing and to maintain eye contact with Tommy.

“And you think that’s me?” I ask with a forced laugh. “That’s some serious detective work you did there, pal.”

“As a matter of fact, I do. Because you match the description,” he says, counting off on his fingers. “Because you’re clearly homeless and on the run. And because some little bitch just escaped from Taras Kreshnik’s house. Is that you?”

Lie, lie, LIE! Dima’s voice is still bellowing in my head.

I shake my head. “Who?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, you fucking bitch.” Tommy is grinning now. He looks like a skeleton with all of his teeth showing. The image is eerie. “There’s a reward out for you. I heard you fucked a don. I also heard you gave birth to a don’s baby. You’re an important woman.”

Tommy reaches out his hand to stroke me like I’m a prized pet. I slap it out of the air instinctively. “Don’t touch me, asshole.”

He grins wider. It looks like he’s just found buried treasure. In a way, I suppose he has.

Tommy leans around me and winks at Ernestine. “Well, you were right, Ernie. All it took is the right price for me to leave you alone. You give me your houseguest and I’ll leave you and June in peace.”

Ernestine walks over to me and stands at my shoulder. She looks at me, her expression unreadable.

I'm not sure what she's going to say. She and June have been kind to me, but I'm a stranger to them. There's no reason for them to risk their safety for me.

I guard my heart against whatever she decides. If she tells Tommy to take me, I won't take it personally. What could she have done to stop it, anyway?

Then, without a word, Ernestine moves to stand in front of me. She crosses her arms and shakes her head.

"You can't have a single member of my family, Tommy. Not today. Not ever."

Tears burn at the backs of my eyes. *Family*. The one thing I've never truly had.

Just then, the bathroom door bursts open. "No!" June screams. "You can't take her!" Her voice is proud and defiant as she charges out of the bathroom.

Tommy angles himself towards her, not taking his eyes off of me. "Hey, June Bug. I came to visit."

June hesitates at the end of the hallway. "You can't take Arya," she says again. "And Grandma said you have to leave."

My heart throbs painfully in my chest. She's so proud and defiant. Just like her mother.

And once again, I'm standing beside someone just like Rose. Staring down an evil man.

It's the worst kind of déjà vu imaginable.

"I will be leaving soon," he says coldly. "And I'll be taking your new friend with me." In a flash, Tommy pulls the gun from his pocket and aims it at Ernestine. "And everyone here is going to cooperate. Or else you'll eat a fucking bullet. Understand me?"

With the gun trained on us, Tommy pulls out his phone and dials a number. Without any greeting or formalities, he says to whoever he's called, "The bitch Zotov is looking for? I found her. Let him know and you'll get a cut of the reward money."

I hear an excited whoop on the other end of the phone.

And my heart plummets.

DIMA

A MOVIE THEATER SOMEWHERE NEAR ALBANY

After I drop Arya off at the edge of the trailer park, I head towards the nearest town. Gennady meets me in a movie theater. It's a matinee showing of some old-school war flick.

Bombs explode in black-and-white on the screen in front of us. There's only one other person in the theater, an elderly man with a cane resting across his lap. He's fixated on the screen. Barely notices us enter.

"What a fucking shitshow this is," I grimace.

"It's not that bad," Gennady counters. "The acting could be better, but I'm not complaining."

"I'm talking about the shit with the Bratva and my family, Gennady. Not the goddamn movie."

He chews on a handful of popcorn. "Oh. Right."

"Any news from the city?"

"Silent as the grave out there," Gennady says with a sigh. "Fucking spooky, really."

I frown. "I don't like that. Who launches a rebellion and then immediately goes ghost?"

"Zotov, apparently. All our loyalists are staying undercover or in safehouses until we get a handle on things and put a plan together. It's going to be hard

to regroup without showing some strength, I think.”

I think back to my brother’s offer of an army. If I could show up in Manhattan with two hundred Romanoff men armed to the teeth, Zotov would shit himself and everyone loyal to me would come streaming back to the city to join the war.

There’s only one thing preventing that from happening: the Butcher.

“Before you ask,” Gennady says, reading my expression, “no, we haven’t found his newest location. But...”

“But what?” I ask.

He sighs again. “You aren’t going to like this.”

“Not going to like what?”

“I mean you really, really aren’t going to like this.”

“Spit it out, *dubiina*.”

“We found something, Dima. Something... suspicious.”

“Explain it,” I demand, gritting my teeth. “I fucking despise guessing games.”

Gennady passes a hand over his face. Same as on the phone before, he sounds exhausted. He looks exhausted, too. His normally bright eyes are clouded and weary. His skin is pale.

“We had a witness—a bodega owner who pays us protection—report that someone matching the Butcher’s description had been through the area about ten months ago. He was real spooked. Said the guy came strapped with tons of bodyguards around him. Was cruising around, scaring everybody in the neighborhood late one night. He went up to a nearby apartment. Busted in, stayed for a few minutes, and left. Like I said, everyone in the area was terrified.”

“How does that help us now?” I growl. “It was almost a year ago. I doubt he’s still strolling the same sidewalks, terrifying old *babushkas* on the doorsteps.”

Gennady sighs once more. “Just listen, Dima. We talked to a few people and ended up paying the security guard at the apartment to let us look at the footage. It didn’t show much. Pretty much what the bodega guy said. The Butcher goes in, stays, comes out.”

My fists are clenched tight on the armrests now. “So what?” I say again. “What is the fucking point?”

Finally, Gennady drags his eyes up to meet mine. On the theater screen, more bombs are falling. The hero is dying, blood gushing from an open wound. There’s no escape for him. No avoiding his fate.

“The important part is this: I checked the building’s logs. Do you know who lived in the unit that the Butcher visited?”

I don’t answer. I already know what he’s going to say even before he says it.

“Dr. Arya George.”

ARYA

ERNESTINE'S TRAILER

Ernestine doesn't move from in front of me, even after I tell her it's okay.

"I don't want him to shoot you. June needs you," I whisper to her, but Ernestine is undeterred.

Thankfully, it doesn't matter. Tommy decides his best option is to guard the house from the outside, so he forces June to gather up all of the cell phones in the house. He puts them all in a bag, ties the bag to the leg of a kitchen chair, then orders us to take seats on the couch. He positions himself in a chair in front of the main door.

Time ticks past.

June is shaking and crying intermittently, terrified for herself and her grandmother.

And Ernestine seems to be growing more and more ill by the second. Her face is pale, her hands are trembling, and she keeps taking deep, ragged breaths.

"What the fuck is wrong with you now?" Tommy asks, a whiskey bottle in his hand. One of his first priorities after holding us hostage was to find the liquor cabinet.

"She needs to eat," June pleads. "She gets shaky when her blood sugar is too low."

“Find her a snack, but you can’t turn on the stove. If you think I’m going to let you dump boiling water on me or burn this camper up, you’ve got another thing coming.”

Honestly, it’s not a bad idea. I wish I’d thought of it first.

June gets Ernestine some fruit and crackers and cheese, but the woman barely nibbles on it.

“Please, Grandma,” June whispers. “We have to stay strong. Please.”

I can tell Ernestine is trying, but she’s growing more and more slumped by the second. The emotional turmoil and stress of the situation is too much for her to handle.

I’m trying to stay calm, but I’m looking at being the only capable adult with, effectively, three dependents to take care of.

How can I keep everyone safe? How can I get us out of this?

And where the hell is Dima?

The longer we sit in the camper, the sky growing darker and Tommy growing drunker, the more I realize I can’t let anything bad happen to them.

Not after everything they’ve done for me.

Not after I got them into this mess in the first place.

Yes, Tommy came to the house to talk with Ernestine, but he never would have held them hostage and threatened their lives if the reward Zotov placed on my head hadn’t been so alluring.

Now, greed is overriding any ounce of parental compassion Tommy may have had.

So I decide to beg. To try and appeal to him, person to person.

“Your daughter is scared, Tommy,” I say, getting as close to the man as I dare. I’m ten feet away from him, but I’m still sitting on a chair, looking him in the eyes. “She thinks you’re going to kill her and her grandmother.”

Tommy takes a swig of the whiskey. Even from this distance, I can smell it on him. “I fucking will, too. If they don’t cooperate.”

“Your own flesh and blood?”

He nods confidently. “Hell fuckin’ right. Blood doesn’t mean nothin’ out in the real world. It’s all about green. Money, money, money. Rose took everything from me when she left me. She’s the reason I got locked up in the first place. So they owe this to me.”

“How much is the reward?”

He swivels his head towards me, his eyes lolling about in his head aimlessly. “You think you can top it?”

I shrug. “Maybe. I know powerful people.”

“Powerful people who want you dead,” he laughs. “You ain’t worth shit, girl. I’ve heard the word on you. You’re on the run. Penniless. If you had money, would you really be in this shithole?”

“It’s not a shithole.” June’s voice is soft and timid, but her eyes are as green and fierce as her mother’s.

Tommy winks at his daughter. “It’s just because you don’t know any better, darling. Believe me, when this is all over, and I have my reward, I’ll make sure you live the good life.”

June clings to Ernestine, who is now resting her head on the coffee table, her eyes closed. If her breathing wasn’t so audible, I’d be afraid she was already dead.

This can’t be happening.

“Is there anything aside from money you want?” I ask desperately.

Tommy takes another long drink, looking at me down the length of the bottle. His eyes shine with drunkenness and lust. “Depends. What’s on offer?”

My stomach turns.

I’d rather swallow the entire bottle he’s drinking from and break the glass over my head. But if I have to do this to save Rose’s family, I will.

I'll do anything.

I shrug. "It depends if it would change your mind."

His eyes scan me up and down, assessing my value. Then, he laughs. "You're hot, but you ain't worth all that. I'll take the reward money and buy myself some professional pussy."

Part of me is relieved, but another part of me is crushed.

What else do I have to offer him besides myself?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

If I'm going to get out of here, it's not going to be through making a deal with this asshole.

It's going to be through fighting.

The problem is, my decision to fight affects more than just me. Just like my decision to escape Taras's mansion got Rose killed, my decision to fight Tommy could get the rest of her family slaughtered in their own home.

I'm not sure if I can live with that kind of guilt.

"That's what I thought," Tommy chuckles. "Now sit the fuck there and shut up. This'll all be over soon."

He turns his gaze from me to his phone. Picking it up, he dials his friend again. It sounds like it goes straight to voicemail. "Where the fuck are you, man?" he asks. "Have you talked to Zotov yet? I don't have all night. Hurry the fuck up n' call me back."

He drops the phone on his lap and takes a slug of whiskey.

He doesn't say it, but I can tell he's growing desperate. Tommy isn't sure anyone is coming to help him. He's not sure if he's going to get his reward or not.

I'm growing desperate, too. But for an entirely different reason.

Ernestine has gone quiet.

Her head is still resting on the table, but her loud, ragged breathing has grown soft and shallow. When June shakes her grandmother's shoulder, Ernestine doesn't move. She doesn't react at all.

Something isn't right.

"Grandma?" June's voice cracks as she tries to rouse her guardian. "Can you hear me?"

"The old bitch is sleeping!" Tommy yells from the door. "Leave her alone."

June snaps her head around to him, eyes narrowed. "I know what my grandmother sleeping looks like. She's not sleeping; she's sick. She might die."

Tommy winds his finger in the air and mumbles, "The circle of life." He punctuates the joke with a morbid laugh.

"This isn't the circle of anything!" I snap. "You did this! If anything happens to her, it will be your fault. It will be murder."

That seems to catch Tommy's attention. He sits up, forehead wrinkled as he surveys the scene.

His eyes are bloodshot. One tiny ember could catch his breath on fire. When he stands up, his legs are wobbly and off-balanced. He has to press his palm to the wall to keep himself standing.

"I didn't murder anyone," he mumbles. "This isn't my fault."

"How is it not your fault?" I press. "You put a sick woman through unbelievable stress. Is it any wonder she had a reaction?"

Tommy glares at me, but the ferocity of it is lost in a boozy burp. "She'll be fine."

Ernestine continues her shallow, frantic breathing for a few more seconds. Then the room goes eerily quiet.

We all stop and look at Ernestine.

She isn't breathing at all anymore.

June gasps and begins shaking her grandma. I don't know what to do.

Poor Ernestine.

Poor June.

So much heartbreak in their lives. When will it end?

Tommy stumbles over to the table and shoves June aside. The girl falls on the floor with a pained yelp. He shakes Ernestine hard, hard enough she nearly falls out of her chair.

June yells at for him to stop. "Daddy! Leave her alone!"

This situation is going from bad to worse.

"You killed her!" June screams when one of Ernestine's arms flops uselessly by her side. "You did this!"

Tommy whirls around, his cheeks splotchy, eyes glassy. "Shut up, you little bitch. I didn't do anything. The woman was on her last leg. It's a miracle she made it this long."

June tries to lunge at Tommy, but I hold her back. The poor girl is heartbroken. I can't let her put herself in danger over this. She's just a child.

"Your grandma would want you to be safe," I murmur to her, smoothing down her red hair. It's hard not to remember the last night of Rose's life, when I held her and brushed my fingers through her hair, trying to calm her down.

When will this family stop suffering so much sorrow because of me?

"Listen to her, June Bug," Tommy slurs. "I'll take care of you when this is all over."

"I'd rather die." June glares at him. I know she means it.

Tommy steps towards her, hand raised like he's going to hit her, but before he gets a chance, a figure rises up behind him.

Ernestine.

Her eyes are now wide and alert, her hands aren't trembling the way they were before, and she has a ceramic vase from the center of the table lifted over her head.

Oh my God.

Suddenly, I understand.

She was faking it.

June gasps in surprise, but Tommy doesn't notice. He's too drunk and too focused on his tirade of terror.

Just as he winds his hand back to slap June, Ernestine cracks the vase over the top of his head with all her might.

Water and shards fly everywhere. Tommy's legs buckle. He drops to his knees, his upper body swaying.

"Don't touch my granddaughter, you son of a bitch!" Ernestine kicks him in the back and Tommy falls flat on the floor.

June jumps over him and hugs her grandma, who tucks the girl into her side.

But they both stay alert. This isn't over yet.

It's hard to tell if Tommy is unconscious or not. I kick his shoulder, trying to test, but he doesn't move. Of course, given what I just saw with Ernestine, I know that doesn't mean anything. He could be pretending.

"We have to get the gun and get out of here," I say. "He's told people where I am. They could be coming for all of us."

In my head, I'm screaming, *Where the hell is Dima?*

Ernestine tells June to go pack a bag and the girl runs off to do as she's told.

Now, it's my job to deal with Tommy.

I kick him in the shoulder again. No reaction. His body stays limp. I hope that's a good sign.

I bend down and try to reach into his front pocket for the gun, but the way he fell, I can't get it. I'll have to roll him over.

I sit down on the floor, my back against the refrigerator, and use my feet to lift him partially off the floor. Once his shoulder is elevated, I wedge my toes under him and then use my hands to pull him up.

He's scrawny, but his dead weight is heavy, and it takes me a minute or more to flip him over.

By that time, he's beginning to blink. I jam my hand into his pocket and wrap my hand around the gun, surprised by how light it feels.

It isn't until I get it free of his jeans that I realize why.

The gun is fake.

It's a toy. A water pistol painted black.

When it's aimed at your face, you don't question whether a gun is real or not. You assume it is. As it turns out, Tommy was unarmed and drunk. I could have fought him off myself hours ago.

I shove the gun down the back of my pants, hoping the toy might be as useful to me as it was for Tommy. Then I stand up, grab the cast iron skillet from the stove, and give the back of Tommy's head another good whack.

I hope to God I killed him.

The man is a monster. It'll be a better world without him in it.

June and Ernestine meet me at the front door with the few things they need. I grab the keys to Ernestine's old van from the hook by the door.

And together, we run out into the dusk.

I want to tell the women I'm sorry for doing this to them. That I'm sorry for ruining the life they had here.

But I can't find the words. Anyway, I'm not sure now is the time.

I've just closed the trunk when I hear footsteps behind me.

I whirl around, expecting to see Tommy or his friend here to stop us.

But it's not Tommy. It's not his friend, either.

It's Dima.

I breathe in relief. Of all people in this world who would know what to do in this situation, he's the one I most wanted to see.

He looks strange, though. Standing in the dying sun, bathed in shadow, fists clenched tight at his side like he's desperate to break something.

And those eyes—they're molten lava. Full of rage.

"Dima?" I call. "Dima, we have to go. Something bad has happened. Hurry! I'm not sure how long we have."

He doesn't answer.

Just stands there, huge and menacing. Something cold surges in my stomach.

"Dima?"

He crosses the distance between us in two strides.

One huge paw shoots out and seizes me by the throat.

He pins me to the side of Ernestine's car. With his face right up in mine so it's all I can see, he looks like an avenging angel.

His voice cracks out, harsh as a whip. "You fucking lied to me, *krasavitsa*."

ARYA

“Cat got your tongue?” Dima drawls when I don’t answer. “That’s surprising. You usually have so much to say. None of it the truth, of course. But still, lots to say.”

I lick my lips and take a deep breath, trying to understand what’s happening. Trying to wrap my head around what I’m seeing.

Whatever reason Dima is like this right now, it isn’t good. I can see that in his eyes.

Whatever love he had for me is buried under betrayal and hatred. It’s almost tangible how much he wants to hurt me.

The question is: *How much has he found out?*

“What are you talking about?” I croak against the pressure of his hand on my windpipe. The world is getting dark at the edges from lack of oxygen.

But all I can see is the fury in Dima’s eyes.

“I have my ways, Arya. Even without my Bratva, I have my ways. You should know that by now.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying, Dima,” I whimper. “Please let me go.”

We lock eyes, and for a second, I think I see a flicker of something behind his. But then it’s gone.

His gaze bores into me, his forehead creased. “No,” he says grimly, “I don’t think I will. I’m going to choke the fucking truth out of you.”

“What truth?”

My hands scrabbling at his strong wrists are growing weaker and weaker. I don’t have much time left before I pass out.

Dima presses his forehead against mine. I can smell sweat and cedarwood rolling off of him. “You are not my family. Lukas isn’t even my family. That’s the only reason I’m here. To hear you admit it.”

I stare at him, mouth open, too shocked to speak. I hear Ernestine whispering to June behind me, but I can’t hear what they’re saying. I don’t even know if Dima knows they are here.

“Do you really believe Lukas isn’t yours?” It’s not the most important thing happening in this moment, but it’s the only question I can think to ask. It’s the only one running through my mind.

Everything that happened over the last few months—hell, over the last year—seemed like fate drawing Dima and me together. The one-night-stand at the clinic... when he found me giving birth in the car... when he discovered the truth of who I was at my apartment...

I never tried to trick him. I never even tried to reach out to him.

He found us.

And I thought it was destiny.

But maybe it was just more confirmation of what the universe has been screaming at me for my entire life: you can never outrun your sins.

“Let me go,” I beg, my voice cracking. “Please.”

Dima stares at me silently. His hands don’t budge. I have mere seconds of oxygen left. Maybe not even that.

“He’s your son, Dima. And I’m his mother.”

The world has narrowed down to just Dima’s eyes. Smoldering in the twilight.

And then he releases me.

I collapse into the dirt, coughing and crying. My throat is raw and bruised. Each shuddering inhale hurts my aching lungs, but *God*, it feels so fucking good to breathe. To live.

Until my senses come back to me and I realize that I'm a long, long way away from saved.

I look up at Dima. From his scuffed boots, up his athletic legs, to the trim waist, the washboard abs, the broad shoulders.

Right into the barrel of the gun he now has pointed at my face.

"I should kill you right now for lying to me," he rasps. His finger on the trigger looks ready to pull.

"Lying about *what*, Dima?"

I glance over to the trailer, wondering if Tommy will come bursting out. I hit him hard, but was it hard enough?

I don't want to stay and find out. I want to get June and Ernestine and run for the hills. To get them away from here, away from danger, away from the nightmares that follow people like Rose and me around and stick to our loved ones like stains.

"You know damn well what you lied about."

Oh, Dima, I want to say. If only you knew. I've been lying for so long that I don't even remember where the truth starts anymore.

Out loud, I snap, "Can we stop playing these mind games? Better yet, can we do this later? I don't know how long we have and—"

"Ten months ago, a man came to your apartment. We have the recording, Arya."

My blood runs cold. I try to swallow, but the muscles of my throat scream in protest. "Wha—what man? What are you saying?"

"A man connected with the Albanian mafia. Who was it, Arya? What did he want with you? I want to hear the truth from your lips."

“Dima, I’m begging you, please put the gun away. I don’t know what you’re talking about and—”

“Tell me about the Albanian who fucked you!” he bellows in a voice I’ve never heard from him before. “Tell me about Lukas’s *real* father!”

I freeze. I make sure to keep my face composed.

But on the inside, I could cry with relief.

He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know the whole story.

My secrets are safe.

“Dima, I swear to God, I will tell you everything. But not right now. We have to leave. People are coming for us and—”

“Leave Arya alone!” comes a tiny voice.

Oh God. Oh no.

Dima and I both look over at the same time to see June striding out from around the car. Ernestine is trying to reel her back in, but the little girl is defiant.

My eyes bulge. “June, honey, go back with your grandma!” I beg. “This isn’t about you.”

It’s like she doesn’t even hear me. As if, instead of seeing me with a gun in my face, she’s seeing her own mother kneeling in the dirt.

“Leave Arya alone!” she cries again. She’s sobbing hysterically.

Everything next happens so fast.

June lunges for the gun...

I dive to stop her...

Dima tries to move out of the way...

And then—

BANG.

A gunshot slices through the night.

My eyes close. Same as I did in Taras's house, I wait for the pain to come.

But the same thing happens now that happened back then: it never arrives.

I open my eyes and look up at Dima, shocked he would pull the trigger.

That's when I realize... he didn't.

Someone else did.

DIMA

“Get down!” I roar, more out of instinct than anything else.

Arya ducks into the front seat of my vehicle and I follow behind her. The old lady and the little girl go scrambling into the mini-van parked in the driveway and peel out fast.

Just across the street are two black cars with tinted windows. Someone pops up from the passenger side with a gun in hand.

I recognize Fyodor.

The fucking scum found us. I should have hunted him down and killed him when he dared to come after me the first time.

Too late for that now.

“It’s Zotov and his goons,” I curse. “How the fuck...?”

More shots hit the vehicle. I throw the car in drive and rip out of the trailer park. As I turn the corner at the end of the street, I see the pursuing cars flipping hasty U-turns to follow after us.

The van takes a left onto the frontage road ahead, but when I get to the same fork in the road, I take a right.

“Ernie and June went the other way!” Arya balks, turning around in her seat, angling to see down the road. “We have to follow them. We have to make sure they’re alright.”

“I don’t have to make sure of anything.”

Arya growls. “They’re innocent people, goddammit! What is wrong with you? We have to make sure they’re safe!”

“We can’t. Zotov will follow us and I don’t want those bullets anywhere near a child and an old woman. Do you?”

She sighs and then sinks down in her seat, shaking her head. “No, I don’t.”

More bullets ping off the car. I reach over and push Arya’s head down, forcing it between her knees.

“I’ve got it,” she yells, wrenching my hand from her neck. “I’ll stay down. Just drive.”

I didn’t mean to protect her. Not consciously. It just comes naturally.

The moment I saw her standing behind the van, the moment she looked at me...

All the anger I had towards her faded—for a second.

It’s as if, since the moment I found out about the things she’s concealed, the image of her I had in my mind shifted. She went from looking like an angel... to looking like a fucking monster.

But seeing her standing there, long dark hair spilling down her back, her lips full and parted in shock, eyes sparkling in the streetlights...

It made it hard to hate her.

Of course, the rage flooded back the moment she opened her mouth.

And that’s the story in a nutshell. That’s the key to why she was able to fool me so easily.

Because I fell for her beauty. I let myself believe that a pretty outside meant a pretty inside.

Oh, how wrong I was.

I wouldn’t be making that mistake again.

I slam the gas pedal to the floor, the car inching up to one-hundred, one-twenty.

Arya grabs onto the door, holding on for dear life. “Please be careful!” she squawks.

“Would you rather take your chances with a car crash or a bullet to the back of the skull?”

She squeezes her eyes shut. “It’s a toss-up, honestly.”

I can’t help but grin at that, though I wipe it off my face before she can see.

As soon as it’s convenient, I’m getting rid of her. That’s what I should have done originally. As soon as I saw that grainy footage of the Albanian striding into Arya’s apartment on Gennady’s cell phone, I wanted to leave Arya stranded where she was and never see her traitorous fucking face again.

But that damn voice in my head told me to go to her.

Choke the truth out of her. Hear it from her lips.

Then I could abandon her to fate.

Love is a weapon. Arya knew that. She made me love her. Made me love Lukas.

But it was all built on a lie.

We fly around cars on the highway, swerving in and out of traffic. I can still see the two cars following behind us, but they’re growing further and further behind.

“I think we’re losing them,” I growl, peeking back to check. “We need to get off the highway and find a place to hide out.”

The longer we spend speeding down the highway, the more likely it is someone will call the cops. I don’t need police out looking for me on top of everything else.

The exit coming up is advertised with a big lit-up sign. I can see the glow of a town just beyond it. It’s as good a place as any to blend in.

I whip around two more cars, merge into the exit lane, and then take the forty mile-per-hour exit at a cool seventy-five.

Arya screams as I fly through a red light, turn onto the main road, and then slam on the brakes as I pass a gas station.

Cars are honking all around us, but I'm gone before they even have the chance to register what's going on.

I drive a few more blocks, turn down a residential road, drive parallel to the main road for a while, and then pull into the driveway of a house with darkened windows and no porch light.

I kill the engine.

And we wait.

In the sudden quiet, our breathing seems loud. I can hear Arya tapping her nails on the door. My leg is bouncing with adrenaline and nerves.

"How long do we need to wait?" she asks, looking over at me nervously.

"The longer, the better."

She nods, pushing out a breath between her lips. The car is dark, but I can see her eyelashes brush against her cheeks. And I can see the tears beginning to well.

"It will be fine. We aren't getting shot tonight."

She swipes at her eyes. "It's not that. I just don't know where June and Ernestine went."

"They got away."

"I know," she breathes. "But I don't know where they went."

My attention snaps to her. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I mean I don't know!" she yells, her patience finally snapping. "We didn't have a plan. I just told her to run because I didn't want you to hurt them."

"You thought I'd shoot an innocent little girl and an old woman?"

We stare at each other, our chests heaving, the anger palpable between us.

I grit my teeth and pound my fist against the car door to relieve some of my frustration, and a sharp pain shoots down to my elbow. I wince.

“Are you okay?” Despite the way she was looking at me a second ago, Arya sounds genuinely concerned.

“Fine.” But I still lift up my sleeve to check my arm.

That’s when I notice the blood. A lot of it.

“Fuck.”

“What?” Arya leans over, grabbing my arm, trying to turn me towards her so she can see better. “What happened?”

I pull up my sleeve more. When I do, I can see a bullet graze. I don’t know how deep it is, but now that I’ve seen it, the pain sets in.

“I got shot.”

She gasps. “What do you mean?”

“What part of ‘I got shot’ is confusing?”

“Don’t roll your eyes at me! We haven’t been shot at in a few minutes, so excuse me for being confused.”

I poke at the hole and wince again. “I didn’t even feel it until now.”

“Adrenaline,” she says, turning on the roof light and grabbing my wrist. “Let me see.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m a doctor,” she says sternly. “I’ll decide that.”

“You’re a vet.”

When she looks up at me, there’s annoyance in her eyes, but something else, too. “According to you, there’s not much difference.”

The memory of the night we first met fills the car like a third passenger, obvious and hard to ignore.

I was shot and I came to her clinic looking for a doctor. She told me she was a vet and I told her there wasn't much difference. She patched me up and then we made Lukas.

Or at least, I thought we did.

Now, I don't know what to fucking believe.

But this time won't be like that. Things are far too different now. Too much has happened.

There's no going back.

"I can't see anything in this light," she says, frustrated. "We need to get to a place with running water and a first aid kit and some actual lights. And preferably privacy. The exit sign listed a few hotels. We can rent a place. Hide out for the night."

"Fine," I growl. Now that I've noticed the injury, it's all catching up to me. I'm getting dizzy from the blood loss.

"Do you need me to drive?"

"I've gotten us this far. I think I can manage the next few minutes."

We head back to the main road. There's no sign of anyone following us. No sign of anything out of the ordinary at all.

Still, I'm relieved when we find a motel on a side road where we can park behind the building. The more we can stay invisible, the better.

Arya rents the room since she isn't covered in blood, so she's the one to unlock it and let me in. She holds the door for me. I have to brush past her to get in, my injured arm swiping across her chest accidentally.

Then she closes the door and we're locked in together once again.

With all of our lies swirling in the air between us.

ARYA

“Sit at the table and take off your shirt. I want to be able to see your whole arm.”

I’m in doctor mode now. Somewhere in the back of my brain, a part of me is screaming at the idea of being alone with a shirtless Dima. It’s caused trouble before, obviously.

But mostly, I’m worried about his wound. Infection is deadly.

“I can just roll up the sleeve.”

“No.” I unlatch the first aid kit I borrowed from the front desk and frown at the sorry excuse for supplies inside. “Your shirt is dirty. It needs to be cleaned before you can put it on again. I don’t want your arm getting infected.”

Dima grumbles, but eventually takes off his shirt and sits down. Only when his midsection is shielded by the table do I dare to look over at him.

Fuck. I don’t know what I expected—it’s not like he was going to look different than he did this morning—but he’s a fucking marvel from the chest up. His body is hard and muscled. Tan skin pulled tight over shaped muscles. He’s more sculpture than man.

Except for the scars.

And there are a lot of them.

I noticed them before, after he saved me from Taras's nightmare. Knife wounds, bullet wounds, burn marks.

He has led a dangerous life, the proof of which is imprinted all over his skin.

It's why I lied to him. I couldn't bear to let him see my own scars. To hear about my own past.

To know what I've done. What I've run from.

I sit in the chair next to him and turn on the lamp. It doesn't look like the wound is deep. The blood on his arm is mostly drying, letting me know the wound has clotted on its own. And based on the size, it doesn't look like a bullet could be lodged in his arm. If it was, I suspect he'd be in a lot more pain.

"I think it's just a graze."

"Lucky me," he drawls, twisting his arm to get a better look.

"But really. A few inches over and it'd be your heart instead. You are lucky. You could have died."

Our eyes meet for a moment and then we both turn away.

I don't think either of us are ready to contemplate how we feel about that particular story line just yet.

I clean his arm with a warm washcloth from the bath room, disinfect it with alcohol wipes, and press a large bandage over the wound.

"Am I done, Doc?"

I close the first aid kit. "All taken care of. No surgery required."

Now that we don't have something to do—and Dima is still shirtless—the tension in the air is thick. So thick it's making it difficult to breathe.

He moves to sit on the bed. I stay at the table, too nervous to get any closer to him.

"What now?" I ask finally, unable to stay quiet for any longer.

Dima shrugs. "Sleep."

I raise a brow at him. "Could you sleep right now?"

He shakes his head. "Me neither. Too much adrenaline."

"Yeah, fights always make me..." The word he means to say floats silently between us. *Horny*. "Antsy."

Finally, the tension is too much, and I stand up, hands raised in surrender. "I'm sorry."

Dima eyes me, his dark brows low and brooding. "Sorry for what?"

"For lying to you."

He looks at me expectantly, waiting for more. But I don't know what else to say. The same thought I had back at Ernestine's runs through my head again.

I've been lying for so long that I don't even remember where the truth starts anymore.

Dima runs his tongue over his top teeth as he stares at me. I can see the gears in his head turning. I hope they're turning in my favor.

"Explain yourself," he orders.

I stand up, my heart beating in my throat, and move to sit next to Dima on the bed. I can feel him still gazing at me, but I keep my eyes down at my feet, too nervous to look at him.

"I... I ran from something. A while ago. I was mixed up with a bad guy. I knew he was bad so maybe everything that happened was my fault. But I just... I didn't know quite *how* bad. I found out one day. He was a drug dealer. A bad one. His stuff was killing people across the city, and when I learned that, I poured it all down the drain and ran."

"You should be dead then."

I swallow past the knot in my throat. "I know. I thought I got away at first. But I was wrong. He... he came to see me. Ten months ago." I raise my eyes up to meet Dima's burning gaze. "But it wasn't for sex, Dima. He came to threaten me. To tell me that he knew where I was. That he could get to me

any time he wanted. And that, one day, he'd collect on what I owed him."

He growls wordlessly. Says nothing.

"I didn't have sex with anyone but you. There is no possible way Lukas could belong to anyone but you. I mean, have you seen him?"

"He looks like you," he mutters.

I shake my head. "You're blind. That baby has your smolder. I saw it the second he was born. He *is* you. He's yours."

There's a moment of silence, and then, "Lucky kid."

He believes me. Relief washes through me. If nothing else, I can trust he won't hurt Lukas. Not if he knows Lukas has Romanoff blood in his veins.

It feels like the air has been sucked out of the room. I swallow a lump in my throat. "What do you want from me now?" I ask. "Just tell me what you want and I'll give it to you."

Slowly, Dima's hand creeps across the plaid comforter to land on my leg. His fingers are hot through my jeans. I imagine I see smoke rising between us.

When I look up in his eyes now, they are hooded, his pupils blown wide.

"I want what I always want," he rasps.

There's a chance everything that's happening between us is chemical. Something fleeting that will fade. Something he'll regret the minute we're done.

But I can't bring myself to give a single fuck.

I want him.

I'm on his lap before I can contemplate it further. I wrap my legs around his waist, throw my arms around his neck, and kiss him.

Dima's hands smooth up and down my spine as he kisses me back, sucking on my lower lip, nipping at my chin and my collarbone. He tugs on the end of my hair, tipping my head back so he can lick my collarbone and bite his way up to the smooth spot behind my ear.

My body is on fire. We are fully clothed and just kissing, but I feel like I'm melting from the inside out. Like my bones have gone molten.

Dima grabs the bottom of my shirt and I let him pull the cheap cotton tee over my head. He buries his face between my breasts, then groans and sucks my nipple into his mouth.

An electric current moves through me, culminating at my very center. I tighten my thighs around his waist and rock against him, wanting more of him, all of him. My back arches as Dima scrapes his teeth over the sensitive skin of my chest, driving me mad.

I push myself away from him until I'm standing at the end of the bed. He reaches for me, but I swat his hand away and then reach for the button of my jeans.

Dima's eyes go animalistic. He swallows as I unzip my jeans and shimmy them slowly down my thighs.

I can see the bulge growing between his legs. I've never longed for the feeling of someone inside of me so much in my life.

I hook my fingers on either side of my panties and slide them down to the pile with my jeans. Dima takes me in hungrily.

The second I'm naked, he wraps his arm around my waist and twists us both around so I'm lying flat on the bed beneath him.

"Careful of your arm," I warn, sliding my fingers over the bandage.

He turns his head and kisses my hand. Then, he grabs my wrist and slides each of my fingers deep into his mouth, sucking on them on the way out.

He acts like he wants to devour me. I've never been more willing to be consumed.

Dima kisses each of my breasts and then my ribs, making his way down my body. He presses his lips to the divot of my hips, to the supple skin of my thighs, and then, he parts me.

My legs fall to the side, and Dima runs his hands up the inside of my thighs, tickling the sensitive skin there. I giggle instinctively, but when his fingers

find my center and slide up and down, there's nothing to laugh about.

He opens me with his fingers and lowers his head, pressing a kiss there, too.

I cry out instantly, overwhelmed by his touch and his care. Overwhelmed that this is happening at all. After the way he looked at me, the way he choked me and pinned me against the hood of his car, I didn't know if it ever would again.

His tongue draws circles over me until I'm writhing against his mouth, needy for him, begging.

Only then does he reach down and slide two fingers inside of me.

Immediately, I'm being assaulted from all sides. His fingers are curling against my insides while his mouth worships me on the outside. I feel like I'm floating. Truly, I wouldn't be surprised if I was levitating.

When the warmth inside of me grows into an all-consuming fire, I throw my head back and scream at the ceiling.

"Dima. My God. Yes. Like that. Fuck me."

I don't know what I'm saying, but I can't stop saying it. I can't control anything about my body as I convulse and twist and roll under his touch.

As the pleasure begins to withdraw, leaving behind the warmth and the ease, I relax into the mattress and close my eyes.

Dima works me down. The same concern he showed in taking me there, he shows in bringing me back. He presses kisses to my center—gentle, grateful kisses. Then he crawls over me and presses those same kisses against my lips.

I can taste myself on him and I like it.

I want him to taste like me and smell like me. I want to mark him as my property so no one else can touch him. So he can't touch anyone else.

"You called me 'God,'" he says, his eyebrows wagging with amusement.

"Did I?" I run my hands through his dark, curled hair and pull him down to my lips again, kissing him slowly and lazily.

“You did.” He massages my arms and my shoulders. He straddles me and holds my breasts in each of his hand as if he’s trying to commit them to memory. I want to tell him he has all the time in the world for that, but I can’t seem to find my voice when he’s looking at me like that. “I liked it.”

“I’m sure you did,” I say finally, pushing on his chest so he collapses on the bed next to me. “Cocky men like you always like things like that.”

I crawl over him and undo his jeans. He lifts his hips so I can slide them down his legs. Through his boxers, I can see his significant erection.

Then I slide his boxers down too, revealing him, and Dima puts his hands behind his head, propping himself up so he has a better view.

I move up his body slowly, taking him in my hands, and then, with my eyes locked on his, I slide my tongue up the back of him from base to tip.

His eyes flutter closed as he groans.

I do it again and then slide my lips over him, letting him into the warmth of my mouth. His thighs clench under my fingers. I can feel his entire body tensing with the effort to control himself.

It feels good to bring a man like Dima to his metaphorical knees. To be able to draw things out of him no one else can.

I work him with my mouth, up and down, alternating the pace and the rhythm until he’s trembling underneath me and twitching in my mouth.

Only then do I slide off of him and move up to straddle his hips.

Suddenly, something occurs to me. “Do you have a condom?”

I don’t have anything. I didn’t even bring my purse. It’s all in the van.

Dima, however, is calm. He nods. “In my wallet.”

I raise a brow. “You brought a condom on a mission to destroy me?”

“There are many ways to destroy a person, Arya.”

The hunger between my legs doubles instantly. I practically growl as I snatch his jeans from the floor and rip into the condom. Dima watches with

sparkling eyes as I slide it down his length and then position him at my center.

When I sink down, we both sigh. When our bodies press together, Dima diving inside of me as far as possible...

It feels like I've come home.

He grips my hips and guides me up and down his length. I lay my head on his chest and listen to the hammering of his heart as we come together again and again. Each time, it's better than the last.

It's like the lies between us are shedding away layer by layer. Each time he slides inside of me, I feel more. I feel closer to him.

Soon, it's too much. I sit up and press my hands on his chest as I ride him, rocking back and forth, side to side. Dima grips my hips and my waist. He reaches up and pinches my nipples, palming my breasts while he thrusts into me, matching my pace.

When I come again, it's slow and steady. The feeling drips over me like I'm being cast in hot wax. It drips down my head and into my chest before making its way lower. I arch my back and grind against him, riding out the wave, find my pleasure until my toes curl. Until I can't do anything but collapse forward onto his chest in a spent heap.

"Fucking hell, that was incredible." I kiss his chest, and he pats my back, laughing.

I look down at his still-hard cock and then back up to his face, drawing my finger over his lips. "I don't see how you're still going. It's gotta be a world record."

In response, he slides back into my willing body to the hilt. I've already come twice, but I can feel my body yearning for him still. He's inside of me, but I want more.

One leg at a time, I hook my knees over his shoulders. The next time he thrusts into me, it's an entirely new sensation. We both cry out.

“You’re so tight,” he says, his voice becoming ragged. “This world record won’t last much longer.”

“Then fuck me hard and make me feel it all.”

He hisses like I burnt him and then slams into me. The slap echoes around the room and the bed bangs against the wall, but I still want more.

“Harder.”

He does it again, his thighs stinging against my backside with the force.

“Faster,” I gasp.

Dima tears into me again and again. He said he was close, but I’m the one crying and writhing through another orgasm.

My body clenches at him, desperate to bring him in and hold him, but Dima doesn’t stop or slow down. He thrusts into me harder and harder and harder until I’m sure I’ll break open in the best way possible.

Then, finally, he pauses.

I feel him twitch. He gasps like he’s finally breathing air after a long time without it. Lets go of my hands and curls his face into my palm as I stroke his cheeks and his hair. He kisses my finger tips and my knees, still hitched over his shoulders.

Dima worships the most insignificant parts of me as his orgasm takes him. I’ve never felt so cherished in all my life.

After we clean up and crawl back in bed, I’m beginning to doze when I feel Dima’s body curl against mine.

“Are you still awake?”

“I am,” I say, my voice so soft I’m not even sure I’ve spoken.

“Good.” He breathes against my neck, and I’m confused what he means until I feel him. Pressed against my lower back.

Still on my side, I hook my leg back and over his hip and let him enter me from behind. It’s slow, easy sex, but by the end of it, his hand is between my

legs, and I'm muffling my screams with my pillow.

“Because I'm not finished yet.”

ARYA

I sleep for a while, but after a few hours, closing my eyes feels like a practice in futility.

I can't sleep when I don't know where Lukas is. Or June. Or Ernestine.

They all feel so important to me now, though I've only known them for a short time. Little pieces of my heart, spread across god-knows-where and stuck with god-knows-who.

It's a waking nightmare.

Before the sun is even up, I feel Dima's breathing change next to me. He's awake, too.

"You don't have any idea where they could have gone?" he asks, his voice raspy from disuse.

"Not a clue. I've been thinking about it for hours."

He turns onto his side and props himself up on his elbow. "Maybe they went back to the trailer."

I shake my head. "They wouldn't. Zotov knows where it is now. Ernestine wouldn't risk it."

"You trust that old woman?"

I raise a warning brow at him. “That old woman might be the toughest person I’ve ever met. She’s the reason we escaped Tommy in the first place. She’s smart enough not to run back into a trap.”

He shrugs and we go quiet.

It feels good to be with Dima like this. To at least know that one thing between us is fixed. But that doesn’t change the one major thing between us that isn’t: our son.

We need to find him.

Restless, I go to take a shower, but I haven’t been in there a minute when the curtain pulls back and Dima climbs in, too.

“Hey, you weren’t invited.” I slap his chest, leaving a wet handprint.

His eyebrows raise. “Invite must’ve gotten lost in the mail.”

“Well, fine, but there is still a cover charge.”

I’m only joking, but Dima’s smile turns devious. He licks his lips and then drops to his knees in the shower. “I’ve got a way to pay,” he mumbles into my thighs.

“I was kidding, Dima. You don’t have to—”

He parts me with his fingers, silencing my protests.

When he slips a finger over my slit, I have to grab onto the handle that was probably installed for elderly people to use. *Help, I’ve fallen and I can’t get up.*

Dima slides one finger into me and then another, and I’ve never been so ready before. There’s no need for a build-up, for a gentle teasing. I’m primed. I’m aching.

He adds a third finger, and I lean against the cold shower wall and part my legs to give him better access.

“Beautiful,” he whispers, his breath warm against my sensitive skin.

Then his tongue is on me.

He alternates between little flicks and long strokes, syncing the sensation up with the speed of his fingers. I'm moaning so loud I'm sure the guests in the rooms around us are calling the front desk, but I don't care.

Let them call. Hell, let them come and watch. They might learn a thing or two.

Dima grabs my calf and lifts my leg over his shoulder, and I wrap my ankle around the back of his neck instantly. I hold him against me, bucking against his lips and his tongue and his breath.

The orgasm feels like being doused in warm water. It starts at my head and flows down until my fingers tremble and my toes tingle.

By the time the end of it is ebbing away, I'm putty against the tile wall. The only thing holding me up is Dima's mouth, coaxing out every last second of pleasure.

When he pulls away, I stumble forward, dazed and thoroughly ravished. The warm water from the shower head pelts the back of my head, pushing my hair forward into my face, and I gasp.

Dima laughs. "You doing okay?"

I tip my head back, letting the water wash through my hair, and close my eyes, trying to ground myself. Usually, the shower is where I do my best thinking, but right now, my mind is blank.

I take a deep breath, almost embarrassed by how out of sorts I am. I turn around and let the spray run down my face and something about the water seems to purify my thoughts.

I pause, hands in my hair.

Water.

I gasp and Dima plants his hands on my waist. "Are you okay?"

Instantly, it comes to me. "I know where they are!"

Dima looks up, but his gaze drops back down my wet body, still hungry. "Who?"

I shut the water off and grab my towel from the shower bar, wrapping it quickly around me. “June and Ernestine.”

“Where?”

“There was this French bakery June told me about, close to a lake. They went there once and it was the best day ever. June and her grandma wanted to go back there. They even wanted to move there eventually.”

Dima tilts his head to the side. “You think they’re in France?”

“No! The café is in some little town; it’s just French. June had a croissant.”

Dima sighs and pushes his wet hair out of his face. “That’s not a lot to go on.”

“I know, but there can’t be that many French cafes in town, right? Especially not next to a lake! I know that’s where they went. It has to be.”

He stares at me. I know he has his doubts, but I don’t have any. The water cleared my head. I’m confident.

“Finish your shower and meet me in the room.” I climb out of the shower and pad into the room.

I go to the bundle of brochures on the desk and grab one for Albany. There’s a “must-see” section, but no mention of a French diner anywhere.

I unfold it and press it flat on the table, staring down at the crudely drawn map as though the answer will jump out at me.

Even if I can’t find it myself, I can ask around. Someone has to know something. We will find the diner and we will find them nearby. I know it.

When Dima gets out of the shower, I grab his phone from the nightstand and throw it at him. “Type in your password.”

He arches an eyebrow in question, but unlocks it for me and hands it back.

I search for a while, skimming through maps online, looking at listings for all the diners within a thirty-mile radius, and zooming in on every body of water I can find, scanning the surrounding area for any sign of a diner.

But I don't find anything.

"How is this so hard?" I groan, resisting the urge to throw Dima's phone across the room.

He comes up behind me. I sense his body heat and smell his scent first and I have to suppress a shudder.

He runs his finger along a body of water. "You said it was by a lake, right? Are you sure it wasn't the Hudson? The Hudson River is the obvious choice, but there are a lot of beaches along the Hudson."

"They said lake. I'm sure of it."

"Who?" he asks. "Ernestine or June?"

"June."

"And you don't think there's any chance she is misremembering?"

I groan again and lay back on the bed, arms spread eagle. "There is a chance this is all meaningless and I'm chasing after nothing. It was the first idea that popped in my head, and I got so excited by the possibility that it blinded me to the fact that Ernestine may have taken them somewhere entirely different. I mean, it's not exactly lake weather right now, is it?"

He pats my arm gently. "We'll still find them, even if this turns into nothing."

Suddenly, self-loathing sets in, and I'm miserable. "I can't believe I based this entire theory on one little girl's story and a magnet on the refrigerator."

"They had a magnet?" he asks.

I nod. "It had a plastic yellow frame with a little frog on a lily pad. It said..."

My words dry up. My eyes pop wide open and I sit up in the bed. "*Beachside Bed and Breakfast.*"

"What?"

"Beachside Bed and Breakfast," I say again, jumping out of bed and clapping my hands. "Holy shit, that's it!"

“How do you know?”

“Ernestine kept a thousand photos and magnets on her refrigerator. Most of them were for places around Albany and New York. They didn’t have the money to travel much further than that. One of them was a plastic picture frame with a photo of June and Rose inside of it. June is just a little thing, but she’s holding up a fish nearly as long as she is. Rose was in it, too.

I can see it in my mind’s eye. Rose stood behind her daughter, red hair twisted back in pigtails, grinning from ear to ear. So proud of her little girl. So happy. So free of demons—for at least one instant.

“I’m picturing it right now. It’s a yellow frame with a big frog in the top corner and the words ‘Beachside Bed and Breakfast’ written across the bottom. I think that’s where they would go.”

Dima twists his lips to one side. I know he’s worried I’m clinging to nothing. Hell, maybe I am.

But it’s a name. A findable location. We can go there right now.

We have to try.

DIMA

SOMEWHERE IN RURAL NEW YORK

“We’ve gone farther than I thought,” Arya says, wringing her hands in the passenger seat.

“That’s how it works when you drive a hundred miles per hour.”

She laughs, but the sound is tense. I glance at her out of the corner of my eye. She’s balancing on a knife’s edge. If she’s wrong about where Rose’s family went, it will gut her.

It’s funny how quickly things change.

Yesterday, I choked her half to death with every intent of ending her life.

Today, I’m concerned about her fragile heart.

What the fuck is this woman doing to me?

I need to get out of my head before my crazy thoughts deepen.

“Some vacation destination this is,” I say gruffly, eyeing the desolation of rural New York passing by the windshield. “You ever go anywhere with your family?”

“Me?” Arya asks, as if I could be talking to anyone else. “Um... no, I guess not. Not really.”

“You had to go somewhere. Everyone goes somewhere.”

Her forehead wrinkles. “No. Never. My family life was... complicated.”

“How complicated?”

“Dad wasn’t really in the picture.”

“No mom?”

“She died.” Arya’s hands have gone still in her lap. She stares down at them. “Even if she had the money for a vacation before she died, she would have spent it on drugs. She was an addict.”

“Shit. I’m sorry, Arya.”

“It was a long time ago,” she says. “I was little. I don’t even remember the explosion.”

Her words surprise me. “The explosion?”

Arya tucks a lock of dark hair behind her ear. It’s rare to see her nervous. Even when I was roaring at her last night, threatening to ruin her life, Arya never wavered. She never showed fear.

Now, her fingers are shaking.

“She was cooking meth in the kitchen. I don’t know much about the process, but I guess it can be dangerous. Mom died. I got these.” She touches a series of faint scars along her jaw.

“*Blyat.*” The curse hisses between my teeth. “Arya, I had no idea.”

“I don’t broadcast it. Traumatic family histories aren’t exactly party chatter, you know? It’s something I’d rather forget anyway.”

I reach over and lay a hand on her leg. “You don’t have to forget it. You don’t have to run from the past.”

In my head, I’m laughing at myself. *Don’t have to run from the past? That’s exactly what you did, Dima Romanoff. It’s what we all do.*

She looks up at me, though her eyes have gone glassy. She clears her throat and stares out the windshield. “It all turned out okay. I grew up. Made it through school. I’m okay.”

We drive in silence for a while.

“What about your family?” she asks when the moment has passed. “Any big family history you haven’t told me?”

“Oh, big time. Family of tap dancers. We’re very famous in certain circles.”

She elbows me in the ribs and giggles. I’m glad for it. For one, it keeps me from delving into the true story of the Romanoffs. Into all the sordid shit that’s surrounded my family—my father, my brother, and me—for as long as we’ve ruled New York and Chicago.

For another, it makes this feel almost like a normal road trip. Like we’re heading on vacation instead of searching desperately for our infant son.

Just for a moment, things are okay.



Overall, it’s an hour’s drive to the Beachside Bed and Breakfast. By the time we get there, breakfast is in full swing and the room off the lobby is full of guests loading up plates at the breakfast buffet. Arya runs ahead of me to the front desk, scaring the employee behind the counter.

“Can I help you, ma’am?”

“Yes, I’m looking for a woman who would have checked in with a ten-year-old girl and an infant.”

The gray-haired man’s mustache twitches. “I’m sorry, but are you expected? I can’t give out personal information about guests.”

“Yes, we’re family,” she says, looping her arm through mine and pulling me close. “The name would be Ernestine…” Arya hesitates.

The employee and I both look at her expectantly.

“Shit,” Arya mutters, looking up at me. “I don’t know her last name.”

The man behind the desk folds his hand on the desk top. “I’m sorry, Miss, but I can’t tell you anything. It’s against company policy.”

“Please,” Arya begs, gripping the edge of the desk, her fingers turning white. “I don’t need to know their room number. Just call their room and tell them I’m here. She’ll come down, I know she will.”

“I’m sorry, Miss, but—”

“Don’t say sorry if you aren’t even going to try!” Arya snaps, her voice loud enough that it draws the attention of the breakfasters in the other room.

I lay a hand on her shoulder. “Arya, I don’t think they’re here anyway.”

She shakes me off. “They have to be here. Where else would they be?”

“Miss, no one fitting your description has been here, but even if they had been, I wouldn’t be able to call them down for you. It’s against policy. Please leave.”

“Why did you have to add that bit?” Arya sighs. “The ‘even if they had been’ part? Because now I’m not sure I believe you when you say they aren’t staying here. How can I know you’re telling the truth?”

Under normal circumstances, I’d open my jacket and show the concierge my gun, impressing upon him the importance of helping Arya.

But right now, I don’t think it will do any good. I don’t believe Ernestine and the kids are here at this bed and breakfast.

The floors are a polished gray marble and there are glossy wood pillars holding up ornate ceilings. I can’t imagine Ernestine would have the money for it, based on the looks of her trailer.

Plus, I don’t want to cause a scene. Arya and I need to keep a low profile. Zotov is no doubt still looking for the both of us.

“Miss...” the man starts again, growing angrier.

I wave him off and turn Arya towards me. She blinks and her eyes seem to clear. “Arya, I don’t think they’re here.”

“But we should check,” she says, her determination growing weaker. “Right?”

I shake my head. “We can’t attract unnecessary attention. Not now.”

She seems to understand my meaning and nods in agreement. “Yeah, okay.”

“Thank you and please do not come back,” the man behind the desk says as we walk away.

I wrap an arm around Arya’s shoulders and pull her close as we walk off through the front door. She feels stiff against me. “We’re going to find them,” I tell her. “This was the first place we looked.”

“It’s the only place I can think of.” Her voice breaks, and I squeeze her tighter.

“No, you said there was a bed and breakfast and a diner and a lake. We haven’t look everywhere yet. They could still be in this area. We haven’t even started looking yet. Let’s get in the car and drive around. They couldn’t afford the bed and breakfast, so maybe they’re at the lake. Or maybe they’re eating.”

Arya spins in a circle, scanning the road. “I don’t see a French café.”

“We’ll find one.”

We both climb in the car and I take off. Arya rolls down her window. Her hair blows back in the wind, brushing against my arm and seat.

The area around the bed and breakfast is mostly small antique shops and shopping malls—touristy destinations.

Then, suddenly, the line of trees to the left opens up.

“Oh my God!” Arya grabs my wrist and, with her other hand, points off to the side.

Just through the trees, water becomes visible. It’s set back far from the road, but there it is, reflecting the sun and the blue sky.

The shore.

I pull off at the next driveway and follow a gravel road through the trees to a parking lot cut into the trees. Down another path, I can see people setting up their equipment on the sand, laying out kayaks and life jackets, readying fishing poles.

Arya jumps out of the car and takes off at a sprint. I have to hurry to chase after her.

She skids to a stop on the sand and lifts her hands to her forehead, shielding her eyes from the sun as she scans the beach.

It's a chilly day, so it's not exactly a busy day. The beach is mostly filled with people who look like they are there to work out. No families or kids running and playing.

I see Arya's shoulders drop and I almost reach for her to offer consolation—when two men carrying a kayak move forward.

Then, in the distance, I see a little girl with flaming red hair building a sand castle. On a blanket not far away, an old woman watches.

“It's them!” Arya squeezes my wrist so tightly I'm afraid it's going to break.

Then she's gone, running down the beach again.

So much for keeping a low profile here. Everyone is watching us run dramatically down the beach. Arya doesn't seem to mind and I don't have it in me to stop her.

She deserves this.

“Ernestine?” Arya calls.

The woman on the blanket looks up, sees who it is, and then a smile spreads across her face. She claps her hands and points, and the little girl comes running across the sand and straight into Arya's arms.

That would be June, I assume. She has the same red hair as her mother.

Arya props June up on her hip and carries her over to the blanket, even though she's too big for such treatment.

I'm happy to have found him, but I hold back. The last time this family saw me, I was a threat. I'm the reason they ran away.

The little girl seems to notice me first, her eyes wary. I smile, but she doesn't return it.

Wary. I like her already.

“This is Dima,” Arya says, waving me forward. “He’s... a friend.”

Ernestine’s eyes are slightly milky, but there’s a ferocity in them I admire. “Why were we running from him, then?”

“A misunderstanding.” Arya explains it away. I’m grateful for her ability to forgive. God knows I’m going to need that in the future. “Everything is fine now.”

Ernestine and June accept me more quickly than I expected. The conversation turns to how on earth we found them.

Arya relays the story, but it still doesn’t feel real. “Fate,” she concludes. “I don’t know. I just knew this is where you would be.”

“Thank God for that,” Ernestine says. “Because I had no idea what we were going to do next. We slept in the van last night and my back is killing me.”

The woman is already hunched forward, so I imagine she is in pain. She should not be sleeping in a car.

“We’ll make sure you have a bed tonight,” I assure her. “Everyone will have a shower and a bed.”

“Or a bath?” June asks.

Arya ruffles her hair. “Or a bath. Bubbles and all.”

It’s strange to see Arya with these people. I don’t know them. Neither does she, really.

But love doesn’t always make sense.

I know that as well as anyone.

ARYA

True to his word, Dima takes us all to a cluster of cabins on the far side of the lake. He pulls out an enormous roll of cash and hands it over to the attendant with a rumbled warning that I can't quite hear. If I had to guess, I'd say it was something along the lines of, "If you tell anyone we're here, I'll slit your goddamn throat."

And true to my word, June gets a bath. Bubbles and all.

Dima goes to the store while she's bathing and comes back with armfuls of junk food. We gorge ourselves on Cheetos and microwave chicken nuggets.

It's the nicest dinner I've had in a long time.

Afterwards, Ernestine retires early. She and June curl up in one of the queen beds. They're asleep within minutes. I can hear the little girl snoring gently. It warms my heart.

Dima and I make our way to the master bedroom shortly afterward. We don't say anything or plan it—we just make the move there. Like this was always how things were meant to go. Like we've been doing it our whole lives.

I change into a pair of pajama shorts and a loose t-shirt and slide under the covers. It's chilly outside, but beneath the duvet, I'm cozy.

Dima turns out the light and joins me. The bed creaks under his weight.

I sit there for a while. Neither of us talk. We just breathe and listen to the crickets outside.

“This is nice,” I whisper eventually.

Dima murmurs wordlessly.

“We should stay here forever.”

He grunts.

Suddenly, I sit up and look down at him. The moonlight slanting through the window is just enough for me to make out the glint of his eyes meeting mine.

“Could we?”

“I only paid for one night.”

“No, I mean, could we stay somewhere like this? Outside the city? Away from... everything?”

Dima frowns. His forehead is creased. “What do you mean?”

I sigh and flop back against the headboard. “I don’t know. Going back into the city seems like a risk, right? People want to kill you and take over your Bratva. It’s all pretty dangerous, so couldn’t we just... leave?”

Dima slides his arm out from under me and sits up. “You want me to leave my Bratva.”

He’s serious now. Not angry, but cold.

“No. Well, I guess, yeah, actually. It’s just that a normal life with you could be so great. We could spend the days together. Raise Lukas. Be safe.”

My heart is hammering in my chest so loudly. I wonder if Dima can hear it.

He shakes his head. “This isn’t normal life, Arya.”

“But what you’re going back to the city to do *is* normal?”

He sits upright. “My entire life has been spent leading the Bratva. It is my family’s legacy. My destiny. You want me to walk away from that?”

“I’m not forcing you to do anything.”

“You couldn’t force me if you tried,” he says sharply. “I make my own choices.”

I bite my bottom lip. “It’s just that I’m not in a hurry to rush back into a world that got my son kidnapped and me sold into slavery. I’d rather start over somewhere else, lead a quiet life. Be with you and Lukas.”

Even just saying my son’s name makes me wince. It reminds that he’s still out there somewhere. Still in the arms of cold-blooded monsters.

I want him back, of course. But after that... isn’t it about time I got to write a chapter of my story on my own terms?

Dima’s eyes are black diamonds. “I’m going to get him back, Arya.”

My lip trembles. “But how, Dima?” I croak. “We don’t even know where he is.”

“There are some things it would be best for you to not know.”

I can’t help shivering when he says that. His voice is deep and harsh.

And cold. So fucking cold.

“Are you serious?” I ask.

“Deadly serious.”

“You can’t even tell me—”

“I’m not going to tell you shit, Arya. For your own good.”

“No.” I twist around to face him fully. “No more secrets. Tell me what you’re planning. I’ve been kidnapped, auctioned off, nearly raped and killed, and my son has been kidnapped. Whatever you have to tell me, I can handle.”

“I didn’t ask if you could handle it,” he snarls. “I told you it wasn’t for you to know.”

“I’m not a fucking wallflower, Dima!” I yell. I surprise even myself with the strength in my voice. I lower my tone and add, “Please don’t keep me in the dark.”

He looks at me for a while.

Weighing.

Considering.

In the end, he sighs. "I made a deal with my brother," he says. "Right after I left you in Chicago."

That's a lot to process. "You have a brother? What kind of deal?"

"The kind of deal that only a man like Ilyasov could make. He needed a job done."

"A job?"

"A man must die."

I wince again and immediately hate myself for it. I mean what I said: I'm not a wallflower. I've done and seen far too much awful shit for that to be true.

But the way Dima talks about death so casually sets my teeth on edge. Those eyes are frigid. His voice is emotionless.

It amazes me that the man who can kiss me so tenderly is the same man who can slaughter another human being without so much as blinking.

"What man?" I whisper.

"They call him the Butcher."

"Sounds like a fun guy."

It's a joke, but it's a pathetic one. Neither of us laugh.

"So," I say, clearing my throat, "what happens once you kill this Butcher?"

Dima's eyes harden. "Then my brother lends me an army. And I go take back what's mine."

Again, I shiver despite the heat radiating from Dima. "So it's war then," I say in the tiniest voice. "You want to kill someone so you can start a war."

He clenches his jaw. "You think I asked for this shit? You think I want it?"

“That’s not what I’m—”

“I didn’t ask for any of it, Arya. But I won’t shy away from it. This comes with the territory. I have an empire. I have a kingdom. And jealous men will always want part of that. They’ll come at me with everything they have so they can take everything I’ve built. And I’ll slaughter them all every time.”

My own eyes prick with tears. “But what about your son, Dima? What kind of life does that give him?”

He leaps out of bed and rises to his full height. Looming. Devastating. Powerful.

“It gives him the life he fucking deserves. I left him with you to try and live a normal life, and look what happened! He got fucking stolen from you. So now, we’re doing things my way. I am going to get him back. I’m going to make those motherfuckers pay for laying a single finger on his head. And then the rest of them will pay, too. Everyone will pay. Everyone will bleed. Everyone will remember that I am Dima fucking Romanoff, and whatever I say goes. Including you, Arya. Especially you.”

I don’t know whether to cry or scream. The man in front of me is unrecognizable.

Gone is the strong protector with the sarcastic sense of humor. Gone is the man who made me beg for more of him. *Harder. Touch me. Make me come.*

Now, he looks like a monster in the night.

“Do you even hear yourself?” I ask quietly.

“I know exactly what I said,” he snaps back.

I draw a slow, shuddering breath. “I’ll ask you one more time. I just want to hear you say no for real. Please, I’m begging you... come with me to get our son, Dima. And then turn your back on all the violence and come find a happily-ever-after with us. Will you do that?”

Dima looks down at me from where he’s towering above. His blue eyes are miles deep and sub-zero. I shiver yet again, the coldest one yet. It feels like it comes from the soul.

Dima's lips move. He says one word.

"No."

And then he's gone. He stalks out the door and slams it behind him. The whole cabin rattles.

Left alone in the bed, I do the only thing I can do. I cry for the future I hoped I'd earned.

And I cry for the past I cannot escape.

ARYA

I dream.

I dream a lot of dreams. So many that I can hardly tell where one ends and the next begins.

Dima is drowning me...

Dima is stabbing me...

Dima is throwing me off a cliff...

Lukas is in them, too, of course. He's crying. He's laughing. He's holding onto his father and pointing one chubby finger down at me as I fall over the edge into a chasm full of shadows...

I wake up with a sore throat. The sheets are plastered to my sweaty body and my hair sticks to the nape of my neck. My whole body hurts, like I was beaten up in the middle of the night.

It's still the middle of the night, though, I think. The moonlight is coming in through the slats in the blinds and the cabin is quiet and still. I can hear Ernestine and June snoring in sync from the bedroom down the hallway.

Nothing else makes a noise.

Actually, that's not true. I hear a shuffling sound from the bathroom. When I look up, Dima emerges. He's holding a duffle bag.

“Good,” he says when he sees me looking at you. “You’re up. Let’s go.”

“What?”

“Which part of that was confusing to you?”

Internally, I want to scream. How can one man be so fucking infuriating?

Externally, I just stare at him. “Go where? How? Now?”

He rubs a tired hand over his face. “You have a son out there, in case you forgot.”

“I don’t know why you have to be such a fucking ass—”

“We don’t have time for this,” he interrupts. “Things are happening. Plans are in motion. You said you wanted to be a part of this? You don’t want to be kept in the dark? Then keep up, Arya. Now, are you coming or not?”

Why do I feel so hesitant all the sudden? Maybe it’s because I’m still half-asleep and disturbed by my violent dreams.

Whatever the cause, I find myself fidgeting in bed. I glance down the hallway. “What about Ernestine and June?”

“I left them cash and instructions to find a Bratva safehouse. Somewhere far from the action. They’ll be safe until we... until this is done.”

His pause doesn’t escape my attention. *Until we come back*, is what he was going to say.

But I know what it means that he changed his word choice—he doesn’t intend to come back with me. He meant what he said: that the Bratva is his future.

His only future.

“I’ll ask you one last time,” he says. “Are you coming to save your son?”



We are still outside the city when Dima pulls off on a long road that turns out

to be a driveway. It leads up to a formidable-looking bunker.

“What is this place?” I ask.

“Bratva safehouse.”

“Safe... house?”

“Yes,” he says. “Like a house that’s safe. Thus the name.”

I whirl on him. “I get the drift, asshole. Why in the hell didn’t you bring us here when we left the hospital?”

“Because I didn’t want to lead anyone here,” he says, pulling a key from his pocket and unlocking a metal door. “Also, I didn’t know if the location had been compromised. We had no idea how much information Zotov or his cronies had. This bunker has been a family secret for a situation just like this. But if Zotov knew about it, it would be the first place he’d look. So I had to wait it out.”

I guess he has a point. Still, part of me wonders if everything I’ve been through could’ve been avoided.

I tuck that thought aside. It’s too horrifying to contemplate.

He pushes open the door and lights immediately turn on. For a second, I think they must be motion-activated.

But then a figure appears in the wide doorway in front of us. I jump back in fright, accidentally slamming against Dima’s chest.

“Sorry,” the man says, folding his hands behind his back. “Didn’t mean to scare you. I’m just glad someone else is finally here. I’m bored.”

Dima nods in greeting. “Hey, Gennady.”

Gennady. I recognize the name. Dima said he was his best friend.

Usually, that would be enough information for me to trust him.

But after what my own best friend did to me, I don’t place much stock in the term anymore.

“You must be Arya. Dima’s told me so much. Can’t get him to shut up about you, really.”

Gennady grabs our bags out of the car, then leads us into the house.

Even halfway underground, it’s the nicest house I’ve ever seen. The floors and walls are all solid wood, but that’s offset by the wall of windows facing out the backside of the bunker.

“They’re all bulletproof and one-way,” Gennady explains when he sees me eyeing them. “No one can see inside. And we’re snug as a bug. Nuclear bombs couldn’t flush us out of here.”

“How reassuring,” I drawl.

What I don’t add is this: *I’m as scared of the men inside this house as I am of the men outside it.*

I swallow back my anxiety and keep exploring. The entryway is open and looks down on a sunken living room with an electric fireplace, a U-shaped sofa, and two tall bookshelves.

Just behind where Gennady stood to greet us is an open-concept dining room and kitchen. There are no windows on that side of the house, but large skylights bring in plenty of natural light.

Then Dima grabs my hand and leads me down the hallway towards the bedrooms.

There are three of them. Two are mostly identical, with queen-sized mattresses, matching dressers, and built-in closets. The last, however, is different. It has a wall of windows just like the living room with a distant view of the NYC skyline.

Gennady drops our bags down. “Hasta luego,” he mutters as he backs out of the room.

“Satisfied with the grand tour?” Dima asks me sarcastically once we’re alone.

I turn to face him. “We won’t be here long, will we?”

“I’ll take that as a no,” he rumbles.

“I’m just anxious to find Lukas. You still haven’t told me anything about this plan. What do we know? Who has him? How do we get him back?”

“You’ll get answers when the time is right.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You realize that’s the most annoying possible answer in the entire world, right?”

To my surprise, he actually chuckles. It amazes me how much I’ve missed that sound. Every since our fight at the cabin last night, he’s been radiating this dark fury that only Dima can pull off.

“And yet, it’s my answer,” he says. “Deal with it. Or don’t. That’s your problem, not mine. Now, stay here. I have to go take care of some things.”

“Okay, just let me use the restroom and then I can come, too.”

Dima shakes his head. “Just me. Gennady is going to stay here with you while I go.”

“I told you that you can’t cut me out.”

“I’m not cutting you out. I need to take care of this on my own.”

“But—”

“I’m going alone.” His voice is firm. I can hear the don coming out.

I want to argue, but there isn’t a point. I know he won’t change his mind. The only thing I can hope is he’ll fill me in when he gets back.

“And I can trust Gennady?” I whisper just before he leaves. The man in question is making coffee down in the kitchen, whistling a tune under his breath.

“With your life,” Dima says solemnly. “I trust him with mine.”

I want to, but it’s hard to believe anyone is trustworthy anymore.

Dima disappears around the corner of the house. I walk down into the living room, putting my back against the glass wall so I’ll be able to see Gennady coming.

When Dima's best friend rounds the corner, he has two steaming mugs of coffee and a big smile spread across his face. "Let's spill the tea, as the kids say."

I can't help it the startled laugh that bursts out of me. "What?"

Gennady shrugs. "I don't really know. I'm just trying to break the tension. Things are tense, right?"

I take the mug from his hand, careful our fingers don't touch. "I don't know you."

"So then let's get to know each other. I'm Gennady, Dima's best friend. I'm basically his eyes and ears."

"Yet his Bratva has been stolen out from underneath him." I narrow my eyes.

It's a low blow, but it has to be said. Dima still trusts him, even after he fucked up, but that doesn't mean I have to.

Gennady places a hand on his chest. "Ouch. That stings."

"Sorry, but it's true, isn't it?"

"It is," he sighs. "I fucked up. Big time. But to be fair, Zotov wasn't exactly advertising his plans all over the place. It was a covert affair that half the Bratva was in on. In a way, I think it would have been easier to spot if only a few of the members had been planning a revolt. The fact that so many of them were turning on Dima took us all by surprise. It's never been done before."

"Dima said it's because he won't do human trafficking. Is that true?"

"That he doesn't traffic people?" Gennady asks, eyebrows raised.

For a sickening second, I think he's about to tell me it's all been a lie. That Dima actually does profit off the sale of people. That he lied to me and I'm going to be trafficked again.

"Of course he doesn't," Gennady says, nose wrinkled. "Dima has a code, haven't you heard? An iron-clad one. He doesn't hurt people unless they deserve it."

I remember what he told me earlier. *I have to kill a man.*

Does that man deserve it?

As if reading my mind, Gennady continues. “He lives by that, Arya.”

I frown, still wondering about all the things I don’t know.

“I sense you’re not convinced.” Gennady takes a long slurp of his coffee, looking at me over the rim.

“He’s the leader of a mob. Am I supposed to believe he’s a saint? Isn’t it enough to just believe he isn’t a monster?”

Gennady twists his mouth to one side. “You could believe that, but you’d be wrong. He’s a good guy.”

I curl my legs underneath me. “Okay, so convince me.”

I don’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t what Gennady tells me next.

Yes, Dima runs a Bratva. He deals in arms and drugs and shady deals. He threatens people. He tortures people. He kills people.

But he’s also made anonymous donations to orphanages all around the city. He sponsors after school programs for inner-city neighbors. He has taken a cut of every single dollar that has come through his door and given it back to the city, trying to do some good.

According to Gennady, Dima doesn’t think anyone will ever curb the illegal sales of guns or drugs. As long as human beings crave power, there will be bad people willing to exploit that to make a buck.

But someone can sure as hell use those systems to make things better for people.

Someone like Dima.

It’s not perfect. It’s not something that could be written about in the newspaper with his picture on the front page.

But it’s something. It’s a lot better than nothing.

And right now, when my feelings for Dima are already so complex—teetering on the knife's edge of *Is he good* or *Is he evil*—it's enough.

He's the father of my child, he's a mobster, and he's a good guy.

Okay then...

What does that make me?

ARYA

When Dima comes back that afternoon, he shoos Gennady away and holds out his hand to me.

“Are you ready to see what kind of man I really am?”

I grab his hand and decide against revealing everything Gennady told me while he was gone. Dima may do good deeds privately, but I doubt he wants anyone to know about them without his express permission. I’ll let him reveal his truth to me when he’s ready.

“If you take me to a sex dungeon and make me sign some kind of contract, I’m going to be very disturbed.” I’m joking with him, but the further down we go into the ground, the more uneasy I feel.

Memories of the explosion crowd my head.

I was playing in my childhood room when it happened. When the explosion shook the rafters of my home, of my world.

The ceiling came down and pinned me. I was trapped for so long. It felt like days, though it was probably only hours at most.

But I’ve never forgotten the darkness.

No matter how hard I’ve tried.

At the bottom of the stairs, Dima flips on the lights. There is a short hallway and then a single door with a flickering fluorescent hanging over it. It looks

cinematic, important.

A million thoughts race through my head, unfinished and jumbled—possibilities for what could be behind the door.

Truthfully, though, I have no idea what to expect.

Dima slides a key into the lock, turns the knob, and pushes the door open. He beckons me inside.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness. The room is much better lit than the stairwell or the hallway.

When they do adjust, however, I see... a storeroom.

It's filled with guns, weapons, and ammunition. Boxes labelled with chemistry-looking symbols that I suspect are drug-related are littered across high metal shelves and opened safety deposit boxes bursting with bundles of cash sit on a table in the center.

Money.

Drugs.

Weapons.

The trappings of a mafia don, all spread out and glistening under the lights.

“Gennady has been conducting normal business with our loyal clients while I’ve been gone,” he explains. “Once we knew the safehouse was, in fact, safe, he started storing everything here to keep it away from Zotov and the Albanians. This is what a few weeks of work looks like for me.”

I turn around and face him. “And?”

“And,” he says, gesturing to the room, “this is my life. Drugs and money and guns. Crime and danger. I know you think you know what my life looks like. But I want you to see it for yourself.”

He’s trying to warn me.

Trying to scare me away.

After everything we've been through together, he thinks this room could send me running into the night, terrified. It's sweet how innocent he thinks I am.

But I'm not innocent. Not anymore. Maybe not ever.

"Dima, the first night we met, you pulled a gun on me."

He clenches his jaw. "I remember."

"You know something? I dreamed about you every night after that. The whole time I was pregnant, I dreamed. I dreamed about you before I knew who you were. Then I dreamed about you after I knew who you were. I dreamed about you when I was locked in that sick bastard's mansion, thinking I'd never see you again."

My lower lip starts to tremble. "I've been through so much in the last few months, Dima. All I want is a tiny slice of normal to call my own. All I want is a happy ending. I just want to get my son back and go somewhere quiet. And I want you to come with us. Please," I say, my voice cracking with hope and desperation. "Please."

Dima looks down at me. His eyes are burning like coals. Hot. Dark. Impossible to read.

Is he caving? Is he willing to throw his whole legacy aside to be with me?

I want that so bad. But I just don't know.

"Please," I say again in the tiniest voice imaginable.

Instead of answering, he kisses me.

That's the only thing that's ever truly made sense from the start. Nothing else has—not the guns or the betrayals or the endless running and fear.

But Dima's kiss?

That's always been perfect. That's always been exactly what it's supposed to be.

He tastes like mint. When he picks me up and sets me on the table in the center of the room, I mold my body to his like that's how we were always supposed to be. Pressed together, connected, one.

He moves his hands down my waist and hips with a kind of reverence I've never experienced before.

This man may be dangerous, but underneath it all, he's passionate and caring. He's loyal and fierce.

And he's sexy as hell.

I lift my hips, and Dima slips his sweatpants off of my hips. He didn't have any panties for me to borrow, so I'm bare underneath them. Dima growls as he cups my center, feeling my wetness.

Words can lie, but my body can't. I want him. Now, he knows it.

I push his pants down just far enough for him to free himself, and he pulls a condom from his wallet and slips it on. Then he's inside of me.

My body stretches more with every inch, accommodating his size effortlessly. I hook my legs behind his lower back and arch my back, giving him more of me.

"Take me, Dima. All of me."

For better or for worse, we're together. In every sense of the word.

An easy, comfortable warmth builds low in my belly. I cling to Dima as he fills me again and again. I hold off my orgasm as long as possible, straining against the siren call of pleasure, but when I feel Dima twitch inside of me, I release.

My body clamps down on him, muscles I didn't even know I had contracting and squeezing, holding onto this moment.

"Fuck," he moans, pulsing into me again. "*Khotel by ya etogo ne delat!*"

"What does that—"

Before I can finish asking what he said in Russian, he thrust hard into me and fucks the words right out of my head. He runs a hand through my hair and holds my face to his so we're cheek to cheek as our bodies spasm.

He kisses me, long and hard, and I close my eyes, breathing him in.

I don't know what the days ahead hold, but I trust Dima. With my life.

He won't hurt me.

I know it.

Dima cleans himself up and I lay back on the table, sated and lazy. I can hear him fiddling with his clothes and keys, but I'm not ready to leave the quiet solitude we've found. Even if it is surrounded by weapons and drugs.

I hear the door open, and I know the time has come. We have to go back to reality.

I sigh. "Dima, I..."

"I'm sorry, Arya," he interrupts. His voice is solemn.

I sit up in sudden concern. My body feels cold. The hairs on my arms are prickling up on end.

Dima is standing in the doorway. Clothes already on. Eyes downcast.

"For what?" I ask in a trembling voice. "I already told you I forgive you for everything."

He shakes his head. "Not for that. I'm sorry for this."

Then, with one last look into my eyes, he steps out of the room and pulls the door shut behind him.

I'm still staring at the inside of the door when I hear the lock thud into place.

DIMA

Gennady is standing in the kitchen when I come up the stairs, his face pulled back in a wince. “How did it go?”

“Fine.”

I brush past him and grab my hit bag off the counter. It has guns, ammunition, and restraining devices. I have no idea what obstacles we could run into. I want to be prepared.

“It went ‘fine’? You just locked your girlfriend in the basement.”

“She isn’t my—” I cut myself off. I don’t know what Arya is to me. But I know she’s precious enough that I’ll do anything to keep her safe. Even if it means making her despise me forever. “She’s safe down there and that’s what matters. Now, let’s go.”

Gennady leans towards the basement door, ear cocked. “I don’t hear any screaming.”

“Soundproof. Even if someone happens to break in while we’re gone, they’ll never hear her. And if they do happen to go down there, the only way in is with my key.”

The thought of Arya screaming downstairs fills me with furious guilt again, but I shove it aside.

I don’t have time for that right now. I’ll deal with Arya later.

After this is over.

I drop the key to the door in the safe under the kitchen island and then grab my car keys. “Let’s go.”

Gennady grabs his stuff and follows me into the garage. Arya’s car is recognizable to Zotov and the Albanians by now, so even though it’s less conspicuous, we leave it behind in favor of a black, bulletproof sedan with interchangeable plates. My father kept a whole armada of them in the safehouse for this exact kind of situation.

One of the last smart things he ever did.

“You’re sure your info is good?” I ask as we pull out of the garage. I check the rearview mirror to be sure the door closes and the house is locked down.

“Positive. The Butcher’s staying in a four-story modern monstrosity on East 48th. Architecturally, I think it’s a visual disaster, but it’s certainly pricey enough to scratch the man’s ego.”

“You sure it’s not a trap?” I ask, ignoring his jokes.

“As sure as we can be. God knows I tortured his bodyguard for long enough to make sure he knew what he was talking about.”

I nod, satisfied with that.

It’s as good as it’s going to get.

After months of agonizing hunting and waiting for this bastard to pop his head above ground, the fact that he’s right around the corner makes me fucking sick.

But in any case, it should be simple. Get in, pull the trigger, get the fuck out.

And once it’s done, I’ll be one step closer to controlling my brother’s army.

One step closer to getting Lukas back.

One step closer to Zotov.

Arya appears in my mind. The look of betrayal on her face as I closed the door cut deep.

This is for her own good, though. She'll thank me one day.



We pull up around the corner from the location and get out of the car. The house looms over the block. Modern stone and glass with balconies jutting out over the sidewalk below and a rooftop garden with string lights on top.

The roads are quiet. We're the only people out tonight.

"There it is," I growl under my breath. "The beginning of the end."

"What's the plan?" Gennady whispers, shoving his hands in his pocket as we walk.

"We get inside, take him out, and leave."

"You make it sound so simple."

"Because it will be. It's one guy. We can handle this with or without the Bratva behind us."

"Just like we used to," Gennady says with a smile. "Like the good old days."

We scale the wall quickly and drop down into a patch of shadows on the other side. The lights through the downstairs window are dark, which seems like a good sign.

When no security alarms blare and no guards come racing around the corner with weapons, we approach the building.

There's a door at the back. I stand watch as Gennady picks the lock. He makes quick work of it. Within a minute, the door is open.

And just like that, we're inside.

The downstairs level is dark, but there's enough ambient light from the street to make our way around.

"He's probably asleep," Gennady says, voice barely above a whisper. "From what I heard, he doesn't live with anyone. Still, be on guard."

I gesture that we should split up, each taking a different floor. Gennady agrees silently and slips up to the second floor.

The room is strangely decorated. Not at all what I would've guessed. Richly embroidered black pillows sit on a jewel-tone velvet sofa. Fluffy throw blankets drape over the arms of upholstered chairs. Useless knickknacks like antique alarm clocks and cloth-bound books are stacked on the fireplace mantle and end tables.

It looks like something out of a design magazine. Not the home of a cold-blooded killer.

My gun is at the ready. I walk softly, moving heel-to-toe the way I was trained.

It's been years since I've been on a mission like this, but the training never leaves you. My body knows how to move. How to aim. How to kill.

Every cell in me is on high alert. At any sudden creak, I pivot towards the noise, gun-first, ready to fire.

But nothing moves in the night.

Nothing but us.

I clear room after room. Just off of the kitchen is a hallway with a bathroom, a closet, and, further down, a set of double doors.

I turn the doorknob carefully, push the right door open, angling myself behind the other door, and enter gun-first.

It's a library with built-in wooden shelves stuffed with books on every wall. LED lighting inside the shelves illuminates the spines even when the overhead light is off.

In the middle of the room is another velvet sectional, huge and L-shaped. Straight ahead beyond it is a massive fireplace.

And above that is a huge oil painting. I recognize that face from our brief crossing of paths in the park in Chicago, the night I chose to save Arya.

It's the Butcher. His eyes are dark and glistening. Dripping with violence.

But that's not where I'm focused.

Because there's another person in the painting. A woman clutching to his arm. She's blond, petite, and she looks a lot like...

No. That is her.

Brigitte Arnaud is painted in rough-hewn oil strokes. But it's unmistakably her. That blond hair. That sneer.

I'll never forget it.

Her face is seared in my mind. I'll never forget her. Not after what she did to Arya. And my son.

Then my eye tracks down the painting to see what she's holding.

And my gun drops.

The infant in her arms is my son.

That fucking bitch is holding my child for a portrait. Passing him off as her own. All the while, his mother is—as far as Brigitte knows—being held hostage as a sex slave hundreds of miles away.

I know one thing right away: she's going to die.

She ripped apart my family and made her own perverse monstrosity in its stead. That isn't something you get to come back from. That isn't something I forget or forgive.

Anger burns through me, hot and vivid.

But there's also disbelief. Confusion.

What is going on here? How did Brigitte become entangled with The Butcher? The incestuous links between my brother's enemy and my own are unbelievable.

I'm still staring up at the portrait, trying to puzzle out the web, when I feel a draft on the back of my neck.

My hackles rise, but before I can turn around, the muzzle of a gun presses against my spine.

“Don’t move or I’ll pull the trigger.”

I think about the logistics of calling for Gennady. How do I alert him that I need help without being shot?

“I wouldn’t yell if I were you,” the voice says evenly. “Lay your gun on the mantle and then turn around.”

I do what he says. When I turn around, it’s like I’m still looking at the face from the portrait.

Only this time, the Butcher is staring back.

His hair is cropped close to his head and dyed a vibrant blonde that contrasts with his dark eyebrows and facial hair. He’s tall, but thin, and his gun is aimed at my face now.

Pure lethal.

My eyes flicker over his shoulder to the open doorway. There, I see Gennady tied up in the hallway. He has a towel shoved in his mouth with duct tape over it and his hands and feet are zip-tied together. I notice blood dripping onto the hardwood beneath him.

“You two really thought you could come into my house unseen?” The Butcher snarls, tipping his head back, looking down his nose at me. “I have cameras everywhere. I knew you were here before you even unlocked the door.”

“Why didn’t you kill us then?”

The Butcher smiles. “I wanted to have a little fun with you first.”

ARYA

LOCKED BENEATH THE BRATVA SAFEHOUSE

My throat is raw from screaming.

“Dima! Let me out! Let me the fuck out of here!”

No one answers.

I charge forward with all my strength, bracing myself for the blow I know is coming. Still, when my shoulder slams against the solid door, pain lances through my body.

I cry out. I’ve been at this for at least half an hour, though it feels like longer.

For a minute after Dima left, I thought it was a joke. He apologized to me and then closed the door, and I thought it was some kind of prank or... hell, I’m not even sure. I certainly didn’t imagine he was actually locking me in his basement.

When he didn’t come back, I began to panic.

Why would he do this to me? I trusted him. I just told him I trusted him *while we were fucking on the table*. How could he come inside of me—and then lock me in the basement?

I drop to the floor, overwhelmed and in pain. I don’t realize I’m crying until tears roll down my cheeks.

Is there anyone I can trust?

The question slices through me like a knife. After everything I've been through, trapping me in a room against my will is... horrible.

I feel like a little girl again. Trapped beneath the fallen roof while my house explodes and burns around me.

I tip my head back and look around the room. It's stuffed to the brim with weapons, ammo, drugs, and cash. Enough for me to arm myself with and blast Dima into a million pieces as soon as he opens the door again.

I let myself cry for another minute, rubbing my sore shoulder. Then I stand up, dust myself up, and take stock of my situation and supplies.

The handle is sturdy and well-made. The keyhole stares out at me, almost like it's laughing, mocking how helpless I am against it.

"No," I say out loud. "Hell fucking no. I will not sit in here and wait to be rescued. I'm finding my way out of this shit."

I spin around and study the shelves.

Most of the weapons in the room are guns, but there are small metal boxes lining some of the lower shelves that look more like tool kits. I open one up and find a box filled with gloves, rope, tape, and ski masks.

They're hit kits. Quick bags of supplies you can grab and go to steal things and hurt people.

I move onto the next box and the next, rifling through them quickly until I find what I want: a lock pick set.

Nine years of veterinary training—of learning how to operate in every unconventional way imaginable—has prepared me for this.

Now, I'm going to use the steady hands I use for emergency animal surgeries to open this door and get myself the fuck out of here.

My plan beyond that is vague. I need to find Lukas—somehow. And then I need to run as far and as fast as I can.

But first—the door.

I kneel down on the cement floor and get to work. The job is slow and arduous. I have my ear pressed against the door, listening to the sound of each tumbler as they shift and fall.

The longer I'm here, the more I'm confident I have no idea what I'm doing. I'll probably still be kneeling here, ear pressed to the door, when Dima finally comes back and unlocks the door on the other side.

Then, suddenly, the last tumbler clicks.

The handle pops free. It was so easy. Almost... too easy?

I stare at it in shock for a moment before I wrench it open and take a deep breath of air. It's the same stale air I was breathing in the armory room. I'm still in a basement, after all.

But fuck, it feels so good to be free.

Before I leave the room, I grab a gun hanging from the peg board wall at the back of the room and load it.

Then, I find my car keys and get the hell out of Dima's safehouse. Leaving everything else behind.



“Lukas. Lukas. Lukas.”

I repeat his name under my breath again and again like a prayer.

My plan begins to solidify once I'm on the highway, heading into the city, but I'm still not one-hundred percent certain where I'm going until I pull into a familiar neighborhood. One I've been in hundreds of times before.

While I saved every penny I could, renting a tiny one-bedroom apartment in a safe neighborhood, Brigitte went in the opposite direction, as she so often did.

She rented a townhome in a part of the city where she needed bars on the windows. I didn't often go to her house after dark, which is why I'm glad to have the gun on me right now.

Who knows if Lukas is at Brigitte's house? Maybe Brigitte herself isn't even here—I don't know.

But I have to try. It's the only place I can think to look.

Since Jorik and I broke up, he's moved, so I have no idea where he's living anymore. Even if I wanted to go straight to him, I couldn't.

This is my last lead to rescue my son. My only lead.

I hope to God it works.

Her porch light is off and I don't see any lights in the front windows. When I try the knob, it's locked.

But I also know where Brigitte keeps her spare key.

I told her, time and time again, not to stash it outside her door. I told her I'd keep it for her and I'd be happy to bring it over to her anytime she needed. She did eventually give me a spare key, but she never got rid of the one that stuck to the back of her mailbox with a magnet.

Today, I'm grateful for her lax security.

I slide the key into place and unlock the door as quietly as I can, pushing it open.

"Thanks, Bridge," I mutter to myself.

The number of times I've bounded into my best friend's house carrying Chinese takeout or cheap wine makes this creeping entrance even more strange.

But everything is different now.

Brigitte isn't who I thought she was. Every single memory we had together was fake. She was playing me, spying on me for information. I have no way to know what was real and what wasn't, so everything is suspect. Everything is tainted.

I've lost so much in the last month and a half.

I lost the future I thought I'd have with my son.

I lost the past I had with my best friend.

I lost a piece of myself I'm not sure I'll ever get back.

And yet, even with all of that, I refuse to give up on Lukas. I will find him if it's the last thing I do. I won't let our story end this way.

Brigitte's house smells like her, a mix of incense and lemon Pledge, so I know she's been here recently.

The first floor is dark and empty. I tiptoe up the stairs, skipping the third and fifth stairs, which I know squeal under even the slightest weight.

How many times have I helped Brigitte up these stairs after she had too much to drink?

One night, we both tumbled down them when she lost her balance. I tried to get her up again, but she passed out and I ended up making her a little nest of blankets to sleep on at the base of the stairs. I slept on the couch.

We laughed and laughed about it all the next morning over coffee and pastries. The memory cuts deep.

Brigitte betrayed me in a way that can never be forgotten or forgiven. But none of that changes the fact that she was one of the most important people in my life.

When my parents died, I thought I'd lost the only family I would ever have. I was an orphan, lost and alone.

And then Brigitte found me. She became my sister.

Losing her this way feels like another death.

The girl I thought I knew has ceased to exist. Worse, she has been replaced by a monster. By someone I don't recognize. By someone I'll kill if I get the chance.

On the second-floor landing, I pause, listening to see if anyone is behind any of the doors. I don't hear anything, so I creep towards her guest room. If Lukas was here, that's where she would have made the nursery.

When I push the door open, my breath is stolen.

Standing in the middle of the room is the crib Brigitte and I picked out for Lukas. The one she helped me build in my apartment.

Hanging above it is the outer space mobile we picked out online.

The walls are covered in the art she helped me choose.

The shock of seeing my son's nursery in another woman's house gives me pause for a moment—until I remember why I'm here.

I rush forward, desperately hoping to find him lying in the crib.

But it's empty.

My heart sinks. I spin around towards the hallway. I should be working harder to be quiet, but I'm too desperate to care. Too desperate to be careful.

I turn into the hallway, heading for Brigitte's room, but I pull up short. A noise from behind me that sounded a lot like...

I whirl around.

There's someone standing in the hall.

A surprised scream rises in my throat. But before it can materialize, Brigitte raises her arm and cracks something hard and heavy over the top of my head.

And everything goes dark.

DIMA

THE BUTCHER'S LIBRARY

“Dima Romanoff?” The Butcher chuckles. He grins, proud of himself. He caught himself a don. Quite a feat. “Do you know me?”

“The Butcher.”

He bobs his head back and forth. “It’s one of my names. Though not my favorite. It’s a little cheesy, no?”

I see Gennady roll his eyes in the hallway. If I wasn’t one slip of a finger away from being shot in the forehead, I’d laugh.

“In my experience, people who’ve earned impressive titles don’t ever seem to need them.”

The Butcher’s jaw tightens, but his smile stays in place. “Awfully patronizing for a man who fled his city and now finds himself on the wrong end of a gun, Don Romanoff.”

“You’re a talkative *mudak*, aren’t you?”

He shrugs, then turns and looks up above the fireplace. “Do you like my portrait? I just had it done. The whole family, all together. My woman. My son. Impressive, no?”

His son? For a second, I see red.

I know he’s trying to bait me. Trying to trick me into doing something rash. This is part of his fun. I won’t let him have any.

“What do you want?” I ask, tired of talking around the subject. “You know who I am. You know the kind of money and power I have. What do you want?”

The Butcher throws his head back and laughs. “You? Money and power? Word on the streets now is that you’re nobody. You don’t even have your own Bratva. It’s been stolen out from underneath you.”

I shake my head. “When a hijacker takes control of the plane, you don’t call him the new pilot. You cut his fucking throat and throw him overboard, then take back the controls. That’s exactly what I intend to do. That’s what I’m doing right now.”

“Why would Zotov relinquish control?” The Butcher ponders. “He has your Bratva, and he has the Albanians’ partnership. Together, we’re taking the operation to new heights.”

“To new lows is more like it,” I bite out. “You’re ruining the good reputation I’ve spent years building and killing people in the process. How long do you think your profits will last when the feds come knocking at your door? You can’t let this many people overdose and expect nobody to notice. You can’t keep stealing women and girls from their homes and expect karma to spare you.”

“And you can’t run your Bratva into the ground and expect no one to step up and stop you,” The Butcher retorts, finally losing his composure.

Behind him, I see Gennady wiggling in the hallway. The light isn’t on and it’s hard to make out exactly what he’s doing.

But it looks like he’s trying to free himself.

I just have to keep The Butcher talking and stay alive long enough to let that happen.

“Okay, I’ll play along,” I say with a shrug. “Let’s say I ran my Bratva like shit. Let’s say I was a terrible don. What right does that give you to steal my son?”

At that, the Butcher’s smile is back again.

His gun has lowered slightly, aiming more at my stomach now. If it went off, I wouldn't die instantly. But it's still not a comfortable situation to be in. I'd like the gun to be in my hands, not his.

Patience, Dima. Wait for the right moment to strike.

"That's what I love about this whole tale," he remarks, twirling his fingers in the air. "It's such a convoluted little story. A tangled web. If I saw it in a movie, I'd think it was farfetched. Yet here we are. You and I. The two of us."

I sigh, too tired of this man's soliloquies to stop myself. "You talk too much, *mudak*."

He laughs, but there's no humor in it. "You're only frustrated because you don't know the truth. You only have half of the story."

I don't like being on the outside. Being left in the dark, as Arya called it. But I also can't bring myself to ask this piece of shit to fill me in.

I'd rather kill him and find out later.

There's a rustle in the hallway behind the Butcher. I see Gennady signaling to me that he's working to undo the zip-ties around his hands.

Just a few more minutes of chit-chat. That's all I need to do. Keep this asshole talking until Gennady is free.

"So, what half of the story do I have?" I inquire.

The Butcher's chest puffs with the pride of secret information. "You know that Zotov stole control out from under you, partnered with the Albanians, and tried to have you killed. And you know that now, I have your son. You see, this story is like a connect-the-dots, except, you are missing most of the dots."

"So fill them in. Give me the dots."

The Butcher shrugs. "I could do that. But I think I'd rather kill you. Let you die never knowing."

"Where's the fun in that?"

“None for you, but it will be incredibly satisfying for me. Especially because... I’m growing bored.”

The Butcher lifts the gun. I’m out of time. The only option now is to fight and hope I don’t get hit in the process.

Except, just as I’m contemplating charging the Butcher, risking a shot to the gut, I see Gennady stand up behind him. His mouth is still taped shut, but his limbs are free, and he’s creeping forward slowly and carefully.

Patience. We’re almost there.

“The least you could do is tell me your real name,” I snap, trying to buy Gennady the time he needs. “I don’t want to die at the hands of ‘The Butcher.’”

The Butcher grins as Gennady grows larger behind him, looming closer and closer. “I’m Jorik Bogdanovich. But Arya should’ve told you that, shouldn’t she?”

My face screws up in confusion. I want to ask what in the hell that’s supposed to mean.

But before I can, Gennady tackles Jorik from behind.

They slam into the floor in a flurry of limbs. Gennady has his arms wrapped around the Butcher’s legs, but the Albanian’s arms remain free.

I watch, too far away to intervene, as Jorik spins around and fires off a shot at Gennady.

BANG.

And Gennady’s grip suddenly slackens. He collapses into a limp puddle on the floor.

I bellow and whirl around to grab my gun off the mantle. *BANG.* Brick explodes next to my face.

I dive sideways behind the sofa to avoid the bastard’s wild shots. The couch begins to erupt with geysers of fabric and foam. I pop up above the cushions for just a second to fire off a shot.

I only have a second to aim, but it's enough. *BOOM*—contact. The Butcher cries out in pain.

I can't even bring myself to look at Gennady yet. I'll deal with him when the Albanian is dead.

“You're such a fucking nuisance!” Jorik yells. “And a pussy. You're here fighting for a kid and a woman you know nothing about. You think Arya is going to be a good mother? That bitch will ruin this child the way she ruins everything.”

I pop up again and fire off another shot. This time, I miss, but the Butcher jerks sideways to avoid the shot, falling on the floor.

I take the opportunity to hit him again. This time, my shot buries itself in his stomach.

He's down. I don't think he's getting back up.

Still, he has a gun and nothing to lose. I don't come out just yet.

I hear coughing. I'm not sure who it is: The Butcher or Gennady. I want to get to my right-hand man as soon as possible. I need to get him out of here and get him help.

My thoughts flash back to the night last winter when I was shot—just a graze—and I stumbled in on a sexy vet about to leave for the day.

Who would have ever thought it would turn out like this?

I stand up to survey the scene. The Butcher isn't fighting anymore. His fingers are limp around his gun and torrents of blood are pouring out from the gaping wound in his torso. His face is going pale.

I move towards him, ready to end this. Ready to put a bullet in him and be done.

As I stand over him and lift my gun, he coughs and shakes his head. “You want the dots, Dima?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Connect... connect the dots...” he splutters.

“You don’t know what you’re saying. You’re dying.”

His eyes widen with the reality of his situation. I don’t feel sorry for being the one to deliver the news. He would have happily delivered the same news to me.

“You don’t... don’t know the story, Romanoff...”

I roll my eyes. “Fuck you.”

I lift my gun again, and Jorik jerks with a cough. “Wait. Wait. It’s about Arya. I think you’ll want to know.”

I should pull the trigger, but goddamn it, I hesitate.

I fucking hesitate.

ARYA

I feel the pain before I even know I'm conscious. A splitting ache that starts at my forehead and moves straight back to the crown of my head. Like my skull has been opened wide.

I groan, relieved at the sound of my own voice, no matter how strained. It means I'm conscious. I'm alive.

For now.

"She's waking up," someone says in a high-pitched, sing-song voice. "Yes, she is. I hoped she would stay asleep, but she's waking up. Oooh, what a handsome boy you are!"

Distantly, I recognize the voice, but I'm in too much pain to put anything together right now. The next step is simply to open my eyes.

I try to blink but it feels like my lids have been glued shut. A simple task has never been so hard before.

"I hit her so hard, she might have a concussion," the chipper voice says. "Not nearly as smart as you, no, no. Not anymore. No one is as smart as you, sweet boy."

Sweet boy.

Is someone talking to a child?

A child. Small fragments of thoughts begin to materialize in my head, joining together into full pieces.

I've been hit. There's a baby in the car. Someone is talking to him.

Then the names fill in.

Brigitte hit me.

Lukas is the baby in the car.

Brigitte is talking to my son.

That thought is enough to send my eyelids popping open. My vision is dark around the edges and blurred, but as I blink, my eyes adjust to the light.

We're in a car—an SUV by the looks of it—and I'm lying on my side in the backseat. My hands are bound in front of me and my feet are tied.

Brigitte is in the front seat with Lukas. She has the dash lights on, which is why it feels so bright in here. And it's why I can only see my son in silhouette.

Even in silhouette, though, he looks so big. So much bigger than the last time I saw him. Six endless weeks ago.

My heart broke every time I thought of him over the last six weeks. Every time I realized another day had passed without him, I wanted to drop to my knees.

But seeing him now, like this? So much bigger? A baby, cooing and wiggling and watching the world with wide eyes?

I feel like I'm going to be sick.

Turns out I'm right about that. I vomit all over the floor of the SUV.

"Oh, no!" Brigitte coos. "That's nasty, isn't it, my little angel?"

"Don't you dare talk to my son." My voice is raspy and wobbly, but I don't care. "Don't you fucking dare."

“Your son? I don’t think so. He doesn’t even remember you,” Brigitte sneers. I never knew her voice could sound so mean. Not towards me, at least. The cruelty nearly takes my breath away. “I’m his mom now.”

“You stole him. You’ll never be his mother.”

Brigitte shrugs and leans forward, rubbing her nose against Lukas’s. “When you’re dead, he won’t even know you existed. He won’t know the difference.”

When I’m dead? I was so concerned about Lukas that I hadn’t spared much of a thought for myself.

“Where are we?” I ask.

“Oh, that’s right,” Brigitte says, leaning forward to look through the window. “You wouldn’t recognize this place. He moved since you two broke up. Probably to get away from the bad memories you left him with.”

From my awkward angle, I can’t see much, but it looks like we’re in an alley. Further ahead, I can see fences and lights glowing from inside nice-looking houses. It’s a good neighborhood.

“This is Jorik’s house? This is where you took my son?”

“My child,” Brigitte snaps. “And yes. You’ll be sad to know you let a good one go, Arya. Jorik is a wonderful father. So doting. So protective. For instance, he’s inside right now killing two people who were coming after our family.”

It takes me a second to wrap my mind around what she’s saying. Once I do, my heart drops.

Two people.

“Who?” I ask, not daring to face the truth. “What two people?”

Brigitte turns to me and grins, her teeth glinting in the overhead light. “You know who.”

Tears spring up in my eyes, but I blink them back. An hour ago, I never wanted to see Dima again. Now, I want nothing more than that.

I just want to know he's alive.

“Jorik isn't strong enough to fight Dima. He's going to lose.”

“They don't call him ‘The Butcher’ for nothing. Your man may be a don, but mine's a killer.”

The Butcher?

My head is still aching like nothing I've ever experienced and there are too many facts floating around in my head.

Dima told me his brother asked him to kill someone named The Butcher. Dima said he didn't know who the man was.

Could it be that it was a sick coincidence? A strange twist of fate that sent Dima into the very house where our son's kidnapper was living? Where my ex-fiancé is living?

There were things Jorik never told me when we were dating. Questions I had that I was too afraid to ask.

One of them was what he was out doing at all hours of the night. In the darkest part of my mind, I thought he was cheating on me.

Now, I know the whole truth. He was dealing drugs—and killing people.

And I had no fucking idea.

Fear grips my chest in a vice, but I breathe through it and try to think. Dima is a fighter. I've seen him kill people. I know what he's capable of.

And if Dima finds out the truth of who Jorik is—about what he has done—Jorik doesn't stand a chance.

Someone just needs to tell Dima the truth.

Brigitte keeps talking to Lukas in the front seat. “Daddy's taking care of the bad men inside, precious. He'll be done soon.”

For Lukas's sake, I hope Brigitte's right. I hope his *real* father is doing just that.

I wiggle my ankles together. I can feel the knot around my feet growing looser and looser the more I move.

As quietly as possible, I slide my ankles up and down and then forward and back, undoing the knot until it's loose enough for me to kick my shoe off. Once I'm barefoot, I can slip right through.

Lukas starts to get fussy. Brigitte sets him in his car seat, which she's moved to the front seat to accommodate me taking up the back seat. It's perfect.

As soon as she sets Lukas down and turns to grab his bottle from the center console, I throw both my arms over the front of her seat and wrap the ties holding my wrists together around her neck.

Brigitte lets out a strangled, shocked cry. "You bitch—!"

But I pull back even harder, pressing my feet against the back of her seat for leverage.

It's better that I can't see her face. If I could, I'd be afraid I'd lose my nerve. Because no matter what Brigitte has done to deserve this, I'm still me. We still have a history.

But no, doing it this way is better.

My future and Lukas's future—and maybe even Dima's future—depends on me following through.

So I will.

Brigitte claws at my hands. I feel warm blood flowing down my skin and wrist, but I don't let up.

It's time for her to die.

She's thrashing in the seat, her legs smashing the horn every few seconds. Lukas is crying. Wailing. Screaming, really.

That's all the motivation I need to pull the ties tighter. To end this as fast as I can so I can comfort my son.

With the last strength in my body, I pull the rope tighter around my best friend's throat.

My palms burn, the rope digs into my skin, but I don't care. Winning this fight is worth any pain, any inconvenience, any scar.

I can feel Brigitte is starting to lose energy. She's flailing in the front seat, her hands slapping at mine rather than scratching and digging. Her movements are becoming less coordinated.

I hold on.

Then she goes still.

I know she's probably just unconscious, so I hold the rope there for another minute, maybe two. It gets to the point that I'm afraid to let go. Afraid she'll pop up as soon as I do and disappear with Lukas again.

But Brigitte is still in the front seat, her body slouching down like a sack of flour, and I take that as a good sign.

She's dead.

I slowly loosen the rope from around her neck, barely even breathing as I wait to see what happens.

When she doesn't move, I jump out of the car and run to the passenger side door.

Lukas is full-on crying now, red-faced and angry. It's strange to both recognize him and not. I know he's the same baby I gave birth to, but he's so much bigger. So much rounder and fuller.

My heart aches at the time I lost with him, but I push down the pain and throw myself into taking care of him first.

That means grabbing the bottle Brigitte had for him in the diaper bag, getting him out of this car, and rushing inside to warn Dima.

If he's still alive.

I push that thought from my head, too.

He has to be.

Carrying Lukas after so much time apart feels strange. It's like picking up an instrument you used to play years ago. Your body remembers, but your mind is slow to catch up.

My body remembers Lukas. I know how it should feel to have him nuzzled against my chest or cradled in my arms. But my brain is telling me I don't know how to do this. That I don't have enough experience.

Lukas, however, seems happy to be held by me and fed his bottle at the same time. His tiny little fingers are clamped around the bottle, not strong enough to hold it up yet, but simply feeling the texture and the temperature, exploring it.

"My baby boy," I murmur. Tears flow like waterfalls down my face.

But I don't have time to cry. I have to hurry. For Dima's sake.

I push open a wooden fence and step into a green square of grass. Paving stones lead to an outdoor kitchen on a patio and an all-glass back door.

The house is eerily quiet when I step inside. All of the lights are off on the first floor, so I start moving towards the stairs, but I'm only up a few steps when I hear voices behind me.

I turn around and see light coming from under a set of double doors at the end of the hallway.

I creep towards the doors and realize one of them is partially opened. I can't see anything through the crack, but I can hear voices.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

It's Dima. I recognize his voice instantly. Relief washes through me in a warm wave. He's still alive. He's still breathing. I'm not too late. I start to charge forward—until...

"Connect... connect the dots..." another voice splutters.

I freeze. Jorik's voice is just as recognizable. It's a voice I hoped to never hear again.

"Fuck you," Dima snarls.

“Wait. Wait.” Jorik sounds out of breath. Dima must have been serious about him dying. It sounds like he’s nearly gone. “It’s about Arya. I think you’ll want to know.”

My heart stops.

Jorik is about to tell Dima everything.

DIMA

“Waste him,” Gennady groans, rolling onto his back.

I can see the bullet wound in my best friend’s side. It’s bad. He needs to get to a hospital now if he is to have any chance of surviving.

“You don’t know Arya like I do,” Jorik gasps. His breathing is becoming ragged. I can hear blood gurgling in his chest. He won’t be long for this world. “No, no, no.”

“I know all I need to know.”

“Is that right?” he laughs, but it sounds watery. “I wouldn’t be so confident.”

He’s wrong. I do know Arya. Not for long. Not the details of her biography.

But I *know* her.

She’s an easy person to know. Her emotions are written right on her face. From the moment we’ve met, I’ve seen into her soul.

And I’ve let her see into mine.

I turn away from Jorik and kneel next to Gennady. Blood is gushing from his side, so I slip off my jacket and press it against the wound to staunch the bleeding.

“I’ll be okay,” he says, nodding his head, his brow creased with false confidence. “I’ve had worse.”

I'm not sure that's entirely true. But I hope to God it is. Gennady can't go down like this. Not after everything we've been through.

I won't let The Butcher be the end of his story.

"Let's get out of here and leave this asshole to die alone," I say, hefting Gennady up, one arm wrapped around his back.

He throws an arm around my neck, but as he does, I think I hear something in the hallway outside the library. I turn my head towards the sound, waiting.

No one comes in, though. I convince myself I must be imagining it.

"She's lying to you," Jorik croaks in a high-pitched voice. I'm surprised he can find the energy to still put on such a show in his last moments. "She's not who she says she is. You think you're with Dr. Arya George, don't you? You fucking idiot. You blind fool."

I don't want to be interested in what he's saying, but it's hard not to be.

"Don't listen to him," Gennady says. "Get me out of here."

There's a hint of desperation in his voice. I know he's right—we don't have time for this. I nod and start leading him towards the door again.

"You want to know her real name? Aryana Georgeovich."

At that, I pause. I feel Gennady stiffen next to me.

"You hate the Albanians, don't you?" Jorik asks. "Dima Romanoff and his moral compass could never allow him to do business with the *dirty Albanians*. I guess that moral compass gets a little fuzzy when it comes to *fucking* them, though, huh?"

A chill moves down my back. *What the fuck is happening here?*

I move Gennady over to the couch, letting him prop himself up on the back of the sofa, and turn back to The Butcher. He's still lying on the floor, blood pooling around him.

But his head is raised so he can see me. He's smiling. Enjoying himself.

"Arya's an Albanian?" I ask in a low, dangerous voice.

“Born and raised. She grew up in the mob. Her mother was their main drug supplier.”

“You’re lying.”

I hate the violent tremor in my voice, but I can’t help it. I’m angrier than I’ve ever been.

The first night we met, when I walked into the vet clinic, she asked if I was with the Albanians. She wasn’t surprised to see me there with a gun because she’d been around violence her whole life.

She wasn’t afraid of me because she’d known men just like me from the time she could walk and talk.

Born and raised, Jorik said.

“Does anyone get out of the mob life?” Jorik asks, the question rhetorical. He glances up at the portrait hanging above his mantle, his head bent at an awkward angle in order to do so. “You know, it could have been Aryana’s face up there. She and I were engaged to be married, after all.”

The wind wheezes out of my lungs, but I do my best not to show it.

Jorik wants a show. I’m not going to give him the fucking satisfaction.

“I can see how you were blinded by her lies. The girl is a good fuck.” He groans at a sudden rush of pain, thinking back on memories, and then releases a slew of watery coughs. “She’s wild in bed. Unfortunately, she’s wild out of bed, too. You can’t trust her for shit. Isn’t loyalty big with you Romanoffs?”

Knowing Jorik touched Arya makes me want to end him instantly. But he isn’t worth the bullet. His voice is getting faint, anyway. He’ll be dead in a minute or less.

“She tried to ruin me,” Jorik continues quietly. “She destroyed half of my product. I spent a year making good on debts. So I figured it was time for Arya to make good on hers.”

“What does that mean?”

Jorik smiles. “Finally interested, are you?”

I don't answer.

He coughs again. Realizing he doesn't have much time, he keeps talking. "She was supposed to marry me. Have my babies. Good Albanian boys. Instead, she nearly destroyed my reputation and got me killed. I figured it was only fair that she be auctioned off to be some sick bastard's sex slave—it was all she was good for anyway—and that I get the kid. I've always liked kids."

I recoil like he's shot me. The thought of Arya touching him... moaning for him... I'm shaking from head to toe with rage.

"You see, we Albanians always pay back our debts," Jorik says. "Which is why I will die in peace knowing you will get what's coming to you, Dima Romanoff. My family will come for you, seeking revenge for me, and you'll die a more gruesome death than—"

I don't even realize I'm walking towards Jorik until I'm standing over him.

He's still a waste of a bullet, so I pick up my boot and bring it down hard on his face. His skull crunches beneath my foot.

Just like that, The Butcher is snuffed out.

I hear a gasp near the door. I think it's Gennady. I start towards him, but stop a few steps later.

It wasn't him.

Standing behind him in the now-open doorway is Arya.

Somehow, I'm not surprised to see her. Like it was always meant to happen this way.

She's horrified, though. Her eyes are wide and shining. Her hands shaking. Lukas in her arms looks like he wants to cry.

But all I can see is red.

"Hello, Aryana."

ARYA

I came just in time to hear Jorik tell Dima everything.

Everything I never told him.

Everything I should have said from the start.

I could admit to everything, but he would never forgive me. I could run, but he would catch me.

So I stand in the threshold of the library, halfway in, halfway out, waiting to see what he'll say. Waiting to see what he thinks of me now.

“Hello, Aryana.”

A chill moves down my spine. His voice is cold. Colder than I've ever heard it before. Lukas is squirming in my arms as if he too is afraid.

“That's not my name,” I whisper. “It hasn't been for years.”

“Aryana Georgeovich,” he says again, sliding his tongue over his teeth. “It's a pretty name. Though, I guess you were almost Aryana the Butcher's Wife. Not quite as pretty, but—”

“Stop,” I say, unable to stand the cruelty in his voice. “Please. I left him. I burned that bridge a long time ago. I hated him.”

“Hated him?” he spits. “You hated him so much you had to lie to protect him?”

Shame courses through me, hot and acidic. “We all make mistakes.”

He steps towards me and I’m tempted to move back. That’s what one does when they’re being pursued by a threat.

But Dima isn’t a threat to me. He can’t be. Even after everything that’s happened, I refuse to believe it.

So I hold my ground.

“I thought I was the one who made mistakes,” he snarls. “But I only made one: trusting you.”

“Dima, please. Listen.” Lukas is starting to wail softly. It’ll be ear-piercing soon.

He waves his hands in the air to dismiss me. “I’ve listened to you a lot. And do you want to know what I’ve never once heard from you? *‘It was my fault, Dima.’*”

“It was my fault,” I say at once, tears burning at the backs of my eyes. “I’m sorry. I should have told you, but—”

“But you preferred that I had the burden of guilt? You liked it better when I thought you were the innocent one?”

It feels like a knife has gone clean through me. “You didn’t do that because you felt guilty. It’s because we care about each other. Because we’re... a family.”

I haven’t used the word out loud yet, but in my mind, I’ve considered Dima, myself, and Lukas a family. At least, I’ve imagined we would be one day.

Now, that’s all irretrievably broken. Lukas’s cries are getting louder and louder.

He barks out a laugh. “Fuck you, you fucking liar.”

“Dima, I’m sorry. I lied, but I was afraid. I didn’t know—”

“Who would take care of you and protect you from all your enemies?” he finishes. “Oh, I know. You were trying to do what was best for you. Whatever benefited you the most.”

“Don’t make it sounds like that. It wasn’t like that for me, Dima. I wasn’t using you.”

“Weren’t you, though?” he asks. “I told you I would get Lukas back for you. I told you I’d fix my mistake and make it right. Turns out, it wasn’t my mistake to fix. It was yours. And you never said a fucking word.”

“Dima, I—”

Before I can get the thought out, Dima lifts his gun and points it at me.

My mind flashes back to that night a year ago. To the strange man who came into my clinic with a gun and a graze.

I wasn’t afraid of him then, but I’m afraid of him now. Terrified. Lukas is crying so loud now that I can barely hear myself think.

“Is it true?” he asks, his voice deep and slow. “You heard everything the Albanian said. Did he lie? Did he make it up?”

I blink at him.

“Answer me!” he roars.

I shake my head. “He didn’t make it up. It’s true. It’s all true.”

Dima lowers his head, his jaw clenching in anger.

I look to Gennady for... something. Support, maybe? But he looks weak. He’s sagging against the couch and it looks like he might faint.

“It’s all true, but I love you, Dima,” I say, deciding it is time to be fully honest. “That’s true, too. I never wanted to betray you, and—”

“Go.”

I stop, waiting to see if he’ll say more. “What?”

“Go,” he repeats. “Leave now. That’s the mercy you’ll get from me.”

I shake my head, not understanding. “Mercy?”

“A head start,” he says, looking up at me with his steel gray eyes, his expression vacant. “You get to start running before I hunt you down and

punish you for what you've done to me. Loyalty is everything to me and you betrayed it. You'll pay for that."

Emotion clogs my throat. This is just a misunderstanding. He's making this decision in an emotional moment. He'll forgive me, I know it. All I need is a little more time.

I look to Gennady. He's pale and trembling. "At least let me help Gennady. I'm a surgeon, I can—"

"You can get the fuck out of here. *Now.*" Dima says, waving the gun at me. "You have until the count of ten."

I don't believe him.

He wouldn't shoot me.

He wouldn't kill me.

"Ten—nine—eight—" His countdown is even and unaffected. As if I could be anyone in the world. No different than any other person he has ever had to kill.

As Dima keeps counting, it feels like he's looking right through me, right through our baby boy, and all at once, I know he's serious.

He's going to shoot me. He's going to kill me.

Unless I go.

So, with one last look at the father of my child...

I run.

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