



ANTONOV  
BABIES

*My Vida Loca*  
**LOVE**

*Jasper's*  
**BABY**

A RUSSIAN MAFIA ROMANCE

BELLA KING

# JASHA'S BABY

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A RUSSIAN MAFIA ROMANCE

ANTONOV BABIES

BELLA KING

AFTER MIDNIGHT

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# BLURB

I fell into the possessive hands of a ruthless Bratva boss,

And now, I'm pregnant with his baby...

Jasha Antonov is everything my mother taught me to be wary  
of.

Sadistically hot, openly jealous, and with a past so dark he  
could be a villain in a fairy tale.

But when our worlds come crashing together, it's not a fairy  
tale we create.

It's wicked, raw passion,

Wild, dangerous temptations,

And a shocking secret that could destroy us both.



## Lola

I can smell his arrogance from across the orchard. He's deeply aware of how attractive he is, wearing his perfect jawline and broad shoulders with the utmost pride. He's already shed his navy-blue suit jacket and rolled up his crisp white sleeves like he has some kind of strenuous work to do, but the only thing that's happening here is plucking low-hanging apples from the trees around us.

And I can't imagine what a six-foot-seven-inch beast covered in tattoos is doing picking apples on a Friday afternoon. He seems like he should be at the club blowing thousands on supermodels, but he's examining each apple quite carefully before picking it and placing it into his wicker basket.

Something doesn't add up, and my suspicion overrides my hesitant attraction to him. Why would a man who looks like a mafia boss be out apple picking in a quaint little orchard on the northern edge of Texas?

I turn away from him, tucking myself behind the wide trunk of a tree and picking a few apples off the lower branches. They have little step ladders set up to get to higher branches, but on a woefully uneven ground of tangled roots, it feels more like a guaranteed trip to the ER.

But because I refuse to step up any higher, I have to move on from the tree that's hiding me from view. When I peer around

the trunk, I see that the Prince of Arrogance has moved several trees closer to me and is looking right at me.

It's hate at first sight, but when his vivid green eyes meet mine again, it's something different. Something that claws at my insides and lodges my heart all the way up into my throat.

But one-sided desire is not what's going to get me in trouble.

The real danger is that he's noticed me staring, and now he's walking straight toward me.

I duck behind another tree, trying to make it seem like I'm busy picking apples instead of hiding from him. I know I've failed when his cologne wafts over to me, and I turn to see a smirk dancing across his lips.

My basket gets about ten pounds heavier in my hand.

"Are we hiding from something?" he asks, looking around with a slight frown. His voice is low, and his words are thickened by a distinctive Russian accent. "I didn't think there would be anything dangerous in a little orchard like this, but I guess you can never be too careful."

I straighten up, trying to play it off like he's the crazy one. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I was just here picking apples."

"Looked like you were hiding," he says, his eyes meeting mine with a knowing glimmer.

I shake my head so hard that I give myself a slight headache. "No, no, I was picking up an apple I dropped. And you? Just coming around to talk to a woman because she happens to be alone?"

He chuckles, leaning against the tree. His cologne hits me again, deep and rich with a hint of cigar smoke. "I just came over because you were staring at me. I figured you might want me to introduce myself," he says.

I narrow my eyes. "I wasn't staring at you."

"It's okay, I'm not judging you for it. I know I'm attractive," he replies, swinging his basket around like it weighs nothing.

Okay, now that's a bit too far. I was considering giving him a chance, maybe a shot in the dark, but he's already blown it. His arrogance is wholly unattractive.

I turn away from him, stepping up on the forbidden ladder to put some distance between us. I grab for an apple without really looking, perhaps too frivolously, and miss it entirely, throwing my weight sideways and right off the ladder.

I'm expecting a quick introduction to the hard ground, but it never comes. Instead, I land in a strong pair of arms and pulled into an even stronger chest. He holds me like that for several seconds, waiting for me to realize where I am.

For a moment, I'm too stunned to do anything but cling to him, but then I come to my senses. "You can put me down now, please," I say, trying not to sound like I'm freaking out.

He gives me a soft squeeze before putting me down, using one of his large hands to steady me. It's warm against my back, and I feel instant regret when I step away from him.

I smooth out my dress, hoping I didn't show him anything personal. It's not that I'd be especially upset if he saw my panties, it's that the *type* of panties I have on would embarrass the hell out of me. They're white with a picture of an apple printed on the front, and I'm certain he'd laugh at me for wearing something that matched the activity I was taking part in.

I squat down as I scoop my basket off the ground to avoid giving him another show, grabbing apples from the ground and blowing the dirt off them. To my annoyance, he joins me, grabbing them and placing them into my basket.

When I finally stand up, he takes an apple from his basket and puts it in mine.

"I don't want that," I say, quickly taking it out and putting it back into his.

"A simple *thank you* would've been sufficient."

My face flushes, and I pull my basket up to my chest defensively. "Right. Thank you for catching me, and thank you

for helping me with my apples. I hope the rest of your evening is enjoyable,” I blurt, spinning around and attempting to leave.

His hand catches my wrist with a firmness that sends a chill through me. “Wait,” he says, his voice deep and commanding. “I didn’t catch your name.”

I put on a fake smile before turning back to him. “Lola.”

“That’s a pretty name. I’m Jasha,” he says, giving my wrist a squeeze, but not letting go.

I look at his hand, hoping he’ll realize what he’s doing and release me.

Instead, he grins. “You’re too beautiful to be out here all by yourself. I’m hoping your boyfriend isn’t coming back to cause trouble. He’d be out of his mind with jealousy if he saw us like this.”

I know this trick, but I fall for it anyway. “I don’t have a boyfriend,” I reply.

The sound that comes out of his mouth says a million things in a single second. “Hmm, so you’re single?”

“Happily so,” I reply, trying to pull away. He still doesn’t let me.

“Then why not make this a date?” he asks. “I’m here alone as well, just picking some apples for when my brother comes to visit with his wife and daughter. They like *sharlotka*, Russian apple cake.”

His story is too cute and quaint to be true. He must be lying, but what else would bring him to an orchard? Is he just here to pick up women?

That’s admittedly a poor idea, since most people here are couples with small children. The only reason I came here alone was because my friend flaked on me. It’s impossible to form reliable relationships with people when you’re always on the move, but that’s my current reality. My job takes me everywhere and keeps me nowhere.

“Sounds tasty,” I say to him, avoiding his question about the date. It wouldn’t amount to anything, anyway. I’m always on

the move, and if I can't even maintain a friendship in Texas, how the hell would I manage a full-blown relationship?

But something tells me Jasha isn't looking for love. There's a wicked gleam in his eye and a knowing smirk on his lips that tells a different story. "Maybe you'd like to try some. I'd love to have you over."

"You don't even know me," I say, tugging my arm away as he loosens his grip.

He leans in, his breath minty with a hint of tobacco. "No, but I'd like to."

Goosebumps erupt down my arms and legs, and I take a step away from him to prevent him from seeing what his words have done to me. If he knows how weak I feel right now, I'm certain he'd take advantage of it. His arrogance isn't the only thing that concerns me. He has a look to him, predatory and dangerous. Getting mixed up with a man like Jasha would only lead to suffering.

He's the type of man my mother warned me about.

But she's not here.

And he is.

"Lola, my lovely girl," Jasha says, reaching out and taking my basket. "Allow me to hold this for you. Pick some apples for us, preferably the ones that are higher up on the tree."

"What, so you can look up my dress?" I ask dryly.

He pulls his head back in a show of innocence.

But that's all it is.

A show.

"I would never think to do such a thing," he says, shaking his head. "The apples closer to the top haven't been chewed on by animals. They'll be better for a cake."

I squint at him. "I'm not getting back on that ladder."

"I'll hold it for you," he says, putting down the baskets and grabbing the ladder with both hands.

“I really don’t need your help,” I reply, even as I step onto it. It doesn’t wobble like it did before. Jasha’s grip is firm and protective.

“Up you go,” he says, and I feel like I’m walking straight into a trap. Perhaps he’s going to shake it and make me fall into his arms again.

“That’s a nice apple right there,” he says, pointing to a branch just out of reach.

I take another step up the ladder to get to the apple, plucking it from the branch and looking for the next one. He’s right about the apples being better higher up on the tree, and I hate him for that. He’s perfect and he knows it.

I don’t want to tell him he’s right and feed his ego further. It’d probably explode from how big it is already.

“So, you were really just picking apples here all by yourself?” he asks from below me. “I’m still expecting a boyfriend to pop in and throw hands. I’d win, of course, but still...”

I roll my eyes, adding another apple to the bunch in my hands. “I was supposed to come with a friend, but they canceled on me last second. I already bought a ticket, so I figured I’d just come get some apples for myself. Not sure if that was a good idea now, though.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have to deal with you.”

He laughs. “I’m not that bad.”

“Oh? Then why are you here alone? Couldn’t find a date to bring?” I tease.

“I already told you why.”

“Yeah, and something isn’t adding up. You look like the type of guy who sells drugs, not one who bakes apple cake for his family,” I reply, stepping down from the ladder with a handful of apples.

“Nice apples,” he says, his eyes jumping between the apples in my arms and the printed apple that’s hiding under my dress.

My face flushes, and my skin prickles. “Were you...? You know what, I don’t want to know. Thank you for your help, and I hope you have a nice day,” I snap, dumping the apples into my basket.

“You’re leaving? Just like that?”

I ignore him, trying and failing to pick up my basket of apples. It’s too heavy.

“Let me help you with that.”

“No!” I slap his hand away. “Just leave me alone.”

“Damn, you’re a fussy little princess, aren’t you?”

I roll my eyes as I transfer the excess apples from my basket to his. “No, I’m just not in the mood to experience any more of your relentless taunting.”

“You sure you’re not just on your period?” he asks, and before I can think of a response, he continues, “Oh, no, sorry. You wouldn’t be wearing white panties if you were.”

My jaw drops. “I’ve had enough of you, asshole. I’m leaving, and if you follow me, I’m calling the police. I’m sure you have plenty of experience with them.”

“Not really. Just with women,” he replies coolly.

“Tell me more about how you’re a walking S.T.D.,” I reply, swinging my basket around as I turn away from him.

“I use protection most of the time.”

I laugh at the utter ridiculousness of his statement. “*Most of the time?*”

“Well, I probably wouldn’t with you.”

And with that, I’ve had enough. I take my apples and I walk away from him, making sure I’m out of his line of sight before I break out into a run, dropping apples all the way back to my car.

**Lola**

I fling my keys onto the mantel by the door and drop the basket of apples on the floor. I don't even have the energy to take it all the way to the kitchen. I just want to collapse on the couch and binge watch videos on my phone until my brain recovers from Jasha.

But I may never be able to get that prick out of my head. He was stuck there for the entire drive home, his teasing words echoing in my ears until they worked their way all the way down between my legs.

He snuck a look at my panties. He saw what I was wearing, and he had the nerve to comment on them. I don't know who raised such a hopeless moron, but it definitely wasn't a woman. He has zero respect for them.

I let out a long breath, relieved that I'll never have to see him again. I won't even have a chance of running into him by chance at the grocery store because tomorrow, I'm hopping on a train and driving it all the way to Chicago.

Life as a train engineer isn't always glamorous, but it pays well and it allows me to get away from men like Jasha when I need to.

Now that he's away, the only thing I can think of doing to relieve the tension that has formed in my shoulders is to stick



my hand into my panties and pretend I'm not picturing his face while I pleasure myself.

It's not like he'd know, and something about using him to relieve the tension that he's responsible for is gratifying.

I'm almost about to finish when there's a heavy knock on the door to my rental.

I yank my hand out from under my dress and tuck my hair behind my ears as I hurry to the door. I hope it's nothing important, but occasionally, I'm forced to start my shift early. I hope I didn't miss any calls and force the conductor, Troy, to pay me a visit. He's about as sweet and cuddly as a porcupine.

"Coming!" I call as I check myself in the mirror by the shoes rack. My cheeks are a bit pink, but it's nothing that would give away what I was just doing on the couch.

I check myself once more before twisting the bolt and pulling the door open. A zap of electric adrenaline hits me when I see who it is.

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything," Jasha purrs, stepping past me into the living room. "Nice place."

I ball my fists, turning to him as he meanders past the couch. "What the fuck are you doing here? Did you follow me?"

"I have eyes all over this side of Texas," he replies, waving his hand up in the air dismissively. "Don't worry about the how. You should be more concerned with the why."

"Yeah, I was going to ask that next," I say, staying by the open door in case I need to make a run for it.

"Because you took my apples," he replies, looking around for what I assume to be my basket. It's right by the door with me, where I left it.

"Um, I took my own apples home, thank you very much," I reply. "So, you can leave now."

He peeks into the kitchen. "No, I think you took mine. I had a couple of Granny Smiths on the bottom. I need those for the *sharlotka*."

I take a deep breath to keep myself from exploding. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, but I am,” he says, moving back toward me and grinning wildly.

“But you can get those at any grocery store.”

“Ah, but they wouldn’t have that charming, hand-picked taste,” he says, holding up his finger. “Plus, I told my niece I’d get her ones from the local orchard. Can’t be a bad uncle, now, can I?”

I couldn’t imagine him as anything *but* a bad uncle. I’m surprised he even has family that wants to visit him. He’s a walking, talking nightmare, and he’s standing in my living room!

“Take your apples and leave. I’ve lost my appetite, anyway,” I say, trying to sound firm even as he walks up to me. My voice dies in my throat halfway through. “You can’t just...”

“I can’t just *what?*” he asks, his voice a deep rumble in his chest. “I can’t just walk into your house and take whatever I want?”

I nod, unable to say anything as he towers over me. His energy is high, but his voice is low. Oh, so deliciously low. It makes my entire body vibrate from the inside out, and I’m afraid if I open my mouth, he’ll hear my insides humming.

Maybe even a whimper.

Or possibly a moan?

“Well, my sweet little Lola,” he begins, moving his hand over the buckle of his snug fitting slacks, “I wouldn’t want to just take things from you and not leave anything in return. That wouldn’t be fair.”

I nod again, but I really shouldn’t. I know what he’s implying, but I’m pretending not to so that I can continue lying to myself about my attraction to him. I should despise him, and most of me does, but the part that’s between my legs seems to want him so badly that my desire is soaking through my panties.

“There’s another little apple, right here,” Jasha says, his hand falling down to the hem of my dress. “I’d like to have a taste. They’re so sweet this time of year.”

His height is cut in half as he drops to his knees, putting the power back in my hands. He’s not so intimidating from down there. I think I prefer him that way.

I shut the door as he lifts my dress, more out of shame than a fear of being exposed to anyone. I just couldn’t live with myself if someone knew that I let a total stranger do this to me. It’s a guilty pleasure that I’m barely able to allow myself to have.

“Mm, very cute,” Jasha says as he runs the tips of his fingers over the cartoon apple printed on the front of my panties.

I feel like I need to explain myself. “I-I usually wear lace.”

“Of course you do,” he says, his words drenched in a patronizing glaze. “If you’re embarrassed by these, maybe we should just take them off.”

“I... I don’t know,” I say, even as I slip my thumbs into the waistband to help him pull them down.

“I think you do know,” he says, his breath hot against my exposed pussy. “But don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone about this.”

I tilt my head back, bracing myself against the door as his lips make contact with pussy. They’re hot, burning delicious pleasure into my pelvis as he creates a suction over my clitoris. Jasha immediately finds a rhythm, bringing me up to the brink of ecstasy faster than my fingers ever could.

I don’t want it to be over so quickly, and yet the pleasure is impossible to deny. It floods through my body like a dam breaking over a city, annihilating any hope of recovering my dignity. Jasha has won, and he barely even had to try.

He looks up at me as I climax in my mouth, his eyes bright with the wicked realization that he owns my body. I’ve already bent to his will, and it’s obvious that making me cum wasn’t his only intention when he came knocking on my door.

He wants more, and he's going to have it.

But he's doesn't rush. A man like him doesn't have to. He waits until he's milked every smidgeon of pleasure from my body before he pulls his mouth away from my swollen flesh, licking his lips like he's ready for dessert.

My breathing is heavy, the elevated levels of oxygen in my brain giving me a natural high that causes my fingers to tingle. Jasha stands up in front of me, his expression transforming into a powerful focus as he leans in to kiss me.

I taste myself on his lips, but there's more to it than that. His flavor is particularly animalistic, primal in the way that makes my blood run cold and burning hot at the same time. My heart picks up its pace again, and I find myself thrilled at the thought of experiencing more of him.

Without a word, he takes my hand, his long fingers wrapping around mine in a firm but gentle grip. He leads me to the bedroom, closing the door hard behind him and grabbing me by the waist.

"On the bed, now," he growls, pushing me toward the bed. My knees hit the mattress, and I fall forward, bent over it at the waist.

Blood rushes to my head as I hear the metallic jingle of his belt behind me. Oh god, he's actually doing this. *I'm* doing this.

Do we have time for a condom?

No.

Do I even care?

Also no.

"Spread those pretty legs," Jasha commands, slapping the insides of my thighs with his hand until I spread them wide enough for his satisfaction.

I feel so exposed, shamefully so, but it does something to me. Something in my heart burns with newfound joy at being able to experience this. It might be wrong, but it feels so fucking divine.

Jasha lifts up my dress, and I feel the air move over my bare ass. I try to keep my legs from trembling as I lean further into the bed, taking most of the tension of my muscles in hopes that I might find a way to relax.

“Pretty and pink, just for me,” Jasha purrs.

God, if he keeps talking like that, I’m going to orgasm again without him even having to touch me.

I jump when his cock slaps against my ass without warning. It’s hot and thick, much bigger than I pictured it in my head, even though I should’ve known better. This man isn’t all bark and no bite. He really knows how to sink his teeth in, and he has the anatomy to back it up.

“There you go, pretty girl, just relax.” He places his hand on my lower back, pressing me softly into the edge of the bed. With his other hand, he grabs my left cheek and pulls it to the side.

At this point, I’m feeling so exposed that I want to die from embarrassment. I’ve never had a man look at me like this before, with the light on and my panties on the floor in another room. I don’t even know why I’m letting Jasha do it. He just... does it, and I don’t feel inclined to tell him not to.

His hand travels down quickly, finding the wetness between my legs and pushing two fingers into my hole. He wiggles them around, a deep hum reverberating through his chest.

I want his cock inside of me, but he wants to prepare me for it first.

When he does enter me, I instantly realize why. His girth is almost impossible to handle at first, stretching me far past what I’m used to. I grip the sheets, soaking them in sweat from my palms as he slowly eases himself in.

“There’s a good girl. Take it all,” he says, moving slowly, but never pausing as he sinks into me.

I breathe deeply, focusing my eyes on the blank wall ahead and trying to keep myself from being too loud as he buries his manhood inside of me. I moan, but I close my mouth to stop it.

No luck. Once he pulls halfway out and thrusts for the first time, I scream.

He chuckles, slowing down. “Too much for you?”

I refuse to give him that kind of satisfaction. I fear what it would do to his ego if I admitted that I he was so big that I simply couldn't have sex with him. He'd never stop bragging about it.

“I'm fine,” I say, but that's far from the truth.

Thankfully, as he continues to move again, pleasure replaces the overwhelming stretching sensation, and his cock slides inside of me more easily. My body adapts to him, but I'd be ruined for anyone else. Never again will I be able to take a man smaller than him.

It would just feel... inadequate.

Jasha's hands are warm on my skin as he grabs my waist and thrusts harder. With every movement of his powerful hips, he gains energy and aggression. Soon, he's fucking me so hard that reality begins to blend in with the colors dancing across my vision, and I'm hurled into a world that seems to walk a tightrope between pure bliss and regret.

I already know he's going to cum inside me. It's so wrong to do without a condom, but I don't want it anywhere but deep in my body.

Suddenly, he pulls out, and I anticipate a shower of warm cum across my back, but he doesn't release himself over me yet. Instead, he flips me over, pulling me closer to the edge of the bed and lifting my legs.

“I want to look into your eyes when I fill you up,” he says.

Something inside me falls apart, a barrier that didn't allow me to release myself to a stranger completely. It dissolves at his words, sending me into another mind-numbing orgasm as he pushes back inside of me.

His hands are all over me as I lose myself to the tremendous corporeal bliss. My throat tightens as his fingers squeeze it,

cutting off my breath and denying my brain oxygen until the room fades to grey.

I grab his hand, pulling his hand harder against my neck until I lose the strength to encourage such punishment, and my hands fall to either side of me. He lets go, slapping me in the face lightly.

Blood rushes to my head, filling every vein and vessel until my face is pulsating with a pleasant swell of heat. The air tastes like cold water in the middle of the night, and I suck it into my lungs like I've been born again.

My body aches with pleasure as Jasha leans back, pumping his hips and groaning deep in his chest. I watch his immaculate muscles move, the fibers twitching beneath his polished tan skin like every atom in his body is working together to breed me.

A sense of awe washes over me as his expression transforms into a twisted desperation at the edge of completion before he collapses on top of me, filling me with his seed. I hug him as he empties himself inside of me, his throbbing cock pushing deep, hoping to discover a place inside me that no other man has been able to touch.

I wrap my legs around his narrow waist, pressing him in, guiding his cock as deep as it will go. Our heartbeats unify, and for just under a minute, everything is right in the world.

And then Jasha pulls himself off of me, leaving me in a pool of cold sweat on my bed.

He's already fully dressed by the time I'm able to sit up.

"I hope you're not leaving already," I say, my heart sinking as he slides the end of his belt through the loops in his trousers.

"Can't stick around forever," he replies, "But call me if you're ever in Texas. I'll give you my number."

I assumed this would be a one and done type of deal, but getting his phone number gives me hope that we could be something more. It's a foolish thought, fueled only by the euphoric afterglow of incredible sex, but it makes me feel better about what we just did.

Sometimes, a lovely lie is better than the cold, hard truth.

“Here,” Jasha says, pulling a black card from his back pocket with nothing but a phone number on it. “I’m easier to reach by text.”

I don’t know whether to thank him or to be annoyed at him for leaving so soon, but I don’t have the chance to do anything before he disappears from the room. A moment later, I hear the front door close.

And I’m left naked and alone.



## **Jasha**

**T**he train screeches to a halt two meters away from the SUV parked sideways across the tracks, smoke billowing from the hot iron wheels into the winter air as they struggle to stop the 150-ton vehicle from hitting our roadblock. If they knew what was about to happen, they'd ram through it, but their ignorance will be their downfall.

We emerge from the tree line, all fifty of us prepared to take on an empty passenger train that should only have an engineer and a conductor inside. We'll find out in a moment.

“Don't shoot anyone unless you see a gun. It's unlikely that anyone on board knows about the cargo,” I command as the boarding begins.

We should be able to commandeer the train without any casualties, and I prefer a clean job. The F.B.I. has been all over my ass lately, and I'd like to keep them far away from this case.

I grip the cold metal railing hard as I board the train from the back. I hear voices inside already, panicked shouting from the conductor as his compartment is raided by my men. It's almost time to go. We can't wait out here for very long.

The moment everyone's on the train, I radio the driver of the SUV to take it off the tracks. We can't afford to lose any time. The train was already late, and every second that goes by is

another chance for the Italians to get a whiff of what we're doing and catch up with us.

The inside of the train isn't much warmer than the outside, but they wouldn't keep this thing heated without passengers. Only the conductor's car and the engineer's compartment all the way at the front of the train will be warm.

I pull my wool coat tighter as I walk back past a cluster of my men to the conductor. He's already being held at gunpoint by six different men, and one is firmly holding the back of his shirt.

"Who's on this train?" I demand, pulling a pistol with an extended magazine out of my coat and pointing it at him. "Five seconds to answer or I'm blowing your brains out."

That usually gets them to start stuttering and start talking. I've never been the patient type, and I certainly can't afford to be now.

"J-just me," the man says, "And... and a security guard. And also, the engineer."

I lower my gun. "Well, consider yourself lucky. You're the only one who gets to leave the train while it's still stopped," I say, nodding at my man to let him go. "Now get off this train before I put a bullet between your eyes."

He doesn't have to be asked twice. He hurries out of the compartment and makes a run for the exit. I watch from the window as he jumps off the train and nearly breaks his legs in the process as he lands on the tracks.

"Could've just climbed off," I mutter, turning away. "Alright," I say, much louder now to address my men. "Let's take out that guard. I only need a couple of you. The rest can stay behind and make sure the conductor doesn't try to sneak back on board and play the hero."

I grab a few of my most capable men, ones who've been loyal to the Antonov Family for a long time, and I take them with me toward the front of the train. I don't know where the guard is, but I figure he's more likely to be closer to the front of the train with the engineer.

As we breach the third compartment, the train shudders to a start, rolling slowly at first but picking up speed quickly.

Business as usual. They don't even know they've been boarded.

I lead the way, taking a brisk walk through the remainder of the compartments until I see a dark shape through the iced-over door leading to the compartment just before the engineer's room.

I hold my hand up as I stop, and my men open up behind me in V-shaped formation to prevent crossfire. "I will deal with this," I say, flicking off my pistol's safety switch. I push the button to open the doors, and I'm met with the bewildered expression of the guard.

I shoot twice, hitting him both times in the chest before he has the chance to reach for his gun. I doubt he's ever had to use it, but now, he never will.

The light leaves his eyes as I step over him, making my way toward the engineer's room. They'll have heard the noise by now, and maybe they will come out to check what's happening. It's better to take them by surprise than to allow them to process what's going on and have time to prepare.

As I reach for the handle to the engineer's room, the door opens, and I'm met with a wide-eyed woman in a navy-blue pencil skirt and white blouse.

I lower my gun, equally taken aback as she is, but for an obviously different reason. "Lola," I breathe.

"I see you remember my name," she says, looking past me down the hallway. "Do you mind telling me what the fuck is going on? And why you have a gun?"

"I'm commandeering the train," I reply, holding up my gun and grinning.

"Oh, good," she replies sarcastically, "I thought you might've finally come back to kill me. I'm glad that's not the case."

I roll my eyes. "You're not that special, darling."

“But you did remember my name, so that must count for something.”

“Not in the least, and I don’t have time to cater to your narcissism,” I snap, regaining my frigid composure. “I’ve already kicked your goofy little conductor off the train, and the guard is lying in a pool of his own blood in the hallway, so you’re the last one on the train to take care of.”

Her eyes widen, and she attempts to slap the door shut. My foot doesn’t allow that to happen.

“Don’t make this harder than it has to be,” I growl.

“Get the fuck away from me,” she screams, kicking at me as I force my way into her room.

I knock her feet away with my gun. “Don’t make me use this.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she squeals, but she doesn’t look terribly confident. I’m sure she thinks I’m a psycho, and she’d be correct in that assumption.

But I’m not going to shoot a woman for no reason, especially not one as pretty as Lola.

I tuck my pistol into my shoulder holster and reach for the cable ties I kept in case we had to take prisoners. The kicking a screaming is a dead giveaway of someone who isn’t going to go down without a fight, and I really don’t need her giving me a black eye while I’m trying to work. My brother Nikolai would never stop laughing at me if that happened.

“Come here and stop fighting me,” I say, grabbing at Lola as she steadies herself against the back of a chair. “You’re not going to be able to overpower me.”

“Stop it, you fucking freak!” She throws her feet out again, flailing like a fish out of water.

I grab her ankles and pull them together, tearing her off the back of the seat and sliding her across the textured metal floor toward me. She continues to squirm, screaming so loud and high-pitched that my ears hurt.

A phone falls out of the waistband of her skirt, and I snatch it up before she can retrieve it. “I’ll be taking that,” I say,

tucking it into my pocket.

I slap three cable ties across her ankles, pulling them together until the clicking stops and she can't move them apart. "Good, now the hands."

"Stop it!"

"Shut the fuck up," I grumble, bending over her and grabbing her arms. I shake her a bit to drive my point in. "I'm not who you think I am. Whatever happened between us before is in the past. I'm the bad guy now. Live with it."

She goes silent as I bind her wrists together with three more plastic ties.

"That's better," I say, helping her up. "Now, sit in your seat and steer us to Texas. And don't make me tell you twice."

"Texas?" she asks with a small voice.

"I said I was commandeering this train, so yes, we're going to Texas. Is there a problem?"

She shakes her head. "No, it's just... far."

"A couple of days. I'm assuming you have enough fuel for that," I reply, looking at the mess of controls by the chair. "I don't know what any of this means."

I catch a smirk dancing across her lips. "We might not have enough fuel. If we do, it's *barely* enough. I guess you need me to drive this hunk of metal, though, and I'm not sure if I feel like doing that after you admitted to murdering someone. That would make me your accomplice."

I laugh. "You're in no position to negotiate with me, sugartits."

She wrinkles her nose. "Don't ever call me that again."

"I remember them being sweet."

She scoffs. "Are you for real? Like, you're going to murder someone and try to steal a train, and then you're going to turn around and start making jokes about my tits? Who even are you?"

“Jasha,” I reply.

She looks like she wants to kill me. “I know that already.”

“Jasha Antonov, leader of the Antonov Bratva for the past...” I drum my fingers across my chin. “Six years, I believe. My brother, Nikolai, is semi-retired. Wife and kids. You know the drill.”

“I didn’t understand half of what you just said,” she replies. “Maybe it’s the accent.”

I force her down into her seat, squeezing her shoulder. “Don’t try to be funny with me. Just do what I say.”

“At risk of pissing you off further...” She holds up her bound hands. “I can’t steer the train like this.”

“Yes, you can,” I say, even though I’m not so sure. “Just get us to Texas.”

She glares at me for a moment, but then she turns and starts flicking switches and adjusting a large handle next to the seat. “I think we need to take the route through Little Rock, which is going to be... at least twenty-four hours. I mean, we can’t just blast through all the stops without letting anyone else go.”

“Use alternate routes,” I demand. “There must be something that doesn’t go through a major city.”

“Sure, but then we’re really cutting it close with fuel.”

“Put it in eco mode or something.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “You must not know much about trains.”

“And I don’t care to learn. That’s your job. Either get us to Texas or I’m going to toss you out onto the tracks.”

She looks up at me, shaking her head. “Jasha, I expected better from you, but after what you did to me, I can’t say I’m surprised anymore.”

“What are you talking about?” I can feel anger starting to rise in my chest, but I’d prefer to keep things as cordial as possible between us, especially if I have to deal with her for the entire way to Texas.

“I tried to call you. You know, after we...”

“Had sex?” I say bluntly.

“Right,” she says, her expression turning down. “Now, I’m kind of glad you never answered my calls.”

“Don’t play innocent. You knew what you were doing, too. It was just a little fun, and that was all,” I reply as the train tracks rumble beneath us. “And I did you a favor. There’s no way you would’ve been blowing up my phone if you knew I was a Bratva boss.”

“I still don’t know what that means,” she says, shaking her head.

“Seriously?”

“I’m just being honest.”

I sigh. “Bratva. It means the Russian Mafia. Do you understand now?”

“Okay, I figured it had something to do with crime,” she says, and then she places her hand on her belly. “Just don’t hurt me, okay? Don’t hurt... us.”

I’m struck by a sudden realization, like the electric crackle of adrenaline when you fall and realize you’re about to hit the ground harder than you had anticipated. It’s a sickening feeling, and it twists my stomach into a knot.

I was going to throw this bitch off the train the moment I confirmed we were on route to Texas, but if she’s pregnant, I can’t bring myself to hurt her and risk hurting her baby.

This changes everything.

I look at her, at her apologetic face as she rubs her belly, and the second realization hits me much harder than the first.

**Lola**

**J**asha looks like he's been struck by lightning, and I'd almost find it funny if my life and the life of our child weren't in his hands. "You're not..." he begins, but he's unable to finish his sentence.

"I am, and I'm certain that it's yours," I say. "But like I said, it's probably better that you never answered my calls, considering the kind of man you turned out to be."

Offending his character snaps him out of his stupefied stance real quick. "You know what?" he asks, waving his finger at me. "You never told me you were on birth control. I can't be held responsible for your mistakes. I bet you wanted to get knocked up, just so you'd have someone rich to collect child support payments from."

"Oh, grow up," I groan, twisting myself around in my chair so that I can better stare him down. "It takes two to make a baby. It's your fault just as much as mine."

He shrugs. "And what? You have no proof that it's my baby, or even that you're pregnant. For all I know, you're making this up so that I don't kill you."

"What's it like seeing the world through such a demented mind? Not everyone is as fucked up as you are. In fact, I'm willing to bet *most* people aren't," I reply, swinging my hands around wildly as I talk. I'm overcome with anger toward him,



but I know it won't help me. The only thing I can do is pray he'll believe me and not throw me off the train.

Or *shoot* me. He mentioned he had already shot the guard.

God, I can't believe I fucked such a lunatic!

*Was that why the sex was so good?*

"You're clearly upset, and that's normal for a person in your position," he says, returning to a rather annoying level of calmness. "And since I'm not really the monster you make me out to be, I'm not going to kill you. I will wait until we're in Texas..."

My heart leaps into my throat.

"And then you may go free," he continues.

"Just like that?" I ask, hardly believing he could be telling the truth.

He waves his hand in the air like it's nothing. "Just like that. I'm not in the business of taking hostages. Either I kill them, or I let them go, and you're not really the type I'd kill."

"Such a gentleman," I reply sarcastically.

"Don't test me. I can still make you suffer," he warns, leaning in squeezing my shoulder again. His hand is warm, and it's comforting despite him being the simultaneous source of my fear.

"I wouldn't test you," I say, but that's a lie. I hold up my hands immediately after. "These cable ties are too tight. Can you take them off?"

"What did I just tell you?"

"I'm not testing you. If you cut off my circulation for twenty-four hours straight, my hands are going to fall off."

He sighs, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a silver blade. He cuts through the plastic easily, then tucks the blade back into his pocket. "Anything else I can do for you, princess?"

I look down at my feet. "Well, I can't really walk like this."

“I don’t want you running,” he snaps.

I look out the window at the cold, foggy air rushing past the train. Where would I run? I’ve already made it clear that I don’t want to be pushed off the train. That would put the baby and me in danger.

Jasha seems to realize that, too, after a moment, and pulls his blade out again, cutting the cable ties that bind my feet together. I’m tempted to spin around in my chair and swing one of my feet into his family jewels, but we’re not going to survive a full twenty-four hours together if I start fighting him again.

“Thanks,” I mutter, stretching my legs like I’ve been bound for days. “That’s better.”

He steps back, motioning for me to get up from the chair. “I don’t need you here at the controls. I’ll be keeping an eye on you in one of the cabins.”

“That’s not very safe,” I say as I climb out of my seat.

“I don’t care.”

I look back at the controls as I leave the room with him and wonder if he’s going to kill me when he realizes I set our route to go further north instead of south toward Texas. It’s too late to fix it now, but the prickle of regret has already begun to irritate the back of my neck.

As I walk out into the narrow hallway of the train with Jasha, I’m surprised to see nearly a dozen men standing idle there, all dressed in solid black and holding rifles. And here I was, thinking Jasha was acting on his own. As it turns out, he’s not the only lunatic I have to deal with.

“Never mind them,” Jasha says, ushering me into a first-class cabin. “They’re just here to make sure things go smoothly.”

“Probably not enough to take on the police,” I reply.

He slides the cabin door shut and looks at me with those vibrant green eyes of his, sending a chill through me in an already frigid room. “It’s not the police we have to worry about. It’s the Italians.”

“This has to be a joke.”

“Sit down,” he orders, placing his hand on my shoulder and pushing me down into my seat. He sits across from me, folding one leg over the other and leaning forward. “This isn’t a joke. The Italians are the ones who have you driving an empty passenger train across the country to begin with.”

“More mafia business?”

“Something of the sort, but they’re not as clever as the Bratva. They think I wouldn’t find out about this little shipment, but I have eyes and ears everywhere. Nothing gets past me.”

“But what’s so special about this train?” I ask, still not understanding why he’s so desperate to take it from his Italian opposition.

“It’s not the train itself, but what’s on board,” he says, his eyes flickering over my breasts.

Another chill moves through me, settling in my lower belly. I put my hand there, trying to make it go away so that I can think straight. I can’t allow Jasha to trick me into trusting him again.

Jasha pulls a cigar from the inner pocket of his coat and follows it up with a silver lighter. “My brother’s lighter,” he says, flicking it open and holding it up to the end of his cigar. “A bit of a family heirloom, like what I’m after on the train.”

He puffs smoke into the cabin, causing me to cough. The smoke also gets in my eyes, and I wave it away. “This isn’t good for the baby.”

“Ah, you’re right,” he says, and I think he’s about to put out the cigar, but he stands up and slides the window open, allowing the freezing air to rush into the cabin and wrap around my bones.

I wrap my hands around myself. “Jesus, that’s too cold. Can you close it?”

He jerks his cigar out from his mouth and crumples it in his hand, throwing it out the window and sliding it shut with a loud bang. “You’re hard to please, but I don’t recall you being

that way when I first met you,” he says, his anger quickly overshadowed by his incessant need to tease me.

“Well, I’m pregnant now,” I reply as he sits back down.

“Would that change anything?” he asks, leaning forward and clasping his hands together.

I pretend not to know what he’s talking about. “Apparently, I’m pickier.”

“That’s not what I was referring to,” he replies, grinning in that crooked way he did when we first met. Does he really think I’m going to fuck him again after everything that’s happened?

Not in this lifetime.

And probably not in the next, either.

“Maybe you’re just not good at taking hints,” I say, pulling myself as far back into my seat as I can go. The fabric is scratchy, even through my blouse, but I’m starting to shiver from how cold it is in here. Any warmth is better than nothing.

“Cold?” Jasha asks.

I nod.

“Deal with it,” he replies, standing up again. “I have to brief my team on what’s happening next. They’re not the most patient bunch, and to be honest, neither am I.”

I scoff as he leaves me alone in the cabin, sliding the door shut with the same unnecessary force that he used to close the window. I have half a mind to run back to the control room and lock myself inside, but I know that he’d eventually get in. I can’t run from him, much less all the men he’s brought with him.

But I do have to deal with this cold. Jasha might be able to handle it with his wool jacket and muscular build, but I’m not made for the cold. I had the heat cranked up to eleven in the control room, and now I’m freezing my tits off because he opened the window.

The moment I know he's far enough down the hallway not to see me, I get up and start pacing. It's the only thing that will keep me warm, aside from cuddling up to him, but I'd rather freeze than do that. He'd get too much satisfaction out of it, and he's gotten enough of that from me already.

I just hope he feels guilty for what he's done. Under that ruthless exterior, there must be a heart that's hurting because of what he's done. And it is there. I know it is, because he's spared me and the baby. Maybe it's only because he's the father, but it does prove he has a soul.

Asshole or not, maybe I can get to him. I really only have twenty-four hours, if that, but I'll be damned if I don't give it my best shot.

## Jasha

**O**n the outside, I'm calm and collected like I always am, directing my men to take positions at the front, middle, and rear of the train to watch for trouble.

On the inside, though, my entire identity is falling to pieces like snowflakes fluttering down from the sky.

I *can't* be a father. For one, I'm certain I'd be a terrible one. I don't even know how to hold a baby. When Nikolai had one with his wife, I almost dropped her the first time I held her, and I was too terrified to touch her again until she got old enough to not to flop around in my arms like a five-pound hunk of rubber.

Secondly, I'm not the family guy. Nikolai is the one with the family, and I've taken charge of our criminal operations. I can't imagine what he'd say if I came back home and admitted I got a woman pregnant, much less one I barely know.

No, it's too crazy. She must be lying, and she'll pay the price for doing so. You don't cross the Bratva and walk away without punishment.

I pause in the hallway on the way back to her cabin.

I should punish her right now, in fact. It doesn't have to be anything harmful, just something that would put her in her place and show her who is in charge.

A little spanking, perhaps.

I know I'm just thinking with my dick, but I honestly don't care. Just the thought of laying my hand across her bare ass is enough to encourage me to go through with it. It's not like she wouldn't secretly enjoy it. She loved it when I was rough the first time we had sex.

"Jasha, I'm fucking freezing my ass off," she says the moment I roll open the cabin door.

"I have just the thing," I reply with a smile. "Pull your skirt up and I'll show you."

She backs up into the corner and folds her arms over her chest. "Fuck you."

"Well, I was going to suggest a spanking, but that's also a good idea."

Lola glares at me, her pretty blue eyes sparked with flaming hot anger. She's sexy when she's all flustered like this.

"Go ahead," I say, pointing at her skirt. "Lift it up."

"You're serious?" she asks, laughing a little as her hands drop to her thighs.

I nod. "You'll be nice and warm. I promise."

I'm expected more pushback, but to my surprise, she lifts up her skirt and spins around. She has a black lace thong on, but I would've been just as happy with the apple panties I saw last time. There's something about her embarrassed cuteness that really sent me into overdrive.

"A bit bigger this time. I like it," I say, examining her ass.

"I'm not fat," she says with a scoff.

"Curvy. Normal when you're pregnant."

"Just shut up and get this over with," she mutters, "And give me your coat after you're done so I can *actually* get warm."

I place my hand on her ass, feeling the coldness of her skin. She's not lying about freezing her ass off. It's concerning how cold she is.

Thankfully, I'm about to change that.

I spank her quickly the first time, making sure that she doesn't anticipate it so that I can hear the way she yelps. It's not painful, I know that, but the surprise is enough to stir up some emotions.

I spank her again, aiming lower this time, and her yelp turns into something more akin to a moan.

"You can't hide how much you like this," I say, spanking her again.

She doesn't say a word, but she doesn't have to. The way she's sticking her ass out and allowing me to have my way with her says everything. She's dying for more, but I'm not going to give it to her.

That would be too easy.

"Put your skirt down and stop acting like a whore," I say, yanking down the stiff fabric of her uniform. "It's more embarrassing than the apple panties were."

She spins around, tugging her skirt back into place. Her cheeks are burning so red that I wouldn't be surprised if she asked to open a window instead of taking my coat. "I thought you had forgotten about that."

"I haven't forgotten a thing," I reply, closing the distance between us with a long step. "I remember everything. Ever touch, every kiss... every orgasm. You had several."

"Maybe one," she replies, her voice failing halfway.

"Your memory must be failing you. Perhaps you need a little reminder." I bring my finger up to her chin and tilting her head so that she's looking up at me. Her eyes are like jewels, sparking with so much fury and lust that I'm tempted to risk everything and make sure she's pregnant with my baby this time around.

"I think the spanking was enough," Lola whispers.

"For now."



She shivers, and though it's probably from my words, I still slip out of my coat and hand it to her. She wraps it around her shoulders, pulling it across her chest and hiding her hard nipples. Even so, they're burnt into my mind.

"Still cold," she grumbles as she sits back down.

I shrug. "I've done all I can. If I start cranking up the heat, we're going to lose fuel, and then we have much bigger problems on our hands."

There's a slight shift in her expression, but maybe I'm just imagining it. Smoke still lingers in the air from when I lit my cigar, slightly obscuring her face from across the cabin. "What kind of problems?" she asks.

"Well, the Italians, as I mentioned earlier," I say, instinctively fishing around in my pocket for a cigar and finding nothing. I sit down, trying to focus on something other than smoking. Nikolai quit when he had a baby, but I don't see how I would. It's a habit that's been engrained since I was twelve years old, stealing cigarettes from the neighbor's house.

"Are these Italians in the room with us now?" Lola asks, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"You joke, but this is probably one thing I wouldn't make jokes about. You piss off the Italians, as I have done by commandeering this train, and you tend to end up dead."

"Oh, lovely," she chirps. "Then I guess I don't have to deal with you much longer."

"It'll be you too, and they won't care that you're pregnant. Not in the least," I reply, feeling an odd but intense heat in my chest at the idea of anyone hurting Lola. I might hate her, but she's the mother of my child, and nobody is going to touch her as long as I'm around to protect her.

"You fucked up," she says, putting her hand over her belly. "I don't want anything to do with this. I think you should just let me off the train, and I'll take the risk of walking to the nearest town from wherever we are."

"I'm not stopping this train. I already told you that," I snap. "You're here with me whether you like it or not, which means

my problems are yours, too.”

She crosses her arms, pulling the coat even tighter around her curvy body. I love how it looks on her. She should be wearing my clothes all the time... or nothing at all.

“You never answered my question before, by the way,” she says, perking up again. “What’s so special about this train? Why take it from the Italians?”

“One word — money,” I reply, refusing to reveal the real reason I’m taking control of this train.

Lola pouts her lips as she falls into a moment of quiet thoughtfulness. “Sure,” she says slowly, as though it’s not quite adding up in her head. “A train might be a few million dollars, but how are you going to sell the thing? And to who? I feel like more people would be stealing trains if they made so much money from them.”

“Something else is on this train.”

“Me?”

“You really think this is about you? It’s a coincidence that you ended up being an engineer on the train I boarded. Try not to be so conceited.”

She scoffs. “Projection, much? You’re the one speaking in riddles so that I can’t understand what you’re after. As far as I know, I’m the only thing of value to you on this train.”

“Not quite,” I reply, pursing my lips. “But that’s for me to know, and you to be blissfully ignorant about. Just trust me when I say that this train is worth more than a couple million. It’s priceless.”

“Whatever,” she mumbles, but I know she’s interested, even as she turns away and stares out the window at the quickly darkening landscape.

Her silence is a relief after so many questions, and I allow myself to relax in the seat across from her as she gives me the cold shoulder. If she ignores me the entire way to Texas, I won’t be mad at all. It’s easier to think when she isn’t running her mouth.

But as much as I'd enjoy sitting in silence and allowing my thoughts to drift to the prize at the end of this frozen railroad, I can't think about anything but the way Lola's body felt beneath mine the first time we were together.

And the consequences of that action.

So severe, and yet...

I'm not sure I wouldn't do it again even knowing the result.

And that scares me.

**Lola**

**T**ension coils in my chest upon the realization that steering us off course is potentially going to get everyone on this train killed. I don't know who the Italians are, but if they're anything like Jasha and his goons, then I'm in trouble.

Serious trouble.

I glance over at Jasha, torn between admitting what I did and keeping it a secret. He's going to find out that we're off course eventually, and it's going to piss him off, but if he finds out now, I might be able to twist it in my favor.

Like it was an accident. A simple mistake.

Anyone who knows anything about trains would know that something so severe couldn't possibly be a mistake, but Jasha already admitted that he knew nothing. If I sound convincing, he'll have no choice but to believe me.

But how would I bring it up?

*Oh, hey, that tree over there doesn't look familiar. Maybe we've taken a wrong turn?*

That sounds stupid because it is stupid. I have to make it more convincing, but how?

A thick cluster of trees rushes past the window, and the sky darkens into a royal purple hue. With night fast approaching, it's going to be difficult to put this train on a different route without disrupting the flow of overnight passenger trains that run in this same direction.

I should tell him, but that's not going to be easy. I don't want him blowing up on me. I still don't know what he's capable of. He could easily overpower me, and I have no way of defending myself if things turn sour.

Then again, if he really wanted to harm me, he would've done it already. I'm carrying his baby, and I'm sure that he feels *something* because of that, even if he tries to hide it.

I look at Jasha again, studying his attractive features and wondering how a man so handsome can be so evil. If he would've chosen a nobler path, maybe a lawyer or a doctor, I would've fallen for him so quickly that he'd have to scrape my trembling body off the pavement.

But he's not like that. He's been twisted by evil forces, and that's made him into the man he is today. I knew it before, when I met him at the orchard, but I was in denial because I was enjoying the feeling of letting go and indulging in a cheap thrill.

Back then, I wanted his hands all over me, and I didn't care about the consequences. It was stupid, of course, but I let it happen because I was stressed out and lonely.

I do wonder what would've happened if we hadn't had sex. I wouldn't be pregnant, so would he have kicked me off the train when he took over? Or would he have killed me?

I'd like to imagine he wouldn't be so cruel, but nothing is guaranteed after I learned he'd already killed a man. I'm sure he's killed many more, so I'm not safe. The only thing keeping me from befalling a similar fate is the baby in my belly.

*His* baby, the one he barely acknowledges.

I place my hand on my belly, feeling the warmth my pregnancy exudes. I remember when I first found out, the

weird feelings I'd have in the morning, the hunger and the random urges to use the bathroom.

I thought I was sick, so I went to the doctor, only to be told that it wasn't a virus that had overtaken my organism, but something much more draining and dangerous — a baby.

I remember laughing when I heard the news, thinking it was some kind of joke, but when the doctor smiled and showed me the tests, I realized that it wasn't a joke. It was real, and I was pregnant with Jasha's baby.

I knew instantly that it belonged to him. I hadn't been with anyone else since that fateful night, and I always used condoms in the past. One chance encounter had changed everything for me, and it took me several weeks to come to terms with the pregnancy and decide what I was going to do.

For me, abortion was out of the question. Life like this was a blessing, and I wanted to savor this gift even though it came in the shape, color, and size of a curse. I had created life, and I wasn't about to deny my baby its fair chance in this world.

So, I continued my job, tucking money away into a savings account and living on as little as possible as I prepared to take on the challenge of being a single mother. I tried to get in touch with Jasha, but every phone call was a failure, and there was no way for me to locate him otherwise.

No social media, no address... nothing.

So, I gave up.

But just as I did, he came back into my life in a way I never expected, and now he's sitting across from me, staring at the wall and pretending I don't even exist.

Part of me hates him. It's a large part, but it's not the entirety of my feelings. There's another part, a very small one, that believes that Jasha could rise up to the role of fatherhood and we could reconcile the differences between us.

It's so small, almost microscopic, but it's real and it's there, and it's the only hope that I have. Everything else leads to misery.

If Jasha is ever to turn around and give this a chance, I'm going to have to be the bigger person and give him a chance first. I'm going to have to trust him, and that means doing what's right for both of us, even if it's difficult.

I have to tell him that we're going in the wrong direction.

My stomach drops as I come to this realization. The dread is strong enough to where I could probably talk myself out of doing it, but it wouldn't help us. Being stranded somewhere without fuel won't save us, and what's more, it will make it so that Jasha never wants anything to do with me again.

And that's only if we survive.

I sigh, looking at my lap and trying to muster the strength to speak up. There's no easy way to say it, so I might as well just come clean.

But just as I open my mouth, ready to admit the truth, Jasha's phone buzzes, and he jumps out of his seat. "I have to answer this," he mumbles, making a quick exit from the cabin.

And my chance to turn things around and save the day is lost, like it was never there to begin with.

**Jasha**

I answer the phone, pressing it to my ear so hard that I can feel Nikolai's voice rattling around inside my head. "I'm on my way."

"Good," Nikolai replies, letting out a sigh. "I was starting to get worried. You were supposed to call me."

"I ran into some unexpected company," I reply, looking over my shoulder at the cabin that currently contains my worst nightmare. If only she would've been on the pill when we met, none of this would've happened.

But she was right, too. I should've worn a condom.

"What company?" Nikolai asks, his voice growing stern. "Jasha, if you start killing people over these jewels, you're going to attract a world of trouble that you're not prepared to deal with."

"Relax, I only killed one person," I reply, as though that's an achievement. I promised Nikolai I wouldn't kill anyone, but he knows me. There's no way he actually expected me to do this that cleanly.

Nikolai sighs again, this time out of obvious annoyance instead of relief. "Just tell me it wasn't the engineer. You need him to steer the train to Texas since you refused to learn how to drive a train before you decided to steal one."



“You know why I did this, and why I couldn’t wait. And no, I didn’t kill the engineer. *She* is alive and well. I had to kill the guard, and that’s all. The conductor is walking the tracks where we dropped him off an hour ago.”

“Fair enough. What are we doing with this engineer when you get to Texas? It would’ve been better if you found someone who knew how to drive a train and brought them with you. Now we have to kill her, and –”

“We’re not killing Lola,” I blurt much louder than I intend. I pull my shoulders up to my ears and move further away from Lola’s cabin.

“So, this engineer... she has a name?”

“Of course, she has a name,” I whisper frantically. “She has a face too, and a body.”

“What kind of body?”

“Literally perfect. Curvy, pale, acts like a virgin but fucks like a whore.”

“TMI, man,” he replies with a slight smile in his voice.

“You asked.”

“I didn’t ask for that level of detail, and I’m not sure I want to know about what you’ve been doing for the past hour when you were supposed to be calling me,” he replies, returning to that dry tone he uses when he wants to get back to business.

But I’m not quite ready to. Lola has a hold on me whether I want her to or not, and I need to at least introduce the idea that she’s here to stay for the foreseeable future to Nikolai. He doesn’t have to know about the baby, but I do want him to know that we have a past.

“Okay, so there’s something else I need to add,” I begin, looking out the window. It’s very dark now, and I can’t see anything but the frost on the glass. “I was screwing around with Lola when I got on the train. That actually happened a few months ago. Small world.”

“Or not. How do you know she’s not with the Italians? She’s driving their train, after all.”

“Not possible,” I say, though it does create a spark of suspicion in me. I’ll need to question her more thoroughly when I get off this call.

“Not possible? It’s *very* possible, Jasha,” Nikolai warns. “Don’t mess around with her. Keep her contained on the train if you’re not sure, but if she’s with the Italians, you know what you need to do.”

“Hey, I’ve got this covered. Who’s the boss now?”

“You are. I’m just making sure you don’t get yourself killed. I know how reckless you can be.”

I laugh. “Yeah, says the guy who decided to take on the entire Mexican Cartel over some woman ten years ago.”

“That woman you’re referring to is my wife and the mother of my child,” he growls, “So watch your mouth.”

He’s always so defensive over that woman, and it’s the reason he resigned as the head of the Bratva. I took his place, but I’m terrified I’m going to fall into the same trap as he did.

A wife and kids?

Not in this lifetime.

Or perhaps much sooner than I think...

“I’m not trying to piss you off,” I say, switching my phone to the other ear. “I’m just telling you that I have this under control. You can leave the woman to me.”

“Gladly.”

I roll my eyes.

“Also, let me know where you are. If you didn’t stop the train for too long, you should be en route to Missouri, maybe two-hundred or so miles from the border.”

“We’re moving pretty fast. Probably closer to a hundred,” I say, pulling my phone away from my ear and putting it on speaker. I open my map application and wait for it to update with our current location. “I’m checking now. Give me a second.”

“One,” Nikolai counts.

I shake my phone as the location updates far from where it should be. “Come on... What’s this?”

“What?”

“It’s showing me the wrong location. I think I have a bad signal,” I say, closing the application and reopening it. “Still wrong.”

“I can hear you fine. I don’t think it’s a problem with the signal.”

My stomach sinks as I witness the little dot on the map move further east. Either the GPS on my phone has suddenly stopped working, or...

We’re going the wrong way.

“You know what? I’ll call you back in a second. I just need to check something,” I say, ending the phone call before Nikolai suggests that I’ve screwed something up. If anyone screwed anything up, it was Lola.

Dammit, I can’t trust that girl with anything. It’s like her sole purpose in life is to ruin mine.

I slide the door to the cabin open so hard that it bounces off the frame and nearly hits me as I step inside. I use my foot to close it, glaring at Lola as she shrinks into the corner by the window.

“You know what you’ve done,” I growl.

“I... I’m not sure what you’re –”

“Don’t play stupid with me! You took us in the wrong direction on purpose.” I tug at my collar as heat rises up my neck. I don’t like being made a fool of, especially not by a woman who thinks she’s untouchable because she’s supposedly carrying my baby.

And if that turns out to be false, I intend to give her hell.

“Maybe by accident,” Lola squeaks, trying to disappear into her seat. “I was nervous when I was setting the course, so it’s possible that I did something wrong.”

“You’re going to fix it,” I say, grabbing her wrist and pulling her to her feet. “Right now, and then you’re going to answer some questions.”

“I can fix it. No problem. I can fix it,” she says hurriedly as I pull her out of the cabin.

“You’re going to do more than just fix it,” I reply, though I’m not really sure what else would help. If we’ve already strayed too far off course, no amount of messing with our route is going to replenish the fuel we’ve wasted.

But maybe that’s what Lola wants, to be found by the Italians so that she can dutifully turn me over to them.

I don’t want it to be true, but if she’s with the Italians, it would absolve me of the responsibility of fatherhood, something I’m not prepared for. How can I raise a child in such a wicked world? I’m not sure how Nikolai manages it, but then again, his wife doesn’t try to get him killed by rival mafia groups like Lola does.

I yank the door open to the control room, placing Lola in front of the mess of switches and levers so that she can fix the mess she’s put us in. “Get us to Texas. I’ll be watching my GPS very closely from now on.”

Silently, she slides into her seat and starts working the controls, pausing a few times, but ultimately coming up with something she believes will work. “We’ll go through the old tracks,” she says, turning in her seat to look at me. “We can roll it downhill most of the way, but we’ll have to slow down at the bend, or we risk flying right off the tracks. From there, we should be able to cut back into the route to Texas without running into anyone.”

“Like the Italians?” I ask, putting my hand on the back of her chair and squeezing it hard. “You’re with them, aren’t you?”

“I have no clue what you’re talking about,” she replies, her eyes sparkling with innocence.

I grit my teeth. “Tell the truth.”

“I am,” she replies defensively, pulling her head back. “I haven’t lied to you at all.”

“You did when you steered us the wrong way,” I retort.

“Yes, but I was honest about the baby.”

“We’ll see...”

“I have proof,” she says, her eyes suddenly lighting up. She jumps up from her seat. “It’s on my phone. I hope you still have it.”

I pull it out of my back pocket and dangle it in front of her. “This little thing?”

She grabs at it, but I pull it away. “No, no, sugartits. You’re not fooling me twice.”

“You can open it yourself. The code is 1-2-3-4,” she says, standing on her toes.

“Not very secure,” I reply, though I admit my phone’s password isn’t much better: All fours, my lucky number.

“Just open the phone and look at my pictures from a month ago. I took a picture of my pregnancy test. Go ahead. Look.”

Looking through her phone would quickly reveal if anything she’s told me over the past hour and half has been true, so I feel compelled to go along with her idea. On the other hand, proving without a doubt that she’s pregnant would mean that there’s at least a chance that the baby is mine, and I’m not sure I’m prepared to know the truth yet.

“Alright,” I say, putting the phone back into my pocket. “Let’s go back to the cabin and we’ll see if you’re telling the truth.”

She shrinks back, pulling the coat I gave her tightly around her body. “Do we have to? It’s warmer in here.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want you messing with the controls if you’re caught in a lie again.”

“I’m not going to do that. I promise,” she insists.

Alarms have been going off in my head ever since I laid eyes on this woman again, and yet I find myself bending to her will. If it were anyone else, I’d never dream of complying with their requests.

But Lola's discomfort might as well be my own. Seeing her cold and miserable gives me no pleasure, and if she does end up being the mother of my child, I'm bound by the laws of honor to treat her well.

Even if she makes me want to rip my hair out.

**Lola**

**J**asha pretends to look doubtful as he punches the code into my phone, but I know he believes me. He just doesn't want to face the reality of being a father. He's clearly not prepared for it. A life of violence and meaningless sex doesn't typically prepare a man to raise children.

Even still, I can picture his strong arms holding our baby, and how small it would look against his commanding figure. If it's possible to get baby fever when you're already pregnant, I have it by just thinking about Jasha holding our baby.

It's not about him. That's what I tell myself. It's just hormones. I don't want him to be part of my baby's life.

But what if he wanted to?

Could I deny my baby a father because of his occupation? That hardly seems fair, but then again, what Jasha's doing isn't fair either, picking through my phone as though I'm the criminal. He should be ashamed of himself, but I know he's incapable of such feelings.

I watch his vivid green eyes flicker back and forth from the screen to me as he swipes through my photos.

Up until this point, I imagined Jasha as an impenetrable fortress, emotions neatly tucked away behind the cold cement walls surround his heart. But as he scrolls through my phone,

there's a flicker of something – doubt, maybe even vulnerability – on his face.

My eyes remain fixed on him as he slows his scroll, and then stops entirely. His face is unreadable, and then his pupils double in size. He turns the phone to me, showing the positive pregnancy test. “This is it, right?”

I nod. “And it's yours. I haven't been with anyone else.”

“Good,” he says to my surprise. “I mean, good that you haven't been with anyone else. I don't think you should be sleeping around. Not attractive.”

I let out a bitter laugh. I thought for a second that he was happy to be father. “You're a real piece of work, Jasha. I hope you know that.”

He shrugs, continuing to scroll through my phone. “Huh, for someone who doesn't sleep around, you sure have a lot of pictures of your tits on here. Who are you sending these to?” He turns the phone to me, showing a picture I took months before I even met him, where I'm standing in front of the mirror in just a pair of panties.

I'm not sure what would be worse – a lie to make him jealous, or the truth that will allow him to laugh at me again.

I pick the jealous lie. I'm not interested in being ridiculed for taking progress pictures of my attempted weight loss. It didn't work, anyway. I feel like I'm destined to be a little soft around the edges.

“Hmm,” I say, leaning forward and pretending to study the picture. “I don't remember who I sent that one to. It wasn't you.”

He jerks the phone back to him so hard that it nearly flies out of his grip. “Who was it? Someone you were with before? Maybe it's his baby.”

“Hey, maybe you're right,” I reply in an airy sort of voice, like I couldn't care less whose baby I'm carrying.

Jasha's face turns the color of a beetroot, and he waves the phone around in his hand like he's trying to shake my



questionable past out of it. “No, you had sex with me, and then a couple months later, you’re pregnant. My sperm would obliterate any man’s feeble attempt to impregnate you. Definitely mine. No doubt in my mind. That’s a Bratva baby in your belly, and you’d better be prepared for it.”

I’m taken aback by how viciously he’s now insisting the baby is his. I didn’t realize how jealous of a man he was until now. He’s always so calm, so uncaring, but I think I’ve found his weakness.

Well, one of them. His other one seems to be my tits.

“I’m glad you found what you were looking for,” I say, watching a thick vein pulse in his neck with morbid interest.

“I found more than I was looking for,” he mumbles, his deep voice reverberating through me. “The question is, what are we going to do about it?”

“For starters, you could stop treating me like a suspect and start treating me like the mother of your child. I think I deserve that kind of respect from now on,” I say, trying to sound confident.

He narrows his eyes. “Unless this is another trick.” He looks down at my phone again, opening the map application and checking that we’re still on route.

“I told you that I fixed it,” I say.

I closed the app and locks the phone, looking back up at me. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do, *darling*. We’re going to take you to Texas like I initially had planned, but you’re staying at the house with me until I figure this all out.”

“Sounds an awful lot like kidnapping.”

“It is,” he replies without blinking. “You’re my captive.”

“If you said it a little differently, it might be sexy,” I joke, trying to lift some of the tension from the room. I’m afraid his head might explode if I don’t, and I’m not keen on cleaning up that kind of mess.

Jasha gives me a look like he doesn’t appreciate my joke, but his lip twitches up a bit before he forces it back down into a

scowl. “You can play pretend however you want, but you are a captive, and you will not be going anywhere until I figure this out.”

“Didn’t really have anywhere to go, anyway,” I mutter, shaking my head. “Just aimlessly driving trains around the country.”

“Could be worse,” he says, pocketing my phone. “In fact, it might very well become worse if the Italians catch up to us.”

“Yeah, you still haven’t fully explained that.”

“Come,” he says, holding out his hand. I take it, and he helps me out of my seat like a perfect gentleman. I feel a rush of butterflies in my stomach, and my heart hammers against my ribs so hard I’m scared that he’ll hear it.

As we exit the control room, we’re met with a gust of cold air, and I move closer to Jasha. Despite his coat having switched to my shoulders, his body seems to continuously radiate heat. My body seems incapable of keeping up with his warmth, and I’m drawn to him like a moth to the flame.

A few of his men down the hallway as the train straightens out on the track after a turn. They’re like inky shadows, floating in a cluster a few compartments down. Something about them scares me, though I know they’re under Jasha’s command.

I move even closer to the stoic safety beside me until my cheek touches his muscular arm. Jasha doesn’t move away. Instead, he leans into it, pulling me into a side hug as we enter into our previous cabin.

It’s slightly warmer here than in the hallway, but not by much. My body heat doesn’t help, but Jasha’s is enough to change the temperature in the room as we settle into a seat together, side by side.

I can still smell the smoke in the air, but it’s not unwelcomed. Anything is better than the smell of cold steel and snow.

“Let me tell you a little story,” Jasha says, his prominent Adam’s apple bobbing up and down in his throat as he speaks.

His voice is like crimson velvet, wrapping around me as I continue to hug him. I can smell the sweat from his armpits, and I wonder how he could possibly be sweating at all with how cold it is. I push my head into his chest, inhaling deeply, but staying as quiet as I can so that he doesn't realize how much I'm enjoying this.

If you can get something good from someone you hate, you should. It's the only way to win against them.

"When I'm referring to the Italians, I'm talking about a specific subset of them who formed a mafia group fifty years ago. They've moved down from New York, where they originated, branching out into the semi-legitimate businesses, usually dealing in stolen goods."

"Semi-legitimate? How does that work?" I ask.

"With legal storefronts and untraceable jewelry," he answers, "They get the jewels cheaper than their competitors because they're stolen, but they cut them up and set them in rings, watches, and necklaces so that they can't be traced. In theory, they shouldn't be able to get away with something so basic, but they use the extra profit to pay off politicians who, in turn, protect them from the law."

I shake my head. "That's terrible."

"Terribly clever," he replies, patting my thigh. "I'm just sorry I didn't think of it first, but that's irrelevant. My brother and I deal with more sophisticated things." There's a humorous gleam in his eyes, and I'm not sure I want to know what exactly his Bratva does for money.

But he tells me anyway. "Drugs, weapons, the occasional priceless antique... It was all business as usual until we started butting heads with an Italian Mafia Family by the name of Pessolano."

"And now you're stealing a train from them?"

"I'm taking what's on the train, and it's not really stealing if it belonged to me first," he replies, a note of indignant pride in his voice.

Since he's already made it clear he's not talking about me, I'm really not sure what he's on about. This train is empty. I walked through the entire thing before I started it up this morning, so unless something of value magically climbed on board when I wasn't looking, there's nothing here.

But Jasha is certain there is.

"So, the Pessolano Family stole your drugs or something?" I ask, thinking they could be stashed on the train without being spotted.

"Not drugs," he replies, squeezing my thigh and sending a jolt of excitement through my nervous system. "Precious stones, but most of them aren't mine. There's just one in particular that I'd like to get my hands on, and I believe it's on this train. Or *in* it. Or *under* it."

"Why not stop and search it?" I ask, a bit confused why he has to take it all the way to Texas.

"No time. The Pessolano Family probably already knows that I've taken the train, and they'll be coming after us soon. Your little trick to steer us in the wrong direction might just cost everyone their lives. I hope you're happy about that."

"Obviously not, but you should've told me the danger we were in instead of keeping me in the dark."

"I couldn't trust you."

"You trusted me enough to fuck me the day we met," I reply, feeling a surge of white-hot annoyance. I pull away from him, remembering that I'm only using him for warmth, and I've had enough of that.

Jasha wrinkles his nose, almost playfully. "That was different."

"Why? Because you took advantage of me for your own pleasure?"

He chuckles. "Give the victim thing a break, will you? You enjoyed it just as much as I did, maybe even more. I distinctly remember you pulling me back into your room when I tried to leave."

“You distinctly remember a lot of things that never happened,” I reply, refusing to agree with him even though what he said was true. He already holds too much power over me, and as he just said, I need to give the victim thing a break. The only way for me to do that is to take back power and put him in his place.

Jasha shrugs, pulling out his phone and tuning me out.

I watch him sit there with a blank expression for almost a minute before it's too much for me to handle. I've done everything right, save for one little mistake in bed with him, and my entire life gets turned upside down. He doesn't even seem to care, but why would he? All he ever thinks about is himself.

I stand up suddenly, slapping the phone out of his hands and glaring at him. “We're not done talking,” I say, my voice tight in my throat but remaining firm.

“That was rude...”

“Shut up. Shut. Up,” I snarl, shooting daggers from my eyes.

“You must be hangry. Americans say that, don't they? It's a combination of hungry and angry,” he replies calmly.

I narrow my eyes at him, but my stomach growls in response to his suggestion. Why does my body always betray me?

“Ah, that's right,” he says, grabbing his phone off the ground and standing up. “I'm sure this train has some food on it somewhere. I could use a bite to eat.”

“Just like that?” I ask as he steps past me to the sliding door. “I don't think we were done talking.”

He grins. “I thought you told me to shut up?”

**Jasha**

**L**ola's quiet fuming dissipates the moment I pull out a premade meal from a cart tucked away in the dining compartment.

"I'm fucking starving," she says, crossing her arms and leaning back against the wall.

"Maybe you are pregnant after all," I mutter.

"I showed you proof already. Don't you think that –"

"Enough," I groan. "Jesus, I can't even joke around you."

"You think this is the time for jokes?" she asks, throwing up her hands. "You stole a train from the Italian Mafia and now they want to kill us both. Nothing about our situation is funny."

"Exactly what I'm talking about. You have a stick up your ass. I think a cock would be nicer."

She rolls her eyes. "You're just a big jokester, aren't you? Not a single ounce of Bratva in you. I thought the Russian Mafia was all about honor and respect."

"Is there a microwave in here somewhere?" I ask, looking around.

"You're not even listening to me, are you?"

“Nope,” I reply, stepping past her as I spot a microwave tucked into a shelf on the other side of the compartment. I peel the plastic back and stick the tray in the microwave, setting the timer for three minutes.

When I turn around, she’s practically standing on my toes. “You’re not supposed to microwave it like that. It’ll splatter all over the place when it gets hot. You should cover the top.”

I chuckle. “You’re cute, Lola. I’m sure you’ll make a good mother, but you’re going to make a terrible member of the Bratva.”

She looks at me with a mixture of surprise and confusion, pulling her head back and studying me like she’s trying to figure out if I’m still joking. “I’m not ever going to be part of the Bratva,” she says.

“You already are,” I say, placing my hand on her belly. It’s the first time I’ve touched her belly since finding out that she’s pregnant with my baby, and both of us freeze the moment I make contact.

Something inside of me shifts, and I stand rigid for what feels like a lifetime. I see the baby being born as a girl, crying as she leaves the warmth she’s always known and into the sterile coldness of the hospital room. She’d look around for her father, needing the type of protection only he can provide, but would he be there?

Would *I* be there?

I still don’t know, and it kills something inside of me. It’s like poison in my heart, constricting my main artery until I’m struggling for each agonizing beat, begging the world to allow me just a few more seconds to live.

I gasp as I pull my hand away, audible enough for Lola to hear me, and she looks up at me. There’s a sheen to her beautiful blue eyes that wasn’t there before, subtle enough to be deniable, but obvious enough that we both know without saying that the room is charged with white-hot emotion.

The microwave dings, and I turn away from Lola, trying to hide myself in a plastic container of rice and chicken. I feel

ashamed, but I'm unable to redeem myself. I don't know how.

"This is yours," I say, turning and thrusting it into her hands. Before she can reply, I grab another one from the dining cart and put it in the microwave. I don't want to talk anymore. I'm afraid of what will be said.

I stand with my back to Lola for the entire time the food is in the microwave, trying to tune out my thoughts before they overcome my rationality. It's only when the microwave dings again that I'm able to turn around and face Lola.

But she's already gone.

My stomach drops, but then I remember we're on a moving train, and there's nowhere for her to go. Maybe she just wants to eat alone, and I wouldn't blame her. I've done nothing but give her hell since we first met.

I sigh, resigning myself to a dinner alone, but when I move to the next section of the dining cart, I discover Lola eagerly waiting at a table, her food untouched in front of her.

"Were you waiting for me?" I ask.

She purses her lips. "Don't ruin the moment by saying something dumb."

Silently, I sit down across from her, putting my food on the narrow table and staring into it for a moment before looking up at her. "I'm sorry," I say, my mind traveling a hundred times the speed of the train. "I just... wasn't expecting all this."

"Neither was I," she says, her tone softening. "I didn't want to burden you with it. I just wanted you to know."

"And I'm grateful you told me," I say, tearing my eyes off her and looking back down at my food. "I just don't know how to be a father. My brother is, but we're so different."

"I'm sure you can't be that much different," she says, laughing a little. "There aren't that many Bratva bosses running around the United States, are there?"

"More than you would think," I reply, "But that's a conversation for another day. I can't really tell you the ins and



outs of the Bratva if you're only loosely connected to it. I need more commitment before any secrets can be revealed."

"Oh, really? Is your brother going to be upset that you told me what you were looking for on this train?" She leans forward, challenging me with a wide-eyed look.

I shake my head, digging into my food with a black plastic fork. "You don't know what I'm really after, and I'm not going to tell you. Like I said, not enough commitment."

"I think you're the one with commitment issues," she replies, poking at her food but not eating it. "I tried to call you, don't you remember? And you blocked me."

That's what I always do. I give my number to a woman so she thinks I'm serious, and then I block her the second she tries to call me.

I don't do commitment, even if I want others to be committed to me.

But for the first time, I feel guilt weighing heavy in my chest for having done this to Lola. It wouldn't have been an issue if she didn't get pregnant. Sure, I would've thought about her often, reliving the beautiful experience we had in her bedroom – the passion, the raw excitement of fucking a stranger.

Lola would've faded from my memory, slowly making her way out of my mind so that I could go on with my life like nothing ever happened.

But she stuck there, even after I blocked her. All the drunken nights and cheap thrills couldn't keep her out, and now she's here in front of me, permanently tied to my Family because I didn't use a condom.

Once more, I find myself apologizing. "I'm sorry that I blocked you. I can't keep women around me when I'm living such a dangerous life. They think they want to be part of it, but they quickly realize that the money and sex isn't worth the danger."

Her eyes meet mine in between bites, drenched in more sympathy than she should realistically have for a man like me. "Sounds lonely," she says.

I try to play off the truth in her words like it doesn't bother me, but the loneliness is exactly what's been eating me up inside after all these years. I don't want to admit that I'm jealous of what Nikolai has – a beautiful wife and child – but... I wouldn't mind having the same thing. The only issue is that I know Lola won't care to be a part of it, especially not after how I've treated her.

"It can be lonely," I admit, scooping the rest of the rice and chicken into my mouth. "But that's just how it is. I'll never be able to have a normal relationship with anyone."

She sighs, pushing her food away even though she's only eaten half.

"You're not going to finish that?"

"I'm not hungry anymore."

"Really?" I ask as I pull her food across the table to me. "A few minutes ago, you were starving."

"I just don't feel good," she says, looking away from me. She's crossing her arms again, but in a different way than before. It's like she's cradling herself, trying to be the mother and the baby at the same time.

I reach across the table and put my hand on her arm, feeling her softness even through the coarse wool of the coat she's borrowed from me. "Do you need something? Maybe something to drink?"

"I'm just tired," she replies quietly, refusing to meet my gaze.

Suddenly, I feel that awful, gnawing loneliness again. It's the type that drives you into a frenzy late at night, the kind that you can't get rid of, even when you chain-smoke until you're puking up black tar. You poison yourself in hopes that you can kill it, but it persists.

"Let's go back to the cabin and you can sleep," I say, sliding out of the booth and taking her hand.

She allows me to, but she's limp, like she's lost the will to try to make a connection between us. The spark is gone, and my heart aches from the cold.



## Lola

I doubt I'll ever be able to get through to Jasha the way that I want to. Every time I think he's about to lead me deeper into his heart, it turns out that he's really leading me to disappointment. He's built his walls high, and I don't have the strength to climb them.

It's a difficult feeling to describe, losing the man you never had to begin with. It feels juvenile, like the crush every girl chased in high school, the guy who was two years older than her and broke all the rules.

She would do her hair up pretty and wear the kind of clothes he liked just to be seen by him, only to be passed by in the hallway so that he could hit on the girl she was bullied by. She'd go home and cry her eyes out, just to be strung along again the next day when he confided in her about his person troubles, something he'd never do with the popular girls.

I know all this so well, because that girl was me. I was the one who was used as the emotional dumping ground for the guy who constantly chased after some dumb bitch that wouldn't take him seriously.

And now, I'm doing it again.

Except that dumb bitch isn't a woman. It's the Russian Bratva, and Jasha is the older guy I'm hopelessly in love with, even if I won't admit it aloud.

Despite my concerns, I keep my chin up as Jasha leads me down the hall past his stoic goons in black. They're not nearly as intimidating with Jasha behind me. In fact, knowing that the Italians would kill me without remorse, the presence of small army of heavily armed Bratva members is comforting. At least we won't die without a fight.

But I do have to wonder just how angry these Italians are, and to what lengths they will go to get the train back from Jasha. Even he seemed concerned about them catching up to us, and

that's not something I would expect from a ruthless Bratva boss unless they really were a formidable enemy.

Jasha's hand on my back distracts me from my fears a bit, but it doesn't take the cold away as we arrive back in our private cabin. It just keeps getting colder as the night progresses, the inky black sky eating up every last ounce of warmth the sun had to offer during the day.

There wasn't much of it to go around, anyway. The sky has been a frosted grey color the entire week, and the temperature dropped fast halfway through it. I was told to stop the train if it started snowing because of the high risk of a blizzard covering the tracks, but so far, we've managed to avoid that.

Until now.

"Um, that's a lot of snow," I say, placing my hand on the frozen window as white streaks fly by. I pull my hand back like the window is a scalding pan. The cold is similarly numbing, and considerably more dangerous when we're soaring down toward a rarely used section of the railroad.

"Nothing like what we have in Russia," Jasha comments as he slides the door shut.

"But still dangerous," I say, turning to him and pulling my coat tighter. "If a tree falls or enough snow gets on the tracks, we're not going to be in trouble. It's safer to stop."

He holds his hand up quite suddenly. "No. There is no stopping."

"Look, I get that the Italians are a problem, but nobody is going to be able to get through the snow if it's heavy enough. It'll slow down them as well as us," I reply, looking back toward the window. It appears as though the snow has doubled in the past ten seconds.

Jasha comes up behind me, placing a heavy hand on my shoulder and letting out an audible breath through his nostrils. "Maybe *something* like we've had in Russia, but it's not that bad. We can get through it."

I have my doubts, but I won't voice them when we're this low on fuel. Stopping is a risk we can't afford, and even if it's

dangerous to continue, we don't have much of a choice.

"Just keep an eye on it," I say, sitting down lengthwise on one side of the cabin. "I'm going to try to get some sleep. Let me know if it gets worse."

Jasha rubs his chin, looking out the window with a slight frown. "That's not good," he mumbles. "I need to make a phone call. Try to sleep. I'll turn the light off for you."

I thank him as he turns the light off and leaves, but my body isn't happy that he's gone. I'm shivering, even with his heavy wool coat, and sleep doesn't come easy when you're this cold.

I pull my legs up to my chest, trying to turn over and nearly toppling off the seat onto the floor. I'd probably have more room there, but then it'd be even colder. Staying alive is more important than being comfortable right now.

I shut my eyes, trying to forget where I am and what's happening. I picture myself in a big white bed with a fluffy down blanket covering my body. It weighs just enough to make me feel like I'm being hugged, but not too much so that I'm trapped beneath it.

Nothing outside that bed matters. Not the snow outside, not work, and definitely not Jasha. It's just the baby and me, perfectly safe and snuggled up in our soft little haven. I can almost forget about my reality until I hear the deep sound of Jasha's muffled voice outside.

I can't make out his words, but I can tell he's angry. His voice grows louder and his sentences shorter until they stop altogether. I hear a deep groan, and then footsteps back to the compartment where I lie.

As the door slides open, I pretend to be asleep, but I can't sleep a wink when there's this much stress weighing on my body and soul.

"Are you sleeping?" Jasha whispers, and I don't answer even though I'm wide awake.

Silence hangs in the air with the weight of all the past mishaps and heartbreaks. I can't imagine this time being any different.

I try not to stiffen my body as Jasha's fingertips brush over my side, lingering at my hip before being pulled away. After a moment, I feel him beside me, attempting to cram his large body onto a set that barely even fits me.

"Ouch! What are you doing?" I whisper harshly in the dark.

"Trying to get warm. You stole my coat," he grumbles.

"You gave it to me."

"Lent. I lent it to you, and you decided to keep it."

"You want it back?" I ask, but I don't intend to give it to him even if he does want it.

"No, I just want you," he replies, his voice deeper and hoarser than before. He grabs me with both arms, rolling us both off the seat and onto the floor. He allows me to land on top of him, padding my descent with two-hundred-and-fifty pounds of lean muscle.

His warmth pulls me in, and even one the floor where it's ten degrees colder, I feel better. If Jasha was my mattress every night, I could sleep anywhere, even outside, and never be cold.

I close my eyes again, allowing him this little victory so that I can relax enough to actually sleep, but he wakes me up and sets my heart pounding in my chest when he pushes his hips up and presses something thick and hot into my ass.

"Jasha," I whine, but I don't pull away. The memories of the night we had sex are still fresh in my mind, etched in place because of how many times I've replaying them.

"Tell me you don't like it," he whispers into my ear, still holding me in place as he grinds his cock into me from behind. Goosebumps erupt on my arms, and the tiny hairs on my neck stand up like little soldiers at attention.

Jasha is their commander, and likewise, he is mine.

"We shouldn't be doing this," I whisper, but my words are lost to the sound of the train track rumbling beneath us. Besides, I want to do this, even if it's wrong. It's not as though I can get pregnant twice, and the only thing I've wanted since the first time is to feel Jasha inside of me again.

It completes me in a way nothing else ever has.

And that scares me, but not enough to stop myself from giving into him again.

And again.

And again...





## Lola

“God, need to be inside you again. Right now,” Jasha groans in my ear, rubbing his cock against my ass like he’s trying to burn a hole through my skirt.

I reach around, lifting my skirt to get him inside me quicker. I can’t wait any longer either. I hate him with every ounce of my being, but I’ve already had to wait long enough to feel him inside me again. I want him so badly that it hurts.

Jasha rolls me over to the side gently, allowing me a little more room to wiggle my skirt up. He takes care of the rest, tearing my panties to the side and pushing his fingers past my wet lips.

“I miss this,” he says, and I know by the sound of his voice that he means what he’s saying. “Nobody has to know about this, Lola. It’s our little secret.”

It won’t be much of a secret once my pregnancy becomes visible, but for now, I trust that he’s not going to tell anyone. I’d deny it, anyway. There’s no way on earth I’d admit that I was fucking the man I hate.

No *fucking* way.

“That’s right, baby,” Jasha says, and I can hear the jingle of his belt behind me. “I’m just going to get you nice and wet, and then you’re going to take everything I have inside you.”

“Please,” I whimper, “Please do it.”

He presses his lips on the back of my neck, the heat of them searing my skin and sending a fresh wave of arousal through my body. My pussy is soaking his fingers as he plays with me, sending its needy and eager invitation to him.

My sanity is gone, and its place is an insatiable vixen, one who won’t stop until she’s filled with Jasha’s seed again.

He senses that vixen and answers her calls, lifting my leg up so that he can guide his cock between my legs. He slaps it

against my clit, teasing me until I put my hand down to guide him inside. Only then does he enter me.

“Fuck, that’s so good,” he groans, talking into the back of my neck. His breath is hot and wet, and it makes goosebumps rise on my skin to the point where they’re almost painful.

“Give it to me,” he says, thrusting inside me slowly. “Ride me like the pretty whore you are.”

I move my hips, obeying his command as I take control. I’m dancing on his cock, doing things I never thought I’d do just to feel him deeper inside of me. It’s like the first time all over again, but better because I have the satisfaction of knowing he wants me enough to do it again.

My ego swells from the sounds he’s making, the deep, guttural groans that rumble in his chest. His pleasure is almost more important than mine, more fulfilling because it makes me feel powerful and sexy.

But I’m also not going to give up the beautiful, shimmering rise of bliss inside of me just to make him cum quicker. I’m going to ride him until I drench his cock with my satisfaction, and only then do I want him to be able to finish inside of me.

“You’re too good, baby. Slow down,” Jasha whimpers, putting his hand on my hip and attempting to stop me from moving so fast.

I won’t stop, though. I’m possessed by the need to have his cum inside of me again. I crave him in a way that makes me feel insane, but I won’t stop now. I need to feel his body surrender to me.

“Oh fuck,” Jasha groans, almost pulling out but then pushing so deep that he hits my cervix as he cums.

I can feel everything in this position – his throbbing cock, the heat of her body against mine, and the pump of his warm seed deep into my pussy. It’s so vivid and intense that an unexpected swell of pleasure takes over my body and sends stars dancing across my vision.

I shudder as I lose control with Jasha, feeling his pleasure as though it were mine as my body erupts into climactic ecstasy.

Everything disappears. The room, the floor, the cold. They all vanish as reality dissolves like cotton candy in a puddle, leaving behind a sticky sweet wet mess.

I don't stop moving until long after I've milked Jasha for every shimmering drop of pleasure he has left to give me.

And then, we fall into a silence so pure and wonderful that it puts me to sleep in an instant.



## Jasha

The ground shudders violently beneath me, and I'm drawn out of sleep as though shaken by a giant. Blood pounds in my ears as I reluctantly peel myself off Lola's warm body and stumble to my feet.

Something is right.

I look out the window, and the sky is still black, but the snowflakes aren't flying past us anymore. They're drifting down, practically following the train as it moves along the tracks.

We're slowing down.

Lola climbs to her feet and I grab her arms to help her up. We're both a bit stunned, but if the train is stopping, that means we need to jump into action. There's no time to rub the sleep out of our eyes.

"Why are we stopping?" I ask, immediately suspicious of Lola even though she was asleep beside me.

"How should I know?" she asks, looking out the window. "Fuck, it's snowing like crazy out there. Maybe something tripped up the ATS system."

I throw open the door and grab Lola, pulling her out with me. "There's no time for technical jargon. What the hell is an ATS system?"

"Automatic Train Stop," he recites dutifully as we enter into the control room. "Usually it's triggered by debris or something in the tracks. If it's snowing hard, that would be enough to trip it."

"Wonderful," I grumble, pulling her out in front of me and placing her in the engineer's seat. "I need you to turn it off."

She gives me a look like I'm crazy. "Seriously? We don't know what triggered it. We need to go out there and check first, or we're going to end up damaging the train."

My pulse won't stop pounding in my ears. "What's the worse that can happen?"

"We get derailed," she replies. "And then it's game over. You're not going to be able to fix that without heavy machinery, and nothing is going to be able to get out here with all this snow."

I slam my fist into the windshield. "Goddammit!"

"I'm sorry, but if we need to check the tracks. I just hope it isn't something serious," she says, sounding genuinely apologetic.

But it's not her fault. I'm the one who took the risk of bringing us so close to danger, and now I'm paying the price for it. Nikolai already grilled me over the phone about it the last time I called him, and now I'm going to have to admit that I was wrong to do this.

My pride won't allow me to admit defeat yet, though, so I'm going out to check for obstructions.

"Stay here," I demand, pulling the switch to open the door. "I should only be a minute."

She nods, but as the door opens, she grabs my arm. "Wait! The ATS system should be on the left side of the train. Just look down at the bottom near the wheels."

I smile, planting a kiss on her forehead. "Thank you, Lola."

Her cheeks flush pink as I pull away, but I don't have time to revel in the delicate nature of our emotions right now. I have to get this train back up and running, or we're not going to make it to Texas.

The moment I step outside I know we're in trouble. Without a coat, the wind feels like it's blowing straight through me, numbing me from the inside out as I take my first steps through the fresh snow. It's all the way up to my knees, and I have to push my legs through it just to move toward the front of the train.

Once I reach the tracks, the way becomes easier. Even though there's snow piled high on either side of the train, the actual

railway is mostly clear. I let out a breath, and it's frozen in midair, the moister turning to little pinpricks of ice and swirling away in the next gust of wind.

I clench my teeth, baring the sub-zero temperatures like I used to do as a young boy in Russia. I've been spoiled by a life of luxury in the United States, but every once in a while, I'm reminded that suffering is baked into the human experience. It's impossible to avoid, even when you're one of the richest men in the country.

My legs are already numb when I reenter the snow on the left side of the tracks, scanning the wheels of the train for something that could be interpreted as an Automatic Train Stop. It can't be that difficult to spot. It's only on one side, so I should be able to locate the difference.

At first, I'm unable to find anything, but then I realize it's because there's so much snow caked onto the side of the train that it's probably hidden from view. That would also explain the obstruction. If I could clear off some of that snow, I bet we could start the train up again and be on our way.

I raise my foot, kicking at the snow to break it off the side of the train, but it's too frozen to come loose. I'm going to need tools, and probably a bit more manpower. Thankfully, I have both on the train.

The snow is blowing so hard now that I can barely see, and my body becomes more rigid with every step that I take. It's dangerous to be out here without a jacket or a hat, and I can't imagine that the Italians are making much more progress than we are right now. They're probably trapped on a frozen road, unless they've taken helicopters to get to us, and then we're in trouble.

But the weather is too treacherous to take such risks, so we're most likely safe until the day comes and the sun melts some of the snow.

I tune out the external elements, retreating deep inside myself mentally to brave the cold as I make my way slowly back around the front of the train. My first impulse is to imagine I'm still sleeping with Lola, our bodies generating a



comforting aura that's more than just warmth. It's safety, relaxation, and maybe even... love.

The door to the train creaks open before I can reach for the handle, and Lola uses both hands to pull me in. I stumble onto the train, having to catch myself on the wall because my legs refuse to work. I can't feel a thing.

"I was about to come out there and get you," Lola says, her expression twisted in deep concern.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, my heart beating much faster than it should be. "I wasn't out for that long."

"Nearly half an hour," she says, shaking her head. "And you don't look good. You're so pale."

"I'm not pale," I reply, but when I look at my reflection in the window, I see a ghost instead of a man. "I might take a tea or something," I mumble, trying to retain my footing as I walk toward the next compartment.

"Wait, stay there," Lola says, rushing past me and blocking the door. "I'll get it. You really don't look good. You should sit down. Maybe we can turn on the heat."

"No!" I blurt.

She pulls her head back in surprise.

I lower my voice. "I mean, we need to conserve fuel, remember? We can't run the heating, especially not since we stopped."

She looks torn, but she doesn't say anything as she leaves to get tea. I'm hoping that it's enough to get me feeling right again. There's still so much to do, though I'll admit I'm having trouble remembering what that was.

My head starts spinning as I try to remain standing, so I allow myself to slump down in the seat in front of the controls and remain there until Lola returns.

When she does, she thrusts the tea in my face so hard it splashes on my chest.

The problem is, I don't even feel it.

“Drink this,” she insists, pressing the mug to my lips.

Thankfully, I can feel that, and I take a sip, allowing the warmth to wash down my throat and warm me from the inside. It feels good, and I find myself drinking the entire mug without any regard for how it’s burning my mouth.

Lola pulls away, looking me over for a moment and sighing. “You look a little better, but you were out for a long time. What were you doing?”

“Just checking the... the thing,” I reply, my brain still a bit fuzzy.

“The ATS?”

I nod. “Right, that’s it. The wheels are obstructed by a whole heap of snow, but the tracks are mostly clear. I think it just got caked up on one side, but with some manpower, we should be able to get the snow off and be on our way.”

“You have manpower, and ones that are wearing coats instead of a flimsy dress shirt,” she says, shaking her head.

“I gave you my coat,” I reply, laughing a bit. “So, if any of my extremities fall off, I’m blaming you.”

She gives me a look that feigns annoyance, but it’s laced with a smile. “We need some of those extremities. Try to keep them intact.”

I smirk, but as my mental faculties return to me, I turn my attention back to the crisis at hand. “We need to get my men out there to clear the obstruction. I can –”

“I’ll do it,” she says, cutting me off. “Just stay there and finish your tea.”

“I’ve already...” I begin, but she’s already out the door.



## Lola

I'm still sore from last night, just like I was the first time we had sex. Jasha is huge, and it feels like no matter how aroused I am, or how many times he claims me, I'll never stop feeling overwhelmed by his size.

It's not a complaint, though. Size isn't everything, but Jasha could easily satisfy me with that alone. But there's more, and that's why my body gives in so easily. He's everything a man should be in bed...

And everything he shouldn't be outside of it.

I'm so caught up in thoughts of Jasha that I nearly run into the group of guards he has stationed out in the hallway in the middle of the train. They all turn to me simultaneously, clutching their guns like I'm some kind of threat.

It'd be funny if it wasn't so terrifying. How could a little woman like me possibly pose a threat to a bunch of muscular Bratva guards?

I clear my throat and straighten my back, trying to appear confident when I'm practically melting under the gazes of six grey-eyed men with shaved head and jawlines like Jasha. "Jasha wanted some of you to come out and clear the blockage at the front of the train," I say, hoping they're not just going to shoot me first and ask questions later.

"Where is Jasha?" one of the men asks, his voice low and gruff.

"In the front of the train, recovering from the cold. You can run this by him first if you want, but I'm just telling you because we're in a hurry."

They all narrow their eyes at me, but they all follow me as I turn away and start walking back to the front of the train. With this many men behind me, I feel a small surge of power.

Is this what Jasha feels all the time? If so, I'm beginning to understand why he acts so entitled.

When we arrive at the front of the train, Jasha is already on his feet again, pretending like he has everything under control when there's an obvious instability to his step. "Outside. Break the snow off the left side of the train immediately," Jasha commands, nodding in approval as his men pour out of the small train door.

"Thank you," he says to me once they've left. "I'm feeling much better now."

"I think you still need to sit down for a bit," I reply, looking toward the seat in front of the controls.

He leans against it, but doesn't sit down. "I'll be fine. A little cold never hurt anyone."

God, he's so ridiculous. He can't stand looking weak, even if he has to put his life at risk to do it. He's like a teenage boy at the bus stop, refusing to wear a jacket in the middle of winter to impress his crush.

I feel like I actually might be the girl he's trying to impress. The realization stirs something deep within me, but now isn't the time to get caught up in my emotions. I already did enough of that as we were falling asleep together.

"I tried calling Nikolai, but the signal is dead. I think the storm might have something to do with it," Jasha says, pulling out his phone. "Still no signal."

"What do you need from Nikolai?" I ask, curious why he's been calling him all the time. "Aren't you the boss?"

"I am," he snaps, straightening up like he's been electrocuted by my words. "Nikolai just wants to know when we're going to arrive, and he's terribly curious about you as well."

Raise an eyebrow. "Oh? You've been telling him things?"

"Only what he needs to know," Jasha says, avoiding my eyes.

"Which is?"

"Your name, your occupation... This like that. Enough to run a background check on you," he replies.

And here I was, thinking he was gushing over the phone to his brother about the woman he's having a baby with. I should've known better.

"You don't need to run a background check on me," I reply, shaking my head. "Are you really that suspicious of me?"

"No," he replies, sounding a bit annoyed. "I'm not, but that doesn't mean Nikolai isn't, and he's not going to agree to bring you into the Family if you don't pass a background check first. Not my rules, by the way. That's Bratva tradition."

I wonder if this is what he was arguing over the phone with his brother about. I find it sweet that he trusts me, but I'm not sure I want to be a part of his Bratva Family, regardless.

"Isn't it a choice to be part of the Bratva?" I ask.

He looks at my stomach, his expression softening. "Not when you're having my baby. I haven't told Nikolai that yet. He just thinks we're dating."

I laugh. "It's kind of funny that it's the other way around. We're not dating but I *am* having your baby."

"What? We are dating, sort of," he says, sounding genuinely offended.

"You're serious?" I ask, trying to stifle another laugh. "Jasha, you kidnapped me. That pretty much permanently rules out the possibility of ever dating."

"It doesn't change that you belong to me," he replies, his energy shifting. He moves toward me, finding strength in his steps this time and using it to intimidate me. "You're having my baby, so you're part of the Bratva."

I don't allow him to have the upper hand. Ultimately, I have the power in this situation, especially since he believes I'm part of his Bratva Family now. I'm sure there are rules around what you can and can't do to a woman in the Bratva, especially one who's going to give birth to the boss's heir.

I hold my ground, stiffening my lower lip and looking up at him. "I'm nobody's property, Jasha. I want to make that clear as a new member of your Bratva. I'm not below you."

He narrows his eyes at me, and I can see him trying to find some reason why I'm wrong in the back of his head, but he can't. I've twisted his own words around and used them against him, and now he has to live with what he's created.

"The Bratva doesn't approve of babies out of wedlock," he finally says, his eyes flickering down to my belly. "I just want to make *that* clear."

"I'm still not going to date you," I reply, my voice losing its potency as his green eyes drill into mine.

"You don't have to date me, Lola," he replies, a smile curling up on his lips. "You have to marry me."





## Jasha

Lola is stunned for a moment, hanging on my words in silent shock for several seconds before the door beside her opens and my men begin boarding the train again. “All clear,” one of them says.

Lola’s bewildered expression melts into firm determination. “I’ll start the train,” she says.

I nod, and she starts pulling levers and checking screens. After a moment, the train shudders to a start, and we’re on our way again. I just hope we haven’t lost too much time or fuel. We can’t afford to cut it this close.

But there’s really not much I can do now that we’re on the way again. I just can’t fall asleep a second time. If something else comes up, I need to be able to address it immediately.

“Everything good?” I ask, leaning over Lola’s seat as she studies a gauge cluster to her left.

She scrunches her face, tapping one of the gauges and shaking her head. “Not really. The fuel is low. Like, really low. We’re not going to make it to Texas without a miracle.”

“Fuck,” I mutter, my mind moving a thousand miles a second to come up with a solution. “There must be something else we can do, something that will allow us better fuel efficiency.”

“We’re already running without heat. We could turn off the lights, but the savings would be negligible.”

I drum my fingers on the back of her seat, sweat starting to run down my face despite the cold. Nikolai warned me that this trip was going to be dangerous, but I didn’t take him seriously. Now, with reality crashing down from all sides, I’m the one who’s responsible for pulling us out of this mess.

Normally, that wouldn’t cause me that much stress. I’ve been in much worse situations on my own, but that’s exactly the point. I’m no longer on my own, and the idea of losing Lola and the baby crushes me.

I can't let that happen.

"We can have fuel airdropped further down," I say, my tone lifted by a new idea. I wipe the sweat from my brow and lean into the gauge cluster. "How many miles do we have left?"

Lola takes a deep breath. "I can't say exactly. Maybe six hundred if we're lucky. It's definitely not enough to get to Texas, unless we don't brake at the turns, but that could derail the entire train."

"We're going to play it safe," I reply, having made up my mind to protect Lola. "Once I get a signal on my phone, I'm going to get in touch with Nikolai. He will be able to send a small plane or helicopter to drop off fuel. How much does a train like this need?"

Lola's eyebrows draw together in a tight frown. I'm tempted to comment on how cute she looks, but she'd probably just get annoyed. "We get about half a mile to the gallon," she says, studying the gauge cluster. "So, if we want to play it safe, we're going to need about three-hundred gallons."

"And what if we don't want to play it safe?" I ask, gritting my teeth at the prospect of transporting that much fuel at such a short notice.

"Two-hundred, and that's bare minimum," she replies.

I do the math in my head, coming up with at least two-thousand pounds of fuel. We have a helicopter that can lift up to four, so it's not out of the question for us to transport that much fuel. It just depends on how quickly we can get it here.

I take a sharp breath, turning away from the controls. "We'll do two-fifty, and that will have to suffice. If I can get Nikolai to transport that much fuel in our direction, we should be able to pull this off."

"And if we can't?" she asks, spinning around in her seat with a wide-eyed look of concern.

A cold chuckle escapes my throat. "Then we're going to have to shoot our way out of this mess."

I leave the room and Lola follows after me quickly, tugging at the back of my shirt to get my attention. I'm not trying to scare her, but I've done a good job, anyway. She's terrified.

"Are we going to die?" she asks as I continue down the hallway past our usual cabin.

"Probably not," I reply flatly, keeping the same pace as before.

"*Probably* not? That's not very comforting. I thought we had found a solution?"

"Tentatively."

"Bullshit," she snarls, yanking my shirt so hard that a few of the stitches pop.

I spin around, wrapping my hand around her waist and pulling her to me. She bounces lightly off my chest, her eyes sparkling with something that's awfully close to excitement. It's like she wants me to snap. She's enjoying this.

But her expression returns to stark annoyance the moment she catches me smiling. "This is serious," she says. "The estimate of three-hundred gallons could've been off. You shouldn't do two-fifty."

"I don't care," I reply bluntly. "I can't even make the call until I have a signal again."

"Try my phone," she suggests.

"Nobody is getting a signal out here," I reply, but I fish around in my pocket for her phone anyway. Different providers do have different signal strengths, but I doubt it'll be enough to cut through a snowstorm like this, unless we're right next to a tower.

I look at her phone and see numerous missed calls, all coming from a person by the name of Joshua. There's no signal, but that's not why my heart rate doubles and my palms get sweaty.

Even Lola can tell that something is wrong, because she frowns and leans in to look at the phone.

I pull it away from her quickly, tucking it into my pocket and gritting my teeth. "Who is Joshua?" I ask.

“What?”

“Joshua,” I repeat, much louder this time. “He’s called you half a dozen times already. Obviously, it’s someone who considers you important.”

“Yeah...” she says, still frowning. “So what?”

My throat tightens, and I start to feel much hotter than I should on this frozen train. “You said you weren’t seeing anyone else.”

“Jesus, you really are the jealous type, aren’t you?” she asks, shaking her head.

I pull her phone out again, shaking it in front of her like I’m mixing a cocktail. “Who the fuck is Joshua? Your boyfriend?”

“No...”

The phone slips out of my hand and flies toward the window, hitting it with a loud crack and clattering to the floor. Lola swoops down and picks it up, displaying a shattered screen. She clicks the button on the side of the phone, but the screen remains black. “Look what you did!”

“It wasn’t useful, anyway,” I grumble.

She groans. “You’re really something, Jasha. I was starting to think you were... I don’t know... *okay*, or something, but after this I’m having serious doubts.”

“Why? Because I wouldn’t let you hide your little relationship with Joshua?”

She scoffs. “Please stop saying that. It’s disgusting. Joshua is, like, sixty years old, and he’s my boss. I assume he’s concerned about me since we disappeared into a snowstorm, and rightfully so.”

I sink back into my anger a bit, considering her words. I want to continue being jealous, to have a reason for my negativity, but I can’t find one. I should be trusting Lola, not trying to find something wrong with her at every opportunity.

Maybe I’m just scared of how much I like her.

“Sorry about the phone,” I grumble, giving a half-hearted attempt to put the situation at ease.

“I’m sure you could buy me a new one,” she says with an impish smile.

I laugh, a little sunshine breaking through my spoiled attitude. “I’ll get you whatever you want, princess, but in the meantime, I’d like something from you.”

Her eyebrows shoot up her forehead, and she gives me a skeptical look.

“Nothing too crazy. Just a game of chess to pass the time until we get a phone signal,” I say, continuing down the hall. “I saw a board in the rear compartment. It may have belonged to the conductor.”

“I guess we’ll never know, since you threw him off the train,” she replies, hurrying after me.

I wave my hand in the air dismissively. “It’s better than being shot.”

“I think I like you better when you’re not killing people.”

I smirk. “I’ll try not to shoot anyone else, but I can’t promise you anything.”



## Lola

There's an odd sort of peace, sitting down across from a Bratva boss to play a game of chess when your entire existence is on the line. It's as though we've both accepted that it's out of our hands for the time being, and we'd just like a distraction from it all.

I, for one, welcome this type of distraction, especially since I was head of the chess club in high school. If Jasha thinks he's going to get an easy win, he's dead wrong, but I'll let him discover that on his own.

"You know how to play?" he asks as he arranges his pieces on the board.

I shrug. "I've played a few times."

"Great," he says, looking genuinely excited. "Nikolai and I used to play all the time, but since his wife had a baby, he's been less available. Understandable, but you'll forgive me if I'm a bit rusty."

"I'm sure you're better than I am," I lie.

"I'll go easy on you. I'll even let you go first," he replies, finishing the pieces and turning the board around. "You can be white."

"Such a gentleman," I say with a wink that he misses entirely. He's too engrossed in the board, which I'm going to use to my utmost advantage. I may also be a bit rusty, but I'm no novice.

I reach forward, moving a pawn to open up the board. It could easily be mistaken for a beginner move, but it's all part of my strategy. I don't want him to know that I'm good at this game until it's too late.

"Your move," I say, leaning back.

Jasha smiles, a hint of arrogance in his eyes, and opens with a similar pawn forward. "This might be too easy."

"Don't bet on it," I reply, moving another pawn.

“Ah, the classic opening... for a novice,” he says, studying the board. “But let’s see what you do about this.” He moves his knight out.

I pretend like I’m momentarily stumped, but I’ve seen this opening a thousand times. He has an aggressive style of play, but that just means he’ll make more critical mistakes. He thinks that by stressing me out with bold moves, that I’m the one who’s going to slip up, but that’s quite the contrary. I already see a way I can stump him, but I’d like to wait a little longer to show him what I can do.

We exchange a few moves, developing our pieces, taking control of the center. At first, he seems confident, perhaps even a little cocky. But after I castle and start setting up my pieces for a strategic attack, I notice his expression change. His eyes narrow ever so slightly, analyzing the board, tracing imaginary lines from one square to another.

“Something the matter?” I ask innocently, my hand hovering over a bishop.

He glances up, his gaze locking onto mine. “No, not at all. Just considering my options. Are you sure you haven’t played this game that much? Your moves are very similar to what I see from Nikolai.”

“Does he beat you often?” I ask with a laugh.

“No. Never,” he replies, but I doubt that very much by the way his voice drops when he looks at the board again. His eyes move over the pieces, but he can’t find a way to break through my defenses. “I’ll get this. Just a moment... just one moment.”

I wait for over a minute while he traces lines over the board with his eyes first, then his fingers. “Dammit,” he says, shaking his head. “You’re lucky. You don’t have a single break in these defenses. Who taught you to play?”

I shrug. “I’m self-taught.”

“Not bad, but this might throw you for a loop,” he says, finally moving a piece. It’s his queen’s knight, an excellent move but one that won’t save him.



I'm smiling like crazy on the inside because of his mistake, but I won't show that to him yet. I want to see his face when he realizes what he's done.

I push my bishop forward to pin his knight to his queen. There's no escaping from this, but because of his enormous ego, that's going to take him a while to realize. He'll just keep looking and looking, but he's not finding a way out from this pin.

"An interesting move," he mumbles, rubbing the stubble on his chin. "Very interesting, but not the best move, by far. No, that's not going to work. That's definitely going to get you into trouble."

He keeps rambling, but I stop listening once I realize he's just talking to himself, unable to believe that this is happening in a game he thought he had full control over. I'm almost a little sad to see him losing like this. He's so serious about it, like I'm really hurting him by winning.

At least I know he won't give up on something without a fight. If he's this serious over a chess game, then how much thought will he put into getting us off this train alive?

"This is unfortunately, but easy to turn around," Jasha says, finally moving his queen so that he doesn't lose that too.

I take the knight, moving like I'm unsure of what I'm doing, even though it's becoming increasingly obvious that I'm not a beginner. "More beginner's luck," I say with a giggle.

"Right, that's all it is," he grumbles, rubbing his chin so hard that little hairs fall onto the board. He blows them away and moves his next piece, another move that's going to spell trouble for him in a minute.

I make another move, and he grunts, leaning forward and looking at every piece like he can intimidate them into playing worse. He sinks deeper into concentration, calculating his moves for much longer amounts of time, calculating every countermove possible before he'll even touch a piece.

And yet, despite his best efforts, I tear his position down until he starts getting desperate and aggressive, taking pieces even

if it means he'll lose twice as many. He'll do anything to throw me off balance, but it's not working.

His other knight falls.

And then, his queen.

By the time I back his king into the corner, Jasha is visibly agitated. His hand hovers over the board, hesitating, and then finally, he lays down his king in defeat.

Checkmate.

He sits back, shaking his head and laughing the stress of the game away. "How the fuck did you do that?"

"Maybe I'm a better player than you thought," I reply with a wink.

"Much better. I don't believe you only played a few games."

I shrug. "Well, I was on the chess team in high school. Never defeated, actually."

He scoffs. "You didn't tell me that. I could've beaten you. I was just taking it easy because I thought you were an amateur."

"Want to play again?" I ask, jumping up in my seat. "I'll reset the board."

He checks his phone and sighs. "Fine, since we have some time to kill, but be warned, I'm not taking it easy on you this time."

"I wouldn't want you to," I reply with a smirk.

Jasha plays a completely different opening the second time, but it's questionable at best. He's trying to imitate something from a famous game, but I'm already ten moves ahead of him.

"Don't try to be clever," I warn. "It's only going to get you into more trouble."

"Enough talk," Jasha replies, moving a piece so far across the board that he's nested in my pawns. "Let's play for real this time."

I fall into silence, allowing my moves to do all the speaking while I try not to get distracted by the way he smells. It's so rich, licorice and spice with an underlying note of orange. I could just sit here without moving a piece and smell him all night, but that would give away how utterly obsessed I am with him.

He can't know that. Like a chess game, I need to keep my motives hidden.

That's how I beat him.

I knock one of his pieces over as I take more room on the board, leaning in just a bit to get a better whiff of him as he grumbles something under his breath.

I have to stifle a laugh several times when he leaps up from the table, circles the room a few times, and comes back, only to lose another piece.

He loses even faster the second time around.

Finally, with another checkmate, his scowl turns into a deep laugh. "You surprise me, Lola. You really are good at this. You have to play my brother sometime."

"Maybe another game with you, first?" I ask. "I'm still a bit rusty."

"No, I think I've learned my lesson. Never underestimate the woman sitting across from you, especially when she's pretending like she doesn't know what she's doing."

He allows me to revel in my small victory over him for a minute, but then quickly goes back to his serious self when he checks his phone and realizes we have a signal again. Even the snow outside seems to have cleared up a bit, which means all hope isn't lost after all.

"I need to call Nikolai," Jasha says, holding up his phone. "I'll just be a minute."

I nod, leaning back in my seat as he leaves, thinking of what's to come. I guess it wouldn't be so bad to meet the family after all this is over. If Nikolai likes to play chess too, I wouldn't

mind challenging him to a game, especially since I suspect he might be better than Jasha.



## Jasha

““**Y**ou heard me correctly,” I say, pacing up and down the hallway so fast that I might as well be running. “The helicopter can lift it. We lifted an entire semi-truck that one time.”

“Yes, but this is fuel. Can you imagine that stuff sloshing around? It could throw the whole thing off balance. Not to mention the issue of getting that much diesel fuel at such short notice.”

“We don’t have a choice,” I reply.

“We do have a choice, but you’re not going to like what it is,” he replies.

“What?”

“Stop the train, get off, and let the Italians have it. This might not be worth the risk you’re taking, Jasha.”

I groan. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve been looking for this shipment? I’m certain the ruby is on this train. I’ve traced it all the way from the original thieves to this exact train. You’ll see...”

“I don’t need to see. I trust you. I just don’t want you throwing your life away over something so trivial.”

“Our Family honor isn’t trivial,” I growl, my face growing hot. “And this isn’t something you can just forget about like some kind of cheap costume jewelry. It was stolen from us and needs to be returned.”

Nikolai takes a calmer approach. “What I’m saying is that we don’t need to risk your life to get it right now. We can track it again, and find it once it’s been sold.”

“That’s harder than you think.”

“But worth saving a life,” he replies. “I care about you, and I’m not going to let you get killed over something like this.”

Just dump the girl on the tracks and leave. I'll pick you up in the helicopter."

"I'm not doing that, and I can't dump the girl. It's complicated."

"Catching feelings? You sounded like you were before, but now really isn't the time for that."

I laugh. "*You're* telling *me*. I'm just... not ready to talk about it. Trust me when I say this is important, though. I'll explain everything once I'm back at the house. I expect you to be there, like we talked about."

"The whole family is here," he replies with a chuckle. "We're just waiting for you."

"Great," I say, feeling a small surge of happiness from the thoughts of the family finally being together again. I feel like I don't see enough of everyone, and the years go by quicker each time. Eventually, we're going to run out, and I'll regret having spent more time with the people I love.

And then there's Lola. I know I shouldn't be so resistant to her, but I'm still not sure I'm ready for what comes once she's accepted into the Family. I wasn't joking about the marriage bit. It's essential to keeping the bloodline intact and my heir in the correct position to inherit the Bratva throne.

Lola is pregnant with my baby, and that means she's Bratva, whether she likes it or not.

"So, you're still serious about the helicopter. It's been ages since I flew that thing."

"Send someone else to fly it, then," I bark. "We need the fuel."

"I'll bring it, and then I'll text you the coordinates. How about that?"

"Thanks," I say, realizing how harsh I've been with him. "I mean it. You're doing me a huge favor."

"I'm sure you can find a way to get me back for it," Nikolai replies, a hint of playfulness in his voice. Despite his former leading role in the Bratva, he's always just a brother to me. That's what matters the most.

“Two-hundred and fifty. Remember that, and if you can do more, do it. Just not less. We’re already running on a tank that’s close to empty.”

“I got you. Don’t worry.”

Easier said than done, but I leave the worrying to him as I hang up the phone and go back to the room to inform Lola of our progress. If we manage to fill up the tank and get on our way again in a short enough amount of time, we can make it to Texas before the Italians catch up.

Thankfully, I’ve seen no sign of them, and we can probably thank the snow for that. This weather is dangerous, but now that it’s clearing up, we’re going to have to be more watchful.

I pass a group of my men idling in the hallway, and I bark a few orders at them. “Watch the windows,” I say. “No slacking.”

They rise to attention and take positions at every window down the hall. I’m sure they don’t enjoy doing such dull work, but I don’t pay them to have fun. Besides, it’s better than the alternative.

In the Bratva, a boring day is always better than an interesting one.

The last time something genuinely interesting happened was yesterday, when I found out that Lola was pregnant with my baby.

Before that, the most interesting thing had been when I came face to face with Lorenzo Pessolano, the head of the Pessolano Family, while I was out filling my Rolls Royce with gas in Austin. Circumstances didn’t allow me to jump into action and put a bullet in the back of his head, which I would’ve done without a second thought. As it was the middle of the day and he was surrounded by bodyguards, all I could do was watch from behind my car as he went in to buy a few things and left just as quickly as he came.

I doubt he saw me then, but if he sees me now, all bets are off. One of us is going to die, and I’m going to make damn sure it isn’t me.



I'm sure he's pissed that I've taken his train, but I'm equally as annoyed that he's unknowingly transporting my family heirloom to be chopped up and sold to cheap jewelry stores around the east coast.

I'm getting that damn ruby back, even if it kills me.

I return to the cabin where Lola is studying the chess board again, playing a match with herself. She's clearly a master, but she doesn't want to admit it. She's having too much fun making a fool out of me, but I'm happy to lose to someone who knows how to play. It's not often I get to go up against such a capable opponent.

Or such an attractive one.

"Everything is in order," I announce as Lola looks up from the chess board. "You want to play another game?"

Her blue eyes widen in surprise, but she quickly remakes the board and gestures to the seat across from her. "Ready to lose again?"

"Probably," I reply with a chuckle, sitting down and moving a pawn forward. I'm going to play it safe this time. No need to get ahead of myself. She's too good to make mistakes just because I'm playing aggressively.

"So, everything is good?" she asks, opening the game as usual.

"Perfectly fine. Nikolai is flying fuel up from Texas, and we should be able to load up and get going again without much delay. As long as he drops it close to the tracks, we're golden."

"Seems like a lot of effort to go through," she says, shaking her head and moving another piece. "I mean, I know you said there was something particularly valuable on this train, but the amount of money and risk you're putting into this is substantial."

"Maybe it's time I tell you about it," I reply, pulling a piece back to defend my knight.

Lola raises an eyebrow. "Playing it safe?"

"I've taken enough risks already."

“I hope this one isn’t going to push you over the edge,” she replies, moving her bishop across the board.

I study our positions carefully, trying to figure out her plan. “The train has something valuable on it. Lorenzo Pessolano, the head of the Italian Mafia, probably doesn’t know about it. To him, it’s just another jewel.” I move a pawn forward one square. “To me, its everything.”

“Must cost an awful lot,” she says, quickly countering with a pawn of her own.

“A few million, but that’s not where the real value lies. It’s actually a family heirloom, with a Russian poem engraved into the back and a gold crest inlaid on the front. It was stolen from the house two years ago, and I’ve spent a lot of time and money tracing it. I believe it’s on this train.”

She looks up from the board, frowning deeply. “Why didn’t you tell me that? If I had known I was transporting a stolen heirloom, I would’ve stopped the train myself so that the authorities could search it.”

I shake my head. “Police are worse than Lorenzo, believe me. If I saw that motherfucker, I’d put a bullet in his head. I can’t say the same about the cops. They’d never leave me alone if I shot one of them.”

I move another piece, realizing the attack play she’s set up.

*Not so fast, little one. The game is going to be mine this time.*

Her frown deepens as she realizes what I’ve done. “Dammit,” she mutters. “Okay, before I move, tell me more about this Lorenzo guy. You two don’t get along, I presume.”

“Not in the least,” I reply, leaning back in my seat. “A year ago, he murdered one of my good friends, a man named Gabriel. He helped us out when Nikolai was in a pinch with the Mexican Cartel. I honestly thought the man was untouchable, but after he crossed Lorenzo, the entire Italian Mafia came down on him. Ultimately, Lorenzo was the one to pull the trigger and take his life.”

Something awakens inside of me as I tell the story to Lola. For me, death happens all the time, but seeing her look of horror

reminds me of what his family must've felt when they heard of his death.

I tucked the sorrow somewhere deep inside of me, but it's creeping out now that I recall the incident.

Gabriel was a good guy. He didn't deserve to go down like that.

Lola looks down at her lap, speaking softly. "I'm sorry."

"This life gives, and it takes," I say, looking out the window as the snow blows past. The sky is just starting to lighten, the due blue hues turning into a washed-out purple color. Soon, it'll be lavender, and we'll be picking up the fuel that Nikolai is dropping off.

And by the end of the day, we'll be in Texas.

Which means my time alone with Lola will be finished, and I can't hide her pregnancy from Nikolai. He's already suspicious why I'm so attached to her, and he's not going to believe it's just because I've fallen in love. He'll know that something else is going on, and I need to come clean.

We don't keep secrets in this Family.

I move my queen into position and smile at Lola. "Your move."



## Lola

**M**y heart sinks when I realize I've already lost the game. I was doing so well, but I let Jasha distract me with his story and now I've thrown away my win. It should've been easy, but then again, all of this should've been easy. Jasha came into my life and screwed everything up.

The trouble is, I'm having a harder and harder time holding it against him. Hearing his story and feeling his pain has humanized him, and if I can empathize with a monster, I can also fall in love with one.

"Good game," I say, my throat tightening up. "Um, has Nikolai texted you about the location? We're probably coming up on the next major town, and he can't drop stuff there without the police noticing."

"He'll have that figured out, I'm sure. We don't have to do anything until he sends me the coordinates. Maybe you'd like a rematch?"

I sigh, seriously considering it, but my brain is all over the place after knowing more about Jasha's life. I feel closer to him, and that's scaring me. Having sex is one thing, but falling in love is a whole different universe.

And didn't he mention something about marriage?

Things are moving so quickly that it's making my head spin.

Jasha seems to notice. He leans over the table, placing his large hand over mine. I can feel the warmth of his palm even though it's cold in this room, but there's more to it than that. There's emotion in his touch, something I wasn't able to get out of him before.

Something I wanted, but now I'm scared of.

"Is everything okay?" he asks, his voice low and soothing. It vibrates through me like the magic wand I use between my legs some nights when I think about him.

“I’m fine,” I say, putting my hand on my belly. It’s something I usually do to comfort myself, but now, all I can think about is the fact that a little piece of Jasha lives inside me.

Is that still comforting?

I don’t know.

“If you need something, let me know,” he says, his voice continuing to rumble through me in a way that makes me want to fall into his arms and allow him to take over. He’s so powerful, so masculine and capable that it’s tempting to hand all my problems to him and tell him to deal with them.

I’m sure he would, but at what cost? He already believes that I belong to him, and letting him take the weight off my aching heart would cement that into reality.

I look up at him, trying to find the strength to do what I need to do. My baby needs a father, but I must know more about Jasha before I accept him into my family the way that he’s accepted me.

“I want to know more about you,” I say, my voice shaking as I try to control it.

He pulls his head back slightly in confusion. “Such as?”

“Everything,” I reply, knowing I sound like I’ve lost my mind.

“I just need to know you before I…”

“Before you what?” he asks, his voice dropping into a whisper.

“You can tell me, Lola.”

I feel my throat tightening up again, and it’s a struggle just to get anything out, much less a clear explanation of how I feel. I’m sweating in Jasha’s coat, but I’d be shivering if I took it off.

Nothing is right. Nothing is comfortable.

I swallow the lump in my throat and meet Jasha’s brilliant green eyes. “I just need to know the man I’m having a baby with. I don’t want to hate you anymore, but it’s difficult to know what to feel when I know so little about you.”

He laughs, but his face is dead serious. I know he feels the same.

“Don’t hold this against me, please,” I say, pulling my hand out from under his. “Neither of us asked for this, but I’d like to figure it out together. Can we do that?”

He nods, his eyes drifting over the chess board and then down to his lap. Usually, his chin is held high with pride, but tonight, he’s so deep in thought that he’s given up that façade. I get to see the true Jasha, someone that few people have ever seen before.

“If I tell you my story, then I want to know yours. No lies. No leaving things out. I want to know everything too,” he says.

I nod, feeling confident that this will break the wall of frustration between us. “I’ll tell you anything and everything.”

A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth, and he nods along with me. “Okay, but be prepared for some pretty dark shit. My life hasn’t been a walk in the park.”

I brace myself for his story, trying to see things from his eyes, not from my own. I grew up in a very sheltered way, and I never saw all the horrible things regular people have to go through. I was never poor, never had to witness violence at home, and when I graduated high school, the world felt like it belonged to me.

I doubt Jasha’s life was anything like that.

“Nikolai and I were always together, even when we grew up and started making money. We always knew to stick together, that two heads were better than one, even if we didn’t always get along,” Jasha begins, his eyes losing focus as he sinks deeper into his mind. “Things are a bit different now that he’s married, but we still see each other often. I think... I think having a baby will actually bring us together again. Like, our kids could play together and stuff. I’d like that.”

I’m on the verge of tears already, but I try to hide it from Jasha. I want to hear his entire story. I want him to open his heart to me, and allow me to see the man behind the villain. I can’t spoil it by being a sobbing mess.

Jasha looks at me, studying my face like he's trying to figure out if he's said something wrong.

"Go on," I say softly. "I want to hear more."

"Well," he says, scratching the stubble on his neck, "Nikolai and I got into the Bratva business through our father, who passed down his house to us when he died. We inherited the business he had built, too, and transformed it into a formidable empire together."

"Wow, that must've taken a lot of effort," I say with genuine admiration.

He shrugs, as though everything he's ever accomplished is nothing. "We did what we were told, mostly. Our mother told us to always stick together, no matter what, and we took that to heart."

I can hardly imagine a man like Jasha having a mother, but I guess it makes sense. He's a lot nicer to women than he is to men, even if he's not nice at all most of the time.

Jasha smiles at me, like he knows what I'm thinking. "Nikolai is the one who's always talking about our mother. He knew her better than I did, since he's a few years older and she died when we were younger."

"Oh?" I ask, not wanting to pry but needing more information. He said he'd tell me everything, and that includes the painful parts.

"She had cancer. I think the stress and loneliness is what caused our father to die a few years after she did, because before she died, he was a very lively man. He'd chase us around the yard every evening after work, even if he was tired."

A bittersweet smile appears on his face, and he shakes his head fondly at the memory. "One time, Nikolai waited around the side of the house for what felt like hours for him to get home, though it was probably more like thirty minutes. We had our water guns ready, but he must've seen us or something, because he parked the car somewhere else and snuck up on us with a water gun of his own. Jesus, we were



soaked after that. He didn't show any mercy on us, but we wouldn't have shown him any either."

I laugh with tears still in my eyes. "He sounds like a great father."

"He was, but he was gone too soon. Nikolai and I were basically just a couple of teenagers with a big old house and a business to figure out on our own. It aged us quickly, but Nikolai likes to say that I still act like a teenager."

"He's kind of right," I reply, grinning playfully.

He gives me a sly smile in return. "I think we both know I'm much more capable than a teenager could be. Regardless, I'm the leader of the Bratva now, so there isn't much time to act like anything else."

"This must feel like a vacation, then," I say, gesturing to our quiet surroundings.

He nods in agreement. "Kind of, yes. But things are always calm before all hell breaks loose, and I'm still expecting that to happen. I don't think we're in the clear just because we're picking up fuel in a little while."

"It feels like things will never be in the clear, to be honest. This might be normal for you, but it's been a wild ride for me," I admit.

"Brace yourself, then," he says, his expression hardening and his eyes growing cold. "It's still a long way to Texas."



## Jasha

I don't want to scare Lola, even though it seems like I do. She just needs to know that danger can present itself at any time, and the Italians don't forget or forgive so easily. If there's an attack, it'll come suddenly. We won't have time to prepare for than we already are.

I'm the one in charge of keeping her safe, though, so it's not her place to worry about what could happen. My men are on the lookout, and will inform me if something arises that needs immediate attention.

Until then, we still have time to kill, and I'd like to get to know Lola better.

*A lot* better.

Especially since I'm going to be marrying her, but I don't think she's ready to hear more about that part of the deal yet. This could've been avoided had we not had a baby together, but that's already behind us, and I've already made up my mind.

That baby is mine, and so is Lola.

"I need to know more about you, too," I say, messing with a pawn on the chess board between us. "Unless you have questions to ask me about my story."

She rolls her tongue across her teeth, thinking for a moment before narrowing her eyes. "Yes, actually. I think you skipped over all the dark shit you mentioned before. Other than your parents, I'm sure you've experienced some things that would make falling asleep at night difficult."

"I have no trouble sleeping," I say, but that's a lie. I actually struggle to sleep at all most nights. The best I've slept was when I was holding Lola, but I'm not prepared to admit that to her. Not yet.

"Well, I'm sure you've done things that would make normal people lose sleep, so spill the beans," she says, crossing her

arms and leaning back. “Other than killing the train security guard, what horrible things have you done? I need to know who I procreated with.”

I chuckle, but the dark truth can't be hidden with humor. She's not going to like what she hears, but I've committed to coming clean. I'm going to 'spill the beans,' as she so eloquently puts it.

I start with the less conspicuous ones, the people who probably deserved it and would eventually be killed by someone else if I hadn't gotten to the first. Those are the crooks and low-level thugs who nobody missed. Lola doesn't seem too bothered by them as I list out everyone I can remember.

But then I move on to the ones who were less clear-cut. “A farmer in Russia,” I say thinking so far back that I have to clear a few cobwebs out of the back of my brain. “He was sitting on an oil well and didn't want to budge,” I explain. “He was probably abusing his daughter, though, and she seemed happy when he disappeared one day. Nobody came looking for him, and I bought the land from the girl for a generous sum.”

“Probably?” Lola asks, raising an eyebrow.

I shrug. “There's no way to know for sure. People out in those parts of the country aren't terribly open.”

She sighs. “Anyone else?”

“I try not to kill anyone who didn't have it coming, but I will admit to killing a politician who I can't name. I'm pretty sure his family still hasn't gotten over it, but it was him or me at that point. He was cracking down on crime in the area, and I needed that to change before I ended up behind bars,” I explain. “I didn't pull the trigger, though. I try not to, these days, but sometimes I need the satisfaction of knowing they're truly dead.”

“Satisfaction?” she asks, looking thoroughly horrified.

“Perhaps a poor choice of words.”

“Not perhaps. Definitely.”

I rub the back of my neck, trying to think of another way to say it. “Well, you want to make sure the people you need gone are actually gone, and not in hiding. Hitmen aren’t always that reliable, even if you pay them enough. If you want someone dead, sometimes it’s best to do it yourself.”

“Sounds a bit messy. Aren’t you eventually going to end up in prison for that?” Lola asks, giving me a doubtful, and thoroughly unimpressed stare.

I grin, even though I know it’s just going to irritate her. “I’ll try not to.”

She groans, pressing her palm into her forehead. “Jasha, that’s not going to be good enough for me. If you want to be a father, you need to be there for our baby. You can’t get your ass thrown in prison forever.”

“I won’t,” I reply with the utmost confidence. “I have enough connections to where that’s very unlikely.”

She holds up her index finger. “You just contradicted yourself.”

I shrug. “It happens. Now, if we’re done talking about my dark and evil past, I’d like to hear about your life. I’m sure it’s not all rainbows and butterflies.”

“It mostly is,” she says, a hint of playfulness in her eyes.

It’s good to see her bounce back from my story so quickly. It makes me feel like she might be tough enough to handle this lifestyle. She’s full of surprises, and I find myself casting less and less doubt her way the more I learn about her.

“Tell me everything,” I say, finding myself drawn to her story unlike anyone else’s. Normally, I’m quite bored by what other people have to say, especially the inert women of my past, but Lola has managed to capture my interest repeatedly. I’m sure she will this time, too.

“I think you already know some of it,” she says, twirling a strand of her hair. “Normal upbringing, only child, and –”

“Only child. That explains a lot.”

She scoffs. “Let me finish before you start dissecting my personality, please.”

“Sorry,” I mutter.

“Anyway, like I was saying, I had a pretty normal childhood. The only thing that set me apart from the other kids was the fact that I was moving all the time. I guess that’s why I like driving trains. I’m always on the move.”

“What prompted your parents to move all the time?” I ask.

“My dad wasn’t great at holding down jobs,” she answers with a laugh. “He could get through an interview alright, but I think he hated having to obey orders from his boss. He got fired pretty often, but he always made it seem like an exciting new adventure when I was a kid.”

I press my finger into my lips, as though to silence myself, but I can’t help but to make a comment. “I see where you get your rebellious nature from.”

“Perhaps,” she says, shaking her hair like she couldn’t care in the least. She likes to play everything off as small and insignificant when it doesn’t make her look good, and parade around her successes like they’re extremely important.

I know the game well because I do it too. It’s all about power, and Lola likes the roll of the dice to be in her favor just as much as I do. She’s just not as willing to admit it.

She pouts her lips slightly, looking out the window as the purple sky lightens a little faster. I can’t believe we’ve been together this long already. Hours feel like minutes when I’m with her.

“Always on the move,” she says, her words a quiet hum against the deep rumble of the speeding train.

“And that’s the entire story?” I ask.

She glances at me, then looks back to the window. Her eyes lose focus. “Pretty much. A few failed relationships later, and I’m pregnant with a Bratva boss’s baby. I don’t think anyone would’ve expected that kind of twist.”

She's right, and I'm forced to consider how extreme this is for her. Having a baby is a big deal, but changing your lifestyle entirely, being forced to leave the civilian life of comfort and safety behind, is something entirely different.

Before she met me, her life was simple, albeit a bit boring.

Now, neither boredom or complacency will ever catch up to her, for better or worse.

"It gets easier," I say, shifting a piece on the chess board for lack of anything else to do with my hands. "This lifestyle, I mean. Once you get into it, there's a lot of good things that come with it."

"I'm not convinced," she says, but there's a hint of a smile on her face. She's challenging me to persuade her.

"Money, power, and freedom, for starters. Plus, you get me," I say, tilting my head to the side and grinning.

Her eyelids fall halfway down her eyes and her expression goes blank. "Oh, joy..."

"Not convinced?"

"I thought you were telling me the pros, not the cons."

I flick my fingers up one by one as I count the benefits out for her. "You never have to work again, you can have anything you want, and you don't have to travel all the time unless it's for vacations overseas. Our baby will have everything they could possibly ever want or need, including the best education and access to the Family funds once they turn eighteen."

"I don't want them to be spoiled," she replies, but I see excitement dancing in her eyes.

"They'll be spoiled rotten, and so will you," I say with a smirk.

She lets out a long sigh and leans back in her seat, looking out the window again as she tries to come up with another way to push back against the life she's now contractually committed to. She might think she has a way out, but if she keeps insisting that the baby is mine, she's going to live with the Bratva. That's the way this works.

“It’s a lot to process,” she finally says. “But... do I really have a choice?”

“No,” I reply simply.

She nods, pursing her lips as she comes to terms with her new life. “Then I’m with you, but only if you treat me right.”

“You’ll be treated like a goddess,” I assure her.

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Her attitude turns me on more than it should. I can have anything I want in the Bratva, but somehow, this woman thinks I have to get on my knees and beg to have her. If I wanted to, I could slap a pair of handcuffs on her pretty wrists and carry her back to my lair over my shoulder, but that wouldn’t be nearly as much fun as making her fall in love with me and go willingly.

Enthusiasm is sexy, especially when it’s earned.

As I open my mouth to tell Lola all the wonderful ways I’m going to prove myself to her, physically and emotionally, the door to our cozy little compartment slides open and two of my guards step in.





## Lola

I don't think I'll ever get used to the company Jasha keeps. "Helicopter spotted on the west side, following the train," one of them barks with a voice that suggests a pack a day habit. Maybe two.

Jasha jumps up so fast that he would flip the table were it not bolted to the floor. "What type of aircraft? Military? Law enforcement?"

"Appears to be civilian. Possibly a scout," the man answers.

Jasha rubs his chin, his eyebrows drawn together in a scowl. The tension in the room is palpable, and neither man moves an inch. Jasha's shoulders are drawn up an inch higher, and his stance is aggressive, as though he's preparing to leap across the room and strangle his messenger.

I take on Jasha's tension as my own. I've always been empathetic to the point where it's painful. Maybe that's why I always avoid people. I make their problems my own, and then the stress becomes too great to bear.

My teeth are clenched so hard that they groan, only finding relief when Jasha's deep voice rolls through me. "Keep an eye on it, and watch for trouble. They're most likely to strike when the train is stationary, and that will happen soon. Be prepared, and inform the rest of the men to do the same."

"Yes, sir," the man replies, his gravelly voice breaking me out of the trance Jasha's put me in.

"You may leave," Jasha says, motioning for him to go.

The man turns around and leaves our compartment, leaving us in a dreadful sort of silence, like the kind that settles on a house after a family member has died. Nobody knows what to say. It's hard to know what words would help, if any could help at all.

A buzz from Jasha's pocket cracks the silence open like a rotten egg.

“Must be Nikolai,” he mutters, pulling out his phone and frowning at the glowing screen. “The fuel has been dropped twenty miles from our location, right by the tracks. Nikolai has already left.” He looks up at me, his serious expression finally lifting a bit. “I guess you’ll have to wait until we get to the house in Texas to meet him.”

“That’s fine,” I reply, hoping to smooth over any of the tension remaining in the room. I just don’t want us to die. I don’t care about anything else.

“Another game of chess, maybe?” Jasha asks, as though our interruption was nothing of any importance.

“I don’t even want to look at a chess board right now,” I say, holding out my hands to block the black and white pieces from view as I stand up.

“I didn’t think so,” he says softly. “Well, we’d better go to the control room, then. We’ll need to make a stop soon.”

I follow him out into the hallway. The train sways abruptly to the left as we walk toward the control room. I’m used to the way the train moves, but Jasha clearly isn’t, and his shoulder hits the window with a loud thud.

“Fucking hell,” he mutters, raising his fist to the window like he’s about to punch out the glass.

I snicker, and he shoots me an irritated glare.

“You’re the one who insisted we go so fast,” I remind him. “This train does better at lower speeds, especially around the bends. It’s not a cargo train.”

“But it’s still carrying cargo,” he replies, waving his hand in a dismissive manner, as though his statement justifies the speed at which we’re traveling. He hates being wrong, but I find it more endearing than annoying, especially when he falls against a cabin door the moment the train swerves to the right.

He curses under his breath, walking noticeably faster.

When we arrive in the control room, I find everything as I left it, save for the gauge for the fuel level, which is dangerously low. I didn’t realize how much fuel we had used until now. It’s

a good thing we're getting more, because we'd never make it to Texas at this rate.

"How many miles to the drop zone, exactly?" I ask as I slip into my seat.

"Probably eighteen now," he says, glancing at his phone.

I nod, leaning back a bit in my seat. "I'm not going to slow it down now, but it takes about two miles to stop at the speed we're going. If you want to be precise about where we stop, though, we might want to slow down three miles before the drop zone."

"That's fine," he says, but his expression is twisted in palpable concern.

"Is that too much?"

"We'll have to take the risk. I doubt Lorenzo and his goons will be able to catch up to us so quickly. They know where we are, but it's more likely they're going to try to cut us off before we arrive in Texas. They won't be anticipating this stop."

My stomach drops, and the coldness of the room bleeds in through the loose sleeves of my oversized coat. "Will they be able to cut us off?" I ask.

He lays his hand on my shoulder, squeezing it firmly. This time, the heat of his skin does little to warm me. "There's a chance, yes. We must be prepared for anything."

That wasn't the answer I wanted, but at least he's being honest with me. It means I can trust him, and that's the most important thing. Emotions are fleeting, but trust and loyalty are the paradigm for a stable relationship.

Jasha leans into my ear, his breath sending a fresh wave of nervousness through my body. "I'm not going to let anyone hurt you, Lola. I promise."

I look up at him, feeling shy from how close he is and looking down at my lap after just a second. No matter how many times I'm intimate with him, it's still overwhelming to meet his gaze.

“I trust you,” I whisper, speaking into my laps instead of at him.

He squeezes my shoulder again, a bit softer this time. “We’re in this together. You’re part of the Family now, just like Nikolai and his wife and child. We take care of our own in the Bratva.”

The coldness in the room is replaced by the burning heat of realization. He really is serious about me being part of the Bratva now, for better or for worse. I’m in this with him, and his problems are mine now, including the Italians.

But with danger comes protection, and there’s nobody I’d rather have on my side than Jasha and his men. They’re dangerous and capable, a formidable enemy and a powerful ally. I couldn’t be in better hands.

“Maybe you should learn how to shoot, though,” Jasha says in an absentminded way.

My heart leaps into my throat, and I spin around in my chair to face him fully. “What?!”

He looks a bit startled. “Oh, I was saying that maybe it would be a good idea. Not now, of course. There’s no time to teach you enough to be helpful, but... eventually you should know.”

“I’m not shooting people,” I say, feeling a new kind of heat run through my body.

“I’d prefer if you were able to,” he replies. It’s clear that he doesn’t see anything wrong with that. He’s even confused that I’m so bothered by it.

“Okay, so here’s the thing,” I begin, knowing I’m going to have to break this down for him so that he can realize what he’s asking of me. “I’ve been happily living my life without the need for a gun since forever. I’ve never felt like I needed one, and it’s not just because there was a guard on the train. I just don’t put myself in situations that are dangerous enough to warrant me having to shoot someone.”

“I’m not saying it *will* happen.”

“You’re saying it *could* happen, and that’s already too much for me. I’m not used to this Bratva thing. This isn’t how I was raised.”

He still isn’t convinced, and I can see it written all over his face. He looks like someone is yanking out his chest hairs. “Just give it try sometime. I’m going to protect you, but everyone in the Bratva is armed. Even Nikolai’s wife is.”

“And her baby, too?” I ask sarcastically.

“When she’s old enough, yes,” he replies weakly.

I roll my eyes. “I’m sure Nikolai’s wife is a huge fan of that idea.”

“I’m not sure,” he replies, failing to pick up on my sarcasm.

“You know what? We can talk about this later. Right now, I’m more interested in getting us stopped and refueled without dying.”

He nods, falling back into his stoic seriousness. “You’re right. Let’s focus on the task at hand.”

I check the gauge cluster as we approach the drop zone, praying that the fuel Nikolai has dropped will be enough for the rest of the journey. This train is eating up more fuel than it should, and that concerns me. It could be the weight of the unexpected cargo, but there’s also the possibility of a leak.

I grit my teeth, considering whether I should bring it up to Jasha. He’s going to be freezing his ass off outside without a jacket for at least thirty minutes as he refuels the train, and checking the tank will delay us even more.

But losing fuel and failing to reach Texas would be a death sentence.

I sigh, making some adjustments to our speed as we prepare for the stop. I’ve done this a thousand times, but the controls feel foreign to me on this frigid winter morning. It’s like they’ve realized I’m leaving them soon, and they’ve already moved on.

Once I’ve put the brakes on, I turn to Jasha and give him a thin smile of remorse. “I think we have a problem.”



## Jasha

Lola didn't want to come out with me, but I need her to help me locate the possible leak. She's the expert on trains, not me, and I don't have time to learn.

"Holy shit, it's cold," she says rubbing her small hands together the moment we step out into the frozen morning snow. A thin layer of ice sits atop the snow, shattering with each step we take toward the fuel tank.

Even though the fuel tank is a short walk away from the door, I'm glad I was able to borrow a jacket from one of my guards. I have exceptionally wide shoulders, so it fits quite snug, but I didn't want to steal Lola's. I'm sure she appreciates how long it is, especially since all she's wearing to cover her legs is a skirt.

The air is so crisp that it hurts my nose to inhale, but once I catch the scent of diesel fuel floating through the air, I take a deep breath to locate it. It could be coming from the giant grey and white camouflage container sitting three yards away from me in the snow...

Or it could be coming from the train itself.

"Is that smell normal?" I ask, leaning toward the train and taking another sniff.

Lola leans in with me, wrinkling her nose at the pungent aroma. "Definitely not."

"And it's not the fuel container," I say, gesturing toward the camouflage crate and phrasing my statement more like a question.

"It could be," Lola says, her eyes narrowing. "Let's check it. Looking for a leak in the train's gas tank is going to be a lot more difficult, especially in this snow."

I take one last deep inhale before turning away from the train. If it's leaking, we're in huge trouble, but I don't want to waste time on it unless I can rule out the smell coming from the fuel



drop. A few thousand pounds of diesel fuel has to give off some kind of smell.

With the frozen hairs in my nostrils singed by the acrid scent, I trudge down to the fuel container and risk another deep inhale.

It has a smell, but nothing like the one coming from the train.

Fuck.

I look over my shoulder at Lola and grimace. “The smell is coming from the train. Any chance you know where to look for a leak?”

“I’m just the engineer,” she replies. “We have other people who come in and fix up the trains.”

My chest tightens. “We don’t have the luxury of waiting around for other people to come fix the train. A leak could ruin this whole operation and make everyone on board this train sitting ducks.”

She looks back at the train, shaking her head. “We don’t even have anything to patch the train with.”

I grit my teeth, tempted to yell at her to blow off some of the steam that’s building up inside of me, but I know it wouldn’t help. I have a habit of pushing people away when I start caring about them, and I need to learn to control myself. Lola isn’t just some woman. She’s the mother of my child and my future wife.

I suck in a cold breath and let it out slowly. “Okay, let’s get this tank filled up, and we’ll see how quick we’re leaking fuel once we start back up again.”

“Are you sure?” she asks, her forehead creased with worry.

I walk back to her, placing my hand on her shoulder to provide assurance. “In the worst-case scenario, we can have Nikolai come back with more fuel. All we have to do is get to Texas.”

She nods, and I take her back inside the train, ordering my men to go out and hook up the fuel and start pumping. It’s going to take at least twenty minutes to pump that much fuel manually, but we don’t have any other choice.

“I’ll go look at the fuel tank and try to find the leak while they’re pumping the fuel,” I mutter as I guide Lola back onto the train.

“Do you want me to come look with you?” she asks.

I shake my head. “It’s too cold for you and the baby out there. You need to stay inside.”

“That’s awfully considerate of you,” she says, looking slightly doubtful but pleased by my thoughtfulness.

“I’m not a monster.”

She laughs a bit. “You’re allowed to be, so long as it’s not directed at me.”

A bit of tension melts off my shoulders, and I take her hand into mine, squeezing it lightly. “Then I’m your monster, Lola. And I’m going to tear apart anyone who dares even look your way.”

“Seems... excessive,” she replies, but her eyes say something else entirely.

I smirk. “Excessive is what I’m best at.”

The air between us becomes magnetized, but I’m forced to tear myself away from her instead of tearing the clothes off her body. I swear that when we get to Texas, I’m not holding back. I’m going to have her again and again...

And again.

Our fingertips linger together for a moment as I step away. Leaving Lola is always difficult, but now it’s pure agony having to swap the soft warmth of her body for the unforgiving cold.

I’d better make this quick.

The compacted snow crunches under my feet as I retrace my steps back to the fuel tank. My men already have it hooked up with the hose, pumping fresh fuel into the large metal chamber that holds our dwindling supply.

I turn the flashlight on my phone on, peeking under the side of the train to get a look at the bottom. I’m mainly looking for

moisture or dampness on the tracks. That would indicate a leak, and it would also tell me how heavy it is.

At first, it's difficult to make sense of the intricate metal underside of the train. There are so many rods, pipes, and bolts that it would take an expert to locate something out of place, but after a moment, I realize that there's a slow drip coming from the center of the tank.

So, there is a leak, but it's not major. It might even be something that we could patch up, given the right tools. The problem is that the only tools we have on this train do the opposite of patch holes. They put holes in things, preferably people we disagree with.

I tap the fuel tank a few times with the side of my phone, but the drip remains steady. I don't think it's going to get worse, but I'm starting to regret not asking Nikolai to send my fuel. We could've filled the tank up all the way, even if it slowed us down by another ten minutes. A little extra time is much better than getting stuck twenty miles from home with the entire Italian Mafia on our ass.

I sigh, pulling myself out from under the train and looking toward the fuel container that was left for us. It's already a quarter of the way empty, which means we're on track to get this train filled and back on the move in another fifteen minutes.

I clap my hands, the sound echoing through the bleak, frozen terrain. "Keep it going. We can't afford to slow down," I belt.

My men move like one big machine, holding the pipe in place and pumping the fuel together. When one grows tired, the next in line takes over to keep the pace as quick as possible.

I take a moment to admire the efficiency of the capable men I handpicked to come along on this journey. If I had known I'd be transporting even more precious cargo than I had previously assumed, I would've brought the entire force with me.

But the men I have are formidable, and together, we should be able to handle what Lorenzo and his goons throw at us. They

haven't had time to prepare for this. Whatever they spring on us won't be as well organized as they would like.

It's contest to see who can scramble together the best fighters together on a moment's notice, and I still have the edge. Even with the slow drip of the fuel tank acting like an hourglass to diminish my advantage, I believe we can make it to Texas with the train, the heirloom, and most importantly, Lola.



## Lola

Jasha swings back into the train like he's taking it for a joyride, a crooked smile painted on his face like a Halloween mask. I know it's fake, but he tries to play it cool and fool me with it anyway.

"Everything's good," he says cheerfully. "All filled up and ready to roll."

I cross my arms, pursing my lips at his obvious attempt to deflect how much trouble we're in. "Give it to me straight, Jasha."

"Well, it's got a bit of an upward curve to it, but I can do my best," he says with a wink.

I roll my eyes. "Get serious. You went to check the leak. Did you find anything?"

"A small drip," he replies with a shrug. "Nothing major."

I shake my head at how terrible he is at downplaying the gravity of the leak. "You know, I ran the numbers just now while you were out there, and we're using twenty-five percent more fuel than we should be. If you're trying to cut it close with how much fuel you put in the tank, we're going to be ten-thousand tons of dead weight sitting on the tracks long before we reach Texas."

The goofy expression melts off his face faster than taking a blowtorch to a crayon. "Is it that bad? The leak didn't look that severe when I checked it."

"It's pretty bad. Are you sure it was just a small leak? You don't use that much fuel on a minor leak."

He drums his fingers against his chin for a moment, but ultimately says nothing. He's too deep in thought, pointing to the control room and expecting me to follow him there as he speeds off down the hallway.

I groan, but I have no choice but to follow him. I want to be in Texas just as much as he does, perhaps more. Because he

knows how to fight, and the only thing that's going to happen to me if push comes to shove is that I'm going to get killed.

Jasha's already in the control room, leaning over the controls like he knows what to do with them when I catch up to him. He's still drumming his fingers against his chin.

"Any brilliant ideas?" I ask as I come up beside him.

"Start the train," he snaps.

"I see that your politeness has come to an end once again," I reply, pushing past him and sitting down in my chair.

"Sorry, I'm just thinking. I need to see the fuel level before we leave."

"Doing some math?" I ask, shifting the train into drive and letting out a sigh as it shudders to a start.

"Something like that. How long does it take the fuel gauge to update?" he asks, keeping his tone a little softer this time. At least I have an influence on him now. When I first met him, he was completely out of control.

"It's immediate. What you see now is what you get," I reply.

He pinches the bridge of his nose and groans.

"Is it not enough?" I ask, looking at the fuel indicator. "We look okay on the fuel. It's not full, but it's probably enough."

"Probably?" he asks, putting his hand down and giving me a look of disbelief. "Unless we put this train in neutral and roll downhill the rest of the way, that's just not going to be enough fuel."

"So, what are we going to do?" I ask, my throat tightening as desperation creeps in. "I thought you knew how to handle this."

He laughs, but there's not even a hint of amusement in his voice. "I know exactly how to handle this, but you're not going to like it."

I don't like the look in his eyes. It's cold, something I would expect from a calculated army general right before the most

daring battle of his life. It's not the look I want to see from the man who is supposed to protect me.

As though he can read my mind, he places his hand on my thigh and gives it a reassuring squeeze. "Nothing bad is going to happen to you. You have my word."

"And what good is your word?" I ask, panic twisting my voice into a thin squeak.

"My word is my life," he replies, his voice deep and commanding. "And I will protect you with it. You're going to have to trust me on this one. There's no other way out of this."

"You still haven't explained what we're going to do. Can't you ask Nikolai for more fuel?"

He sighs, shaking his head slowly as the train picks up speed. "We need more time if we want more fuel, and we're all out of that. The Pessolano Family already has us in their sights, and they're moving in. We're going to have to be prepared for an attack."

I try to fight the panic that's rising in my chest, but it clutches my heart like a grenade, threatening to tear it out of my chest and toss it out into the frozen wasteland flying past us outside. I can barely breathe, and Jasha's words do little to release the tension that's petrified my body.

Terror has taken me hostage.

"I know this isn't easy for you to understand, but I have decades of experience in combat," Jasha says, pulling away from the controls and running his fingers through his thick hair. He spins around and points at me. "You, on the other hand, have no experience, so consider this an opportunity to learn."

"I'm pregnant, Jasha," I reply, trying to keep from sounding hysteric and probably failing. "I can't just pick up a gun and charge into battle like you can!"

"Lola, listen, I know you're freaking out right now because you sound like a bird that's getting strangled to death. Calm down a little bit and let me explain what we're going to do.



You don't need to shoot anyone, and you're not going to be in danger. Let's start there. Does that make you feel better?"

"No," I reply, completely bewildered by his attempt to calm me down. It's not working at all.

"Okay, look at the numbers on the gauge again," he says, jumping back toward the controls. He presses his finger into the gauge cluster and looks at me. "That's not enough fuel to get us to Texas. So, we have a couple of options. In fact, I'll let you choose." He leans back and crosses his arms. "The first one is what we'd be doing if we wanted to get ourselves killed. We just keep going and hope we have enough fuel to make it to Texas. Obviously, Lorenzo and his gang of angry thieves are going to try to take the train back, and they might just succeed if we allow them to catch us off guard."

"Okay, obviously not happening," I reply, trying to get my emotions under control for long enough to reason with Jasha. "But that doesn't mean we have to resort to violence. We can ditch the train and run."

"Not happening," he snaps the moment I finish talking. It's like he wasn't even listening.

"Okay, what's your other great idea?" I ask, spinning around in my seat to face him fully. I cross my arms, awaiting an answer that's probably only going to piss me off further.

"You're cute when you're angry," he chimes, allowing a smile to slip onto his serious face.

I roll my eyes. "All the jokes in the world aren't going to make me forgive you for what you've put me through. I was thinking I might actually give you a chance, but now I'm realizing once again that you're out of your goddamn mind."

"I'm sure you're right, but you still haven't heard my other ideas," he replies, dodging what should've been a big hit to his ego.

"I'm not sure that I want to," I reply.

"You want a spanking or something?" he asks, raising a thick eyebrow. "Because I can make that happen."

His words send a tremor through me that I cover up with more defiance. I don't want him to be able to cut through my anger and use my attraction to him against me. He's manipulative like that, and I'm not falling for it again.

At least, not right this very moment.

"Put a hand on me and I'm pulling the emergency brake on this train and fucking up the wheels for good. You'll have to get out and push the train yourself if you want it to move after that," I snarl, leaning toward the controls and hovering my hand over a red switch.

He doesn't even flinch. "Very cute, babe, but I know you're not suicidal. You want to get out of this alive just as much as I do, and you need *me* for that." He pushes his thumb into his chest, his upper lip curling with aggression. "So, you're going to shut that pretty mouth of yours and listen to what I have to say."

I'm seething but I have nothing left to do but listen to him. I void his eyes though. I refuse to listen to him with the respect he thinks he deserves.

"Your second choice is going to be more appealing," Jasha assures me, but I don't have much confidence in what he's about to propose. I know it's going to involve violence, and that's something I'm not sure I'll ever get used to.

A moment of silence falls between us, anticipation building in the air before he drops the second option on me. "We're going to give them the train," he says.

My head turns so fast that I pinch a nerve in my neck. Rubbing it, I look up at him with a scowl. "You're not serious, are you?"

"As serious as a man can be," he replies with a straight face. "We're going to rock Lorenzo's world."

I move my hand to my forehead, using my fingertips to rub out the tension that's threatening to make my head explode. "I know this isn't as simple as you're making it sound."

"It's not," he admits, "But it's also going to keep you out of danger."

“Alright. Explain.”

A smile flickers across his face, and he nods to the door. “Let’s have a cup of coffee and I’ll break it down for you.”

“I can’t drink coffee,” I reply, holding my belly.

“Tea, then,” he replies, his voice softening when he looks down at my stomach. “We’re going to need you two nice and warm for what we’re about to do.”



## Lola

“‘Y ou couldn’t just drop me off in the nearest town and do this by yourself?’ I ask as Jasha pours me a steaming cup of tea.

Power has been returned to the train since we’ve given up trying to conserve fuel, and the windows are all fogged up. It almost feels like everything is back to normal, like a little winter train ride with my new lover, but that’s just an illusion. Chaos waits for us on the horizon.

For the time being, though, I’m just happy to be truly warm again.

Jasha takes a sip of black coffee from a little paper cup, swirling it around in his mouth like a fine wine before swallowing it. It’s fitting that he would drink his coffee black, but I don’t see how he could possibly enjoy it that way. I need about a hundred grams of sugar and half a container of creamer to fully enjoy a cup of coffee.

“You’re a target, whether you want to believe it or not,” Jasha says, sitting down across from me as I blow on my peppermint tea. “Carrying the heir to the Antonov Bratva comes with responsibilities, and one of those is to make sure you don’t die.”

I laugh. “Yeah, well, I was managing just fine until I ran into you again.”

“That’s not something we can take back,” he replies, his voice enriched into a velvet tone by the heat of his drink. It’s almost making me forget that I’m angry at him.

I look down at my tea, holding it tighter and savoring the heat through the thin paper cup. “Would you take it back?”

“What part?” he asks.

“All of it.”

“Never,” he replies, and the sincerity of his words surprise me. I thought I was a burden to him, but he doesn’t see me that

way. Maybe he did at the beginning, but things have changed. No matter how hard I push against him, he doesn't give up on me. On us.

I'm impressed just as much as I am terrified.

"You wouldn't take anything back?" I ask, studying his face closely this time. I'm momentarily distracted by the crow's feet pressed into the corners of his eyes, a sign of years of laughter, or perhaps too many summers in the sun without shades.

"Honestly, the only thing I wish I could've taken back is leaving you the first time."

He can't keep getting away with twisting my emotions like this. He's too good at it, making me wilt under the heat of his gaze, melting into a puddle on the floor of the train with every beautifully cruel word that slips out of his wicked lips.

I'm prone to believe the things he tells me, but there's always the chance he's just an incredibly good liar. But that would mean he was only pretending to be a bad liar just a few minutes earlier.

"You really feel that way about me?" I ask, finally taking a sip of my tea to calm the bundle of nerves in my stomach.

"I do," he replies, speaking the words like we're getting married.

Which is something he mentioned before. I should ask again if he's serious about that, but I'm not sure I'm ready to hear his answer.

"I only hope you can forgive me for the first time I left you. It won't happen again. I've come to see the error of my ways," he says, smiling a bit as he takes another sip of his coffee. He puts it down on the table between us. "But that also means you're stuck with me, whether you want to be or not."

"I guess I'm lucky you're so handsome," I reply with a playful smile.

He grins, eating up my compliment without trying to deflect it like most people would. He isn't a humble man, but he doesn't

need to be. He can have anything and everything in the world, which makes it all the more unbelievable that he's chosen me.

He rolls his tongue under his lips for a second before diving back into the real reason we came here. "We're going to set up a trap for Lorenzo. He thinks he's going to cut us off further down the tracks, but we're not going to go that far. We're going to make him come to us."

I tilt my head to the side, intrigued by his idea. "How so?"

He leans in, lacing his fingers together like he's hiding a secret in the weathered palms of his hands. "You and I are going to leave the train with a select few of my men, leaving obvious tracks through the snow so that Lorenzo believes the train has been abandoned. It's believable at this point."

"And really what we should be doing," I add.

He laughs through his nose. "No, I don't do compromises. It's all or nothing in this world."

"So, we're not really leaving the train."

"We are," he says, one side of his mouth twitching up in a smirk. "But only some of us, and we won't be going far. We need to be able to see the train and strike when they arrive to reclaim it."

"What if they don't?" I ask, worried about freezing my ass off in the snow for nothing.

"They will. The cargo is too valuable to leave sitting around like that. If they leave it, they're missing out on millions of dollars' worth of precious stones," he explains. "And they don't want us coming back for it either, so they'll be quick to come down on it, like vultures to a dying beast."

"And they won't suspect a trap?" I ask, raising a doubtful eyebrow.

"Our job is to convince them that we've really abandoned it. Of course, they're going to approach it with caution, but if we park it somewhere away from civilization and enough of us leave the train to create tracks through the snow, they'll believe we had no choice but to cut our loses and run."

“Again, that’s probably what we should be doing,” I say, but I know he’s not going to listen to me. He’s in too deep, and he’s not the type to turn back once he’s sunk his teeth in. I know that about him already.

Jasha gives me an impatient look. “We’re going to *pretend* to give up, and that’s how we’re going to win. Lorenzo and his goons will come down on the train and try to figure out if anyone is inside. Once they realize it’s probably empty, they’ll board it, and then we’ll hit them from both sides – inside and out.”

It’s not a bad plan, but I feel like it’s more complicated and dangerous than he’s making it sound. It’s really easy to turn off my brain and trust Jasha when he’s talking with this much confidence, but I have a baby to consider. It’s not just me.

“You’re hesitant,” he says, taking a sip of his coffee.

I resist the urge to say something sarcastic. I know he’s just trying to help, and I probably don’t have a choice now that I’m having his baby. I’m damned if I do, damned if I don’t, but I think the damning on the *don’t* end would spell certain death for me.

“I see where you’re coming from, but I’d like to know what kind of numbers we’re dealing with. Like, how many guys do you think Lorenzo is bringing in?” I ask.

Jasha’s eyes light up immediately, and he dives into another long-winded explanation. If we weren’t talking about killing people, it’d probably be cute.

Maybe it still is.

“The helicopter that came by could probably only hold four or five people, so I doubt they’ll return in that, and the only thing that’s fast and agile enough to catch up to us out here is another helicopter, probably a retrofitted cargo helicopter. I’ve used those before, and they probably fit around ten people.”

“Any chance they’ll bring multiple?”

“On such a short notice? No. I bet they won’t even be able to fill one of them. My estimate is less than ten, but they’ll be



heavily armored. That's why it's important for us to take them by surprise."

Without any experience, it's difficult for me to poke any holes in his plan. Ultimately, he's the boss, and I need to put my trust in him if we're going to make this work long-term.

I bury my face in my tea for a moment, allowing the peppermint to soothe the anxiety that has a vice grip on my internal organs. Jasha reaches over the table and rubs my arm, and I let out a sigh I feel like I've been holding in since I sat down.

I look up at him, our eyes locking and my heart nearly stopping like it always does. "Okay," I say, my voice catching in my throat and squeezing into a whisper. "Let's do it."



## Jasha

**B**efore I gather my men together and explain the new plan to them, I owe my brother a real explanation about what's going on. I've been hiding the pregnancy from him, covering up my feelings for Lola, and it's not fair for him to be helping me so much and remain in the dark about why I'm going to such great lengths to protect her.

It's time to come clean.

Nikolai answers the phone almost before I've even finished dialing his number. "All filled up?" he asks.

"Yes, but that's not why I'm calling."

I can hear the tension between us through the phone, a small buzz of static that grows louder the longer it takes Nikolai to speak.

"What's up?" he finally asks.

"The girl, Lola," I reply, forcing myself to cut straight to the point. "I'm bringing her to the house once we get out of this shit. She'll be living with me from now on."

Nikolai lets out a deep belly laugh. "Here I was, thinking you were about to die or something and you wanted to call me to say goodbye, and you're talking about some girl. She must really have your nuts in a twist."

I shake my head, pressing the phone into my head like I'm trying to cut my skull open. "You're not getting it, but that's okay. I haven't really explained it to you yet. What I'm saying is that Lola is pregnant with my baby."

The moment the words leave my mouth, I know everything is going to be okay. I was crazy to be nervous about it in the first place. Nikolai went through almost exactly the same thing with his wife, unexpected pregnancy and everything. I was there to witness it.

And now, he's going to be here to witness my journey into becoming a father. I'm not ready for it, but neither was he. I'm

sure I'll figure it out somewhere along the way.

"You're joking, right?" Nikolai asks, his laughter cut by the edge of uncertainty.

"I swear to you, brother, I'm not joking."

"How did you go about getting a woman pregnant the same day that you met her. This is the engineer we're still talking about, right?"

"I met her months ago. I told you that," I reply impatiently. Nikolai never listens to me. He acts like he is, but he doesn't remember half the shit I say to him. I, on the other hand, have a photographic memory.

"Man, you're in over your head," he says, amusement slipping into his voice. "You have to marry her. Bratva rules."

"I know, and I mentioned that to her."

"Probably freaked her the fuck out, or is that why you're calling me? Did she jump off the train or something?"

"No, and no. I mentioned it to her, but we didn't really go into details," I reply, gritting my teeth at his jokes. Usually, I'm the one joking around and giving him a hard time. I'm sure he's thrilled that the tables have turned.

"So, you're still not sure if she's going to jump off the train and make a run for it. Understood."

I roll my eyes. "She's not going to do that. She likes me, and to be honest, I also like her. A lot."

"That's a first."

"Yeah, it is a first, and it's also a last," I reply, a hot ball of anger rising in my chest. "Lola is really special to me, and I'm taking this seriously. I suggest that you do the same."

"Temper, temper... I guess you really are serious about her. I guess congratulations are in order. I think you'll be a decent father if you cull your impulsive nature a bit."

I shake some of the tension out of my shoulders, switching the phone to my other ear. "We'll see about the impulsive part. I have something planned, but if we want to get this damn train

to Texas without getting killed by the Pessolano Family, it's going to sound a bit impulsive."

"A bit? If you're ready to admit it's even a little impulsive, it must be batshit crazy," he says, his voice walking the line between irritated and amused. "I hope you actually took the fuel I gave you. It wasn't easy to get on such short notice."

"I told you I filled up already," I reply with a scoff. "But we're going to stop the train soon and stage an ambush. I know Lorenzo is probably trying to set one up himself further down the tracks, and that's why we need to beat him to the punch."

"Hold up. You need to rewind for a moment and explain to me what the hell is going on. I'm being kept in the dark about too many things," Nikolai says, his tone switching to the more serious one he uses when he's conducting business.

I rub the fog from the glass and look out the window at the trees flying past, the tempo of my words falling into harmony with the frozen pines. "We spotted a helicopter flying over the tracks a little while ago. I have to assume Lorenzo is angry about me taking his train, which I'm sure he wants back as soon as possible, considering the load on board."

"And our ruby," Nikolai adds.

"He doesn't know he has it. It's just another gemstone in the lot, but that's also when he wasn't expecting us to come steal the train. He had almost no security, trying to pass it off as an empty passenger train."

"I know this already," he replies with a note of impatience.

"Right, but I'm trying to make a point. You see, Lorenzo isn't prepared. He wasn't expecting this, and now he's scrambling to get ahead of us and stop us from reaching Texas."

"Sounds like he's the one planning an ambush."

"Right," I say, feeling vindicated because he's come to the same conclusion as me. "But we're the ones who are actually going to pull off a successful ambush. Let me tell you how."

I dive into a detailed explanation similar to the one I laid out for Lola, highlighting more of the benefits than the safety of

the whole thing. Nikolai knows what I'm capable of. He doesn't doubt that I'll keep myself and Lola alive. He's only concerned that we're going to make irreversible waves through the organized crime sector by butting head with the Pessolano Family.

I point out that it's not possible to make waves if you eradicate the water entirely, and that's what I intend to do. I'm certain Lorenzo has taken charge of this perilous game of cat and mouse. He wouldn't trust anyone but himself to do it, and that means the ambush is going to hit him with more bullets than he knows how to stomach.

If everything goes according to plan, we're going to do much more than steal a train full of jewels. We're going to take down the Lorenzo Family for good.

I'm expecting a medal of honor from the FBI and a get out of jail free card, if nothing else.

Nikolai laughs when I tell him that. "If you come home with the Lola and nothing else, I'll be happy. Family matters the most."

"Ah, you've gotten old and soft," I respond playfully, but in truth, I'm starting to feel the same. The seasons move quicker each year, and the taste of Lola's lips feels like it has the potential to slow down time and return it to the way things used to be.

Comfortable. Easy. Happy.

The window I was looking out of has already fogged up again. I rub it with my sleeve and peer out into the early morning landscape, savoring the brief illusion of peace before the world collapses on us again.

"You want me to come down there and help set things up?" Nikolai asks, knowing I'm not going to agree. He's just being polite.

"Thank you, but the best way to set up the counter ambush is to trick Lorenzo into thinking that we've really abandoned the train. We don't want any sign that we have help. As far as he's

concerned, we're powerless, and the train will be easy for him to take back."

"Always was an egotistical bastard," Nikolai grumbles.

"And that will be his downfall," I say with a smirk.

"Sounds like you have everything under control," he says. "I look forward to seeing you and Lola at the house."

"As do I. I will reach out to you later. You don't have to worry."

"I'll always worry about my brother," he replies, and I smile.

Family comes first.

Always.





## Lola

The squeal of the train's frozen brakes sounds like a death sentence as it slices through the dry morning air. Jasha assures me that this is our only real option to rid ourselves of the Pessolano Family and make it to Texas safely, but less than twenty-four hours ago, I didn't know who Lorenzo Pessolano even was.

Jasha swears he wouldn't turn back time, but I'm not sure that I feel the same.

I hold my belly with both hands as we walk down the warm hallway toward a door that's at least seventy degrees colder. The metal has attracted so much condensation that it's iced shut at first. Jasha has to kick it to break the seal and allow it to slide open.

I stumble back as a gust of wind invades the comfort of the train and gives me a taste for the weather outside. The temperature outside keeps dropping, even with the sun rising, and this whole idea feels like a cruel joke.

Whoever this Lorenzo guy is, I'm really starting to hate him.

I'm wrapped in not one, but two coats given to me by Jasha, snatched off the shoulders of the men left in the train. In this climate, even that doesn't feel like enough, especially with a skirt on.

Fuck, and all I wanted to do was look cute.

I hope Jasha is happy.

He certainly looks like he is, marching through the snow with a rifle slung across his chest like some kind of winter soldier. He looks even more Russian with the crisp white snow as his backdrop.

"Spread out," he commands to his men, gesturing with one hand at a cluster of the to the left of us. "Make the tracks wide. They need to think we all left the train."

I admire the amount of thought he's put into this in the short time he's had to think. He's a smart man with a quick wit and an even quicker tongue. I learned the latter well on the day we met. I feel a small surge of excitement just thinking about.

But the cold dampens my mood as a gust of wind blows through my double coats. I'd give anything to be in Texas with Jasha, wrapped up in a thick blanket in his bed with another cup of peppermint tea in my hands.

"Come closer," Jasha says, as though he can feel the cold that's wrapped itself around my tired bones. "My darling, I will keep you warm."

I allow him to pull me close, resting my head on his chest and trying to avoid the bounce of his rifle hitting my face. Concentrating on that distracts me from the cold, and the smell of Jasha's body comforts me as we reach the edge of the woods.

The sky darkens. We're entering a thick weave of trees that will block us from being seen from the train. Three feet in, and I can't see what's behind me. Three more and we're in total darkness. The only thing that's visible is the white snow beneath us, but even that is just a dark gray glow.

"This is it," Jasha mutters as we come to a stop. "We wait here."

My feet are already numb, but thankfully, Jasha has considered that as well. He clears out a small circle in the snow, allowing us to bunker down against solid ground. There, he lays a plastic tarp down to keep the moisture out.

His men are spread out around us in a protective semi-circle, but I can barely see them. It's almost as though we're all alone here, only accompanied by an occasional rustle from the squirrels hurrying from branch to branch above us.

It's been a while since I've sat outside this long in nature. I'm always moving, rushing as quickly as the squirrels are, never stopping to appreciate the beauty of existing.

With Jasha, life feels special and meaningful. There's not a moment where I'm not gripped by some strong emotion,

positive or otherwise, and it brings me to life in a way nothing else ever has.

Having a baby no longer feels like a struggle, but a gift. Especially since I have the unique opportunity to bring the heir of the Russian Bratva into the world. With Jasha by my side, I feel like I can do anything.

I snuggle closer to him as he tucks my feet into his lap. We're sitting quite comfortably now, our bodies warming each other as my eyes adjust to the darkness. I didn't realize how dark it could be in the woods during the day.

"You okay?" he asks, holding the back of his hand against my cheek for a moment.

"I'm fine, but don't move. I don't want to let any air into our little snuggle bubble."

He laughs softly. "That's adorable. Maybe I should keep you in the freezer when we get home to preserve your cuteness."

"Don't you dare," I warn, pulling away from him an inch and then snuggling right back against his chest to keep from freezing.

He laughs again, and I can feel the vibration of his deep voice in his chest. It reminds me of the rumble of the train tracks late at night, when there's nothing to see but darkness for miles, but I still feel perfectly safe in the control room.

I'm saddened by the realization that I'll never be able to drive a train again after this, but that's replaced by the realization that I won't have to work at all. Jasha is a very wealthy man, and I'm certain he'll go to no end to keep me satisfied.

I'm the luckiest girl in the world, and I've only just now grasped it.

"Is it fine to talk?" I ask Jasha tilting my head up to look at him. All I can see is his strong chin and nose, but their rigidity is comforting.

"Just keep your voice low and you'll be alright," he replies in voice that's just above a whisper. "But if you hear a helicopter or people, remain silent and stay still. They won't be able to

detect us with this much snow. It covers the heat of our bodies, especially when the trees are so dense.”

I know nothing about combat tactics, but I trust that Jasha is correct. Even so, I’m afraid to make any noise louder than the faintest whisper. Even the crinkle of the plastic tarp beneath us makes my shoulders shoot up to my ears.

Jasha puts his hand on my belly, pulling me away from my paranoia. He always has a way of returning my mind to what’s most important, or at least distracting me from what bothers me.

“We don’t know the gender yet, do we?” he asks.

Suddenly, I’m all nerves again. My cheeks are so flushed with shyness that I’d probably die if he could see me right now. Thank God for the cover of darkness. Maybe that’s why people have sex at night.

“I’m supposed to go to the OBGYN clinic in a month and a half to find out,” I answer. “What do you want? A boy? Your heir to the Bratva?”

He moves his hand over my belly slowly, his fingers studying the slight curve. “Either way, they’ll be a blessing. My bother has a girl. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind having a cousin to play with. I’m sure the next one could be a boy if this one isn’t, but ultimately, all that matters is that they’re healthy and happy.”

I wasn’t expecting that level of thoughtfulness from him, but perhaps I judged him too soon. It’s easy to do that when he’s being so aggressive and dominant, but when his softer side comes out, it’s like the sun shining through the cold winter weather. It melts the ice and lights a fire in my heart.

I can feel it now, warming my body like a hot cup of tea.

“The next one,” I say, tasting the words in my mouth with newfound curiosity. “You want more?”

“As many as you’ll take,” he replies without hesitation.

Even in the bitter cold, a wave of arousal runs deep within me. “You’d really just keep going?” I ask, wanting to hear more about how many babies he’d put inside of me.

“Sure. If one is a blessing, think how many two or three would be,” he replies innocently.

“Or four?” I ask.

“Yes, why not?”

“Or... five?” I ask, wondering when he’ll relent.

“Or six,” he says, continuing on in a cheerful way that’s starting to make me nervous. Just how many babies is this man willing to put inside of me?

Would he breed me until I was unable to do anything but waddle around the house all day with another baby inside me?

Would my years shrink to nine months instead of twelve?

“How about seven?” I ask, excited to hear his answer just as much as I’m terrified.

“Eight, nine, or ten. However many you’d like,” he replies. “Money isn’t an issue, and I’d love them all the same.”

A laugh slips out of my mouth, and I can tell by the way Jasha’s body tenses that he’s going to get defensive.

“What are you laughing about?”

“Nothing, it’s just...” I take a moment to collect myself so that I don’t laugh again. “It’s just that you’ve never had a child before, and you’re already committed to have, like, ten of them.”

“With you, I’d have a thousand,” he replies, puffing his chest out with pride.

I pat his chest. “Okay, tough guy, relax. I’m not having that many babies. We’ll start with this one and go from there. I’m glad you’re excited about becoming a father. I was afraid that it would be totally different.”

He sighs. “I’m sorry about the way I acted before. I was overwhelmed, and I wasn’t sure what to make of you.”

“I felt the same. Don’t worry.”

“No, seriously,” he replies. “You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met. You’re strong, beautiful, and you don’t let

anyone walk over you. I mean, how many people would have the guts to stand up to a Mafia boss?"

"I don't know," I say, blushing even harder. "I feel like I let you win too easily."

"Well, the cards were in my favor. They usually are."

"A bit concerning, honestly," I admit.

"You can't possibly be upset about that when our lives are on the line, here. Considering how dangerous this situation has become, your best bet is to trust the advantage I have," he says, his voice lowering into a more serious tone.

"I know," I say, putting my hand on his chest and patting him again. "Don't worry. I'm with you. I've already decided that."

The tension dissolves from his body, and we return to silence, waiting for the first sign of Lorenzo's approach. Time crawls, but I don't mind it so much now that I'm snuggled up with Jasha. I could be here forever, and it would be perfection.

But forever doesn't last nearly as long as I'd like it to. The steady beat of helicopter propellers overhead signals a transition into something far more intense.

Our enemy has arrived.



## Jasha

The moment the helicopter lands beside the train tracks, I feel a magnetic pull through the trees. It's as though Lorenzo has a giant magnet attached to his chest, and simply walking out is enough to yank me from my place of comfort and draw me to him.

I know he's here. The air doesn't feel the same as it did before. The ground smells like blood, and every breath I take feeds more oxygen into my brain. Sharpening me. Honing me in on my target.

I've turned from man to beast, and the only thing stopping me from springing out of the woods and tearing Lorenzo to pieces with my bare hands is the beauty sitting beside me.

I need to be more careful. I can't sacrifice myself and leave her alone with our child. As much as I feel like I can take on the entire world and walk away without a scratch, I know I'm only human. I bleed like everyone else.

Okay, maybe a *little* differently, but that doesn't change that I need to be careful for Lola.

Lola is stiff as a board beside me, but when I look at her eyes in the darkness, they don't hold fear. It's something more akin to anticipation, the same as how I feel. We're both ready to end this and move on with our lives.

"Most of my men will go in first. After that, I'm heading in to clean things up," I whisper to Lola. "You're staying here with a few of my guards. If things get ugly, they'll know what to do."

She grabs my arm, squeezing it so hard that her fingertips dig up under my biceps. "You can't go in there," she whispers, his voice thin and sharp. "It's too dangerous."

I shake my head in the darkness. "No, I have to be there to make sure everything goes as we planned it. I'm responsible for the lives of each and every one of my men. They depend on me just as much as I depend on them."



“You can’t just... shoot from a distance?” she asks, already sounding defeated.

“Baby, let me tell you something,” I say, placing my hand on her cold cheek. “I’ve done stuff like this dozens of times. My men know how to sweep the halls, they know how to shoot, and they’re taking Lorenzo and his guys by complete surprise. We’ll have them on both ends. I’m just heading in after them to make sure everything is fine. If I sense that something is wrong, I’ll be back out in a heartbeat.”

“You promise?”

I plant a quick kiss on her cheek. “I promise. I don’t want to die either, so I’m going to be very careful, okay?”

“Okay,” she replies, her voice barely audible over the sound of the helicopter blades slicing through the dead air.

It’s almost time to strike. I check my rifle one last time, flicking off the safety switch and pulling back the slide an inch to check that there’s a round in the chamber.

All good.

This shouldn’t take more than minute, but it’s a shame I won’t get to watch Lorenzo die slower. I had imagined a more elaborate end for him, something with a good steel set of pliers and all of his fingernails on the floor in front of him. Ideally, I’d keep him alive for days, torturing him until he lost his mind. Only then would he lose his life as well.

But my fantasies have been overruled by the need to protect Lola, and risking this mission just to guarantee a more satisfying kill isn’t going to happen anymore.

In and out. If Lorenzo is dead, then I’m happy.

The first gunshot catches all of us off-guard. It’s muffled but loud in the stillness of the early morning, coming from inside the train. There’s a flash in the window, then another, and soon, the shooting sounds like the grand finale fireworks show on the fourth of July.

“Go, go, go!” I belt, jumping up and waving my men into action.

Some of them have already reached the train before I duck down behind our snow bunker. I hear more gunshots, but they're further apart, more sporadic and opportunistic.

We're winning.

I almost can't stand to be on this side of the battle for so long, waiting instead of fighting. It goes against everything inside me that's screaming for me to jump up and run in without any kind of plan.

My heart overrides my instinct as I pull Lola close, kissing her on the forehead as she shrinks to the sound of more gunshots. "It's almost over, my love," I whisper into her ear.

"Don't go," she replies, clinging to me as I try to release her.

"You'll be okay. Remember? I promised."

"Promise me again. Swear you won't let them take you from me," she says, her voice growing louder as she begins to cry.

"Baby, listen to me," I say, taking her by the shoulders and looking into her glistening eyes. "I know you're not ready for any of this, but I want you to know something. I lo—"

She presses her finger to my lips, shaking her head. "Don't say that. You don't need to yet."

"But it's true," I reply, feeling a tug at my heart.

"People say that kind of shit right before they get themselves killed. You should have plenty of time to say it after we're finished here," she insists, pressing her finger into my lips even harder. "Just don't fuck this up, Jasha. I need you. Our baby needs you."

I grab her finger, pulling it from my lips. "I love you," I blurt as I jump to my feet.

I run before she has the chance to slap sense into me.

The ground flies beneath me. Snow doesn't matter when I'm sprinting this fast. My body is being driven by a higher force, and the urge to take Lorenzo out is overwhelming. It courses through my blood like snake venom, poisoning my mind with evil intentions.

I don't want to be good anymore.

I want to kill.

I sling my rifle from my chest to my hands as I board the train. There's no going back. I don't even look over my shoulder as I enter, pushing past two of my men and jumping over a body on the ground.

One of Lorenzo's men.

Then, one of mine.

Another is kneeling beside him, trying to give him aid as he bleeds out in the tight hallway. There's barely enough room for him to lay down, much less to be worked on.

"What's going on?" I ask, my eyes flicking up and down from the body to the door at the end of the hallway.

It's quiet. There's no more shooting.

"They moved down the hallway. All of them," he replies, pulling a piece of fabric tight around the other man's leg. Blood is soaked into his sleeves, but he works diligently, ignoring the crimson mess.

"How many are there?" I ask.

"At least a dozen," he replies, looking up at me for the first time and shaking his head. "More than we thought."

I grip my rifle tighter, my knuckles yellowing from the pressure. "We can handle it. Did you see Lorenzo anywhere?"

He nods, and I feel a fresh surge of energy. "He was there, somewhere near the middle of the group."

Of course, he was. He was using the bodies of his men to protect him from bullets, which means he's probably still alive, cowering somewhere further down the train.

But he won't be able to get out. The doors are locked, we have men on both sides of him, and there only way out is through me.

I utter a prayer for our fallen comrade before walking quickly to the next compartment. Further down, I hear a single

gunshot, then silence again.

Some of Lorenzo's men are still alive. The fight isn't over yet.

Moving through the train is slow despite my growing desire to confront and kill Lorenzo before anyone else can get to him. I have to check every cabin, sweeping it up and down to make sure there's nobody hiding there who will spring out behind me and shoot me in the back after I pass by.

I take none of the risks I usually would, and it feels like I'm walking through cold syrup because of that.

"I love you, Lola," I say under my breath to remind myself why I'm doing this. "And I love you, baby Antonov."

I sweep the next compartment, stepping over a couple of Lorenzo's deceased men, counting them as I go. There can't be more than a handful of them left with how many are dead here. I find clusters of them, likely caught by surprise and gunned down as a group.

I slow down when I see the backs of four of my men, blocking the doorway to the next section of the train.

I say my greeting in Russian, so they know it's me, and they all turn, wide-eyed and tense.

The fight definitely isn't over. Maybe it's only just begun.

"How many left?" I ask, coming closer. "What's the current situation?"

"Just a few left, including Lorenzo," one of the men replies, sweeping his hand through a sweaty buzz cut. "They've barricaded themselves in the middle of the train. We can't get in from either side without taking a major risk. Both hallways are pinned down."

I rub my chin, thinking so fast that I nearly lose the solution when it races through my brain. "We need to negotiate with Lorenzo. He's not going to stay there forever and starve. We can end this early, before he has the chance to call for reinforcements."

"We can send someone in."

“No,” I snap. “I’ll do it. Lorenzo isn’t going to listen to anyone but me.”

“Respectfully, boss, that’s extremely dangerous,” he replies, worry showing in his pale grey eyes.

I think of Lola, about how much she would hate me if I got myself killed, and suddenly, it all becomes too real. I never feared death until now, and it feels far too close for comfort.

I clench my teeth so hard that my jaw muscles beg me to release them. Every nerve in my body is on fire, burning so hot that sweat obscures my vision. I have a choice to make, and it feels like every answer is the wrong one.

If I do this, I risk breaking my promise to Lola.

But if I don’t, we could all end up dead. Lorenzo will call reinforcements if he hasn’t already, and we’re no match for that kind of firepower. I will die, and Lola will be hunted down in the woods and murdered by my worst enemy.

I swallow hard, tension squeezing my entire body so hard that it feels like my internal organs are all about to simultaneously rupture.

And then, like the flick of a switch, I’m back to my old self again.

I’m calm. I’m cool. And I’ve made up my mind.

I’m going to kill that slimy Pessolano bastard.



## **Jasha**

I push past the men at the door, walking through no-man's-land like I own it. I get halfway down the hallway before I see the rifle pointed through the doors on the other end, sandwiched in between like a dog's tail stuck in the doors to an elevator.

They haven't seen me. I doubt they can see anything through such a small crack, but I don't risk continuing the rest of the way. I'm close enough to where Lorenzo can hear me, anyway.

I duck into one of the compartments, leaving the door open like all the rest of them so that I don't give away my position. If I get caught boxed in like this, I'm going to get my guts scrambled by bullets.

I check my rifle again, this time pulling back the slide all the way to make damn sure there's a bullet in the chamber. I'd rather tear Lorenzo apart with my bare hands, but a bullet will do in a pinch.

The sound of the rifle draws attention, and I hear voices from the next section of the train.

Well, if they can hear that, they're definitely going to hear this. "Hey, Lorenzo! Why don't you come out here and talk this out like a man?"

The silence that follows is oppressive, but it doesn't last long.

"Is that Nikolai I hear?" Lorenzo calls from beyond the double doors.

I always get mistaken for my brother, but for Lorenzo to do it makes me particularly angry. He should know by now that the Bratva has a new leader. Either he's so far behind that a time machine wouldn't even help him, or he's doing it to annoy me.

"You know who I am, you ugly bastard," I growl.

He chuckles, then calls through the door again, "Jasha, the little brother. I thought you weren't allowed to leave the house without your caretaker."

“You think you’re funny, but in a minute, you’re going to be dead.”

“I thought you were supposed to be the one with the sense of humor. Maybe that was your brother,” he replies.

I roll my eyes. I am the one with the sense of humor, but not when it comes to Lorenzo. The faster I can get his ass sent to heaven, the better. I’m fed up with him and his games, and I want this train.

No, I *need* this train, and all the precious cargo on board.

“You don’t want to rot in that cabin, do you?” I ask, leaning toward the door. I need to be careful not to poke my head out into the corridor, or it’s likely to get blown off.

“I’m quite comfortable here, actually,” Lorenzo replies.

“Are you? I think we can make a deal that’ll get you out without having to kill any more of your men. How many have already died because of your foolishness? Ten? Twenty?”

“Less than yours,” he replies with palpable irritation. I’m starting to get to him. He knows he’s losing, and he’s trying to bluff that he’s still in control. I doubt his men even believe it. They’ll turn on him if things start to look bad enough.

“We’ll make a deal,” I say, smiling as my plan comes together. “You come out here and talk to me, and I’ll let your men leave unharmed.”

He laughs, but it’s not the deep and confident laughter of a man in a winning position. The cracks in his confidence are widening by the second, and he won’t be able to keep this façade of resilience up for much longer before he shatters.

I’m just glad I can be here to witness it happen.

“Come on,” I urge, talking more to what few men he has left than to him. “Come out and I will spare everyone. You have my word, man to man.”

“What good is the word of a spoiled little manlet?”

Manlet? At nearly seven feet tall? Now I know he’s lost his damn mind. He doesn’t even know how to insult me in a



believable way.

“Um, alright,” I say with a chuckle. “The offer still stands. I’m sure your men trust me, and I respect them a lot more than I respect you. They’re just workers caught up in a battle that’s not really theirs.”

I can imagine so clearly in my head the shifting of the eyes, the nervous wringing of the hands, and the silent agreement from all Lorenzo’s goons that maybe... just maybe, they should listen to me and not their compromised boss.

“Why don’t you come over here if you want to be so tough, huh?” Lorenzo finally says, trying desperately to flip the script.

“I might just,” I reply. “In fact, tell your guys to put down their guns so I can come talk to you face to face.”

Suddenly, there’s a noise from the door. I can’t peek out there and see what it is for risk of getting my face replaced with a bullet, but I do know something is going on. Has Lorenzo actually decided to confront me?

I raise my rifle, prepared for the worst, when I hear Lorenzo growling from down the hallway. “Come back here, motherfucker. Someone, get that guy!”

A dark figure dashes past me so fast that I would’ve missed him if I blinked. One of Lorenzo’s men, judging by what he just said. It looks like we have our first defector.

It’s too bad he’s going to get shot on the way out of here. There’s no way in I’m letting any of Lorenzo’s snakes out of this train alive.

I’m not that nice.

“Losing them fast, huh?” I call out to Lorenzo, hoping he’ll lose his cool and jump out to confront me.

He’s not listening to me, though. He’s busy yelling at his men to stay put, threatening them in a way that would only be done if they truly were about to defect. He’s at the end of his rope, and I’ve just lit a fire under his sorry ass.

“Don’t fucking walk out there,” he growls. “You hear me? I’ll shoot you myself.”

There’s a loud bang, and suddenly, a cluster of men dash past me down the hallway. Someone is shooting at them, and hear two of them drop.

Now is my chance. It’s time to put Lorenzo’s killing spree to an end.

I step out into the hallway with my rifle pointed toward Lorenzo’s compartment. He’s turning away, running to hide himself as deep as he can, like a roach caught in the sunlight.

I pull my rifle off my chest, throwing it to the floor as I sprint toward him. I won’t let him escape. My brain shuts off, and I turn into a beast again.

I have to kill. I need a victim to sink my teeth into, and Lorenzo is just the right flavor.

“Don’t run from me, coward,” I snarl, hurling myself at him so hard that I lose footing and end up flying through the air toward him. I clip his feet, sending him falling halfway through the door into the next section of the train.

His men have already abandoned him. He has no one to protect him, and he’s woefully unprepared for a fistfight.

He tries to raise his pistol to take a cheap shot at me, but I’m already on top of him. I smack it out of his hand easily, and his pupils double in size as he watches his only hope of defeating me disappear.

With him pinned to the floor, I take one last look at his face while it’s still intact. Truthfully, I’ve never been this close to the man before. Spitting distance, if you will. I’d like to take in the full splendor of his terror before I invert his nose and turn his brain matter into a paste.

His nose is already slightly crooked, and so are his teeth. I think I can fix that for him.

“This is for Lola,” I growl, pulling back my arm and slamming my fist into Lorenzo’s face as hard as I can.

His teeth fly into the back of his throat, but he barely has time to cough them up before I've smashed another several in. Blood bubbles down his lips as I punch his face over and over, pinning him in place with my body to keep him from escaping. He's smaller than me, unable to squirm out of the tight position he's found himself in.

"You're going to die," I say, though that should be painfully obvious right now.

Absolutely excruciating.

"Please," Lorenzo says, reaching up and trying to grab my coat.

"Don't touch me," I snarl, slapping his hands away. "You're getting what you deserve."

He opens his mouth to beg for mercy, but I'm not in the mood for it. I shut his mouth with a fist, and then another, and yet another until he's not even able to talk. He's too busy gargling his blood.

I don't know how long I'm on top of him. Time doesn't matter anymore. I know this is over, and I know Lorenzo isn't getting away. I just want to punish him to the fullest extent for how much misery he's put me through.

I lose myself to my rage, allowing all the tension and pent up frustration in my body to be released through the blows. The pain I inflict on him is my therapy, and I don't care in the least how psychotic that makes me.

I already know I'm a monster, and I simply don't care.

If you mess with Lola, you die. That's the last thing Lorenzo will ever learn.

I only stop beating him once he's well past dead and the train becomes deathly quiet. I assume everyone has left already, and I'm the last one here, like church on a Monday.

I climb off Lorenzo's body, wiping blood from my busted knuckles onto the sides of my coat. Lola isn't going to want to see me like this. I probably need to change and wash up before returning to her.

It feels like I'm in another dimension, the twilight zone, as I walk to the bathroom at the back of the train. Time hangs in the air, suspended completely as I rinse my hands off in the slow dribble from the bathroom tap.

I look at myself in the cloudy mirror, and I'm surprised to see how much blood there is on my face. I look like a lion who just finished gutting an antelope.

Something about my image bothers me, and I splash water onto my face to change it. I've never felt this way after a kill before. Maybe it's just the idea of Lola seeing me like this, reduced to a primal beast instead of the man she wants to raise a child with.

For the first time, I'm something more than an animal.

I feel like a man.



## Lola

I can tell he tried to clean himself up, but I can still smell the mixture of sweat and blood on him. It doesn't bother me as much as I thought it would, though. Having him back feels much more important.

I hold his face in my hands, emotions rising to the surface quicker than I can tame them. "I saw them coming out, and I didn't see you, and I... I didn't know what to think. I can't lose you, Jasha. I don't ever want to lose you."

"I'm here. It's okay," he says, his voice rich and soft like a fur blanket around my shoulders.

"I know, but I was worried. Terrified, really. I heard gunshots, and then there was just nothing for so long," I gush, still unable to believe I'm holding him again.

"I promised you something, and I'm a man of my word," he says, maintaining a soothing calmness as a smile breaks across his face like sunshine.

"Thank you," I say, tears welling up in my eyes. "Thank you, Jasha."

"You'll have plenty of time to show your gratitude when we reach Texas," he says, his smile vanishing in an instant. In its place, stark determination takes the reins. "There's a mess on board, but the control room is untouched. I think we should go there and start things up again."

I don't want to do anything but savor this precious moment with Jasha, but I will be relieved to be out of the snow and back somewhere warm. I'm cranking up the temperature on the way back.

I don't care how much fuel we waste in the process. I'm done being cold!

My hands slip down from Jasha's beautiful face, and I take his hand as he leads me back to the train. It still feels like

dangerous is all around us, but it's over. The peril has passed, and we're emerging victorious.

I guess I should be excited, but all I can do is think about what Jasha said to me before he left.

*I love you.*

The words echo in my head endlessly. I wonder if they're true, or if he just told me in case he died.

I have to know if this is as real as I feel it is.

"Jasha, I have to talk to you about something," I say as we board the train.

He puts his hand over my eyes as he steers me toward the control room. "Not now, baby. Let's get this train started."

I pull his hand away, not scared of seeing death. I've come close enough to it already and survived. I'm not afraid any longer.

"Tell me this first," I say as we enter the control room. "Before anything. Did you really mean it?"

I turn to him, looking into his eyes and knowing that he's aware of what I'm talking about. I doubt it's left his mind since he said those precious words, but I need to hear them again. I need to see him say it and mean it before I can allow myself to stop resisting him.

He closes the door, leaving us alone in silence, and returns to me. His green eyes dance with emotion, and I want to cry at how beautiful he is. I know straight away that he meant what he said, but I doubt I could ever get tired of hearing it.

Jasha takes a deep breath, and I can see that he's gathering his thoughts. When he speaks, his voice is even deeper and slower than usual, like he's tasting every word as it comes out. "Lola," he says, running a hand through his hair, "every word I said to you was true. And it wasn't just because of the situation or the danger. I really feel this way."

He takes a step closer, the air between us thickening with tension. "When I said I love you, I meant it with every fiber of my being. I've been fighting it, trying to protect you, to protect

myself, but I can't deny it any longer." His eyes search mine, filled with vulnerability and hope. "I love you, Lola. And I want to spend the rest of my life proving it to you."

My heart skips a beat, the weight of his confession taking me by surprise. All the fear and doubt that had plagued me melts away.

Taking a shaky breath, I let the walls around my heart crumble. "Jasha," I whisper, tears streaming down my face, "I love you too." The admission feels like a weight lifted from my shoulders.

Finally, we can be free to love each other like we should've all along.

He pulls me into his embrace, holding me tightly against his chest. The rhythmic beating of his heart soothes my own racing one.

It feels like home with Jasha. I've been traveling for so long, wandering from place to place without anywhere to call mine, and now I've finally found it.

Pulling back slightly, I wipe the tears from my eyes and smile. "Thank you," I say, meeting his gaze again. It's deep and intense, so much so that I almost have to look away.

Jasha kneels in front of me, placing his hand gently on my stomach. "Our family," he whispers, his voice strained with emotion. "Our future." He looks up at me, eyes filled with love and adoration. "Thank *you*, Lola."

Tears come to my eyes again, and I can't control them. I pull Jasha against my belly, holding him there for as long as I can before he needs to come away to breathe again. For the first time in my life, I have a man who will protect me, care for me, and treat me like I was told I should be treated by my mother.

Jasha is every woman's dream come true. Once you manage to get past those thick walls of defensiveness, he's the purest lover a woman could have.

And I get to call him mine.



I feel a strong buzz of energy, position motivation for the rest of the journey as I return to my seat and start the train. The controls no longer feel foreign to me. They fit in my hands just right now that Jasha is standing proudly by my side.

I know this is the last time I'll drive a commercial train again, but that doesn't mean I won't ever be tasked with driving another one ever. Whatever went down in the last twenty-four hours almost certainly makes me a criminal, and when in Rome, do as the Romans do. I see myself going on Bratva missions with Jasha in the future if he lets me.

But all that is for another day. Right now, I'm just happy to be coming to my new home in Texas to meet Nikolai and his wife. If they're anything like Jasha, I know I'll love them to death.

The train shudders to life, and we're on our way again. The fuel tank is already half empty, but we won't need to fear another attack. We can stop and refuel in peace this time.

"So Lorenzo is really dead," I say, leaning back from the controls once the route is set.

Jasha nods, his expression tired now. I can see how the stress of this journey has affected him.

I don't even want to imagine what I look like right now. No mirrors, please!

"Lorenzo is very dead," Jasha says, letting out a deep sigh. "I'm sure that Nikolai will be relieved to hear about it, but there's always another enemy. You know, this shit never ends."

"But we're safe now, right?"

"For now..."

"And then what?" I ask, feeling a sudden spike of anxiety.

"Well," he begins, shifting weight to his other foot, "There are a lot of things that I'm going to have to do differently now that we're together. The baby makes it even more interesting, but that's not a bad thing. We just have to take safety a lot more seriously."

“I’m sure your brother knows a lot about that. Maybe you should talk to him about it.”

“Shit, yeah. I meant to call him,” he says, patting his pockets in search of his phone. “Just wait a minute.”

“Take all the time you need,” I reply, leaning my head back into the seat and closing my eyes. “I’m not in a rush.”



## Jasha

**H**undreds of miles and a quick refuel later, we arrive at a secret Bratva-controlled train station in Texas. It's about fifteen miles from the house, but that's about as close as anything gets to our estate. It's nice to have some space between yourself and the rest of the world.

But even now that we've arrived, my mission is far from over. I took this train for a reason, and I intend to follow through with my original intention – finding our family heirloom and returning it to the estate.

Lola waits beside the train, idly playing with her fingers as the bodies are moved off the train for disposal by a hazmat team. The sun is high in the sky, warming us both as we stand with our backs to it.

There's still snow all the way down here in Texas, though it's melting quickly as the temperature rises. It never snowed much since I moved here, but in recent years, things have changed. Some years, we even get a few feet of snow.

But I'll be happy when the weather warms up again and we can enjoy the pool that we have in the backyard. Granted, Lola will be too pregnant to do much of anything besides waddling around, but it'll be nice to see her in a bikini.

I won't tell her right now, but her pregnancy is a bigger turn-on than she could possibly imagine. I never thought about a pregnant woman in such a way, but imagining her fertile, glowing body in front of me gives me chills.

I glance over at her, smiling as she looks up at me. She has no idea what I'm thinking, but I know what's on her mind. She's cold, we've been standing here for half an hour, and we both just want to get home and take a nice, long, steaming hot shower.

"I'm going to start looking for the cargo," I say, giving her arm a gentle squeeze. "Just some preliminary scans. You can come with me if you want to see what we use to see through walls."

“You can do that?” she asks, looking surprised and a bit skeptical.

“Oh yes, we have the tools. It’s a blend of a few different things, but we have access to military grade tools when we need them. I already had this from when we were trying to locate a local politician who was buried in concrete by the Pessolano Family.”

“Wow, they really do that kind of stuff?”

I nod. “Yep.”

“And did you find him?”

“Also yes,” I say with a smirk. “But we weren’t about to do the police’s work for them. We just wanted what was in his pocket. Access cards for certain buildings in the capital are pretty hard to come by, so we found him, dug him up, and encased him right back where he belongs.”

“He’s still in a building?” she asks, more curious now than anything.

“Sure, but you wouldn’t believe which one even if I told you. Perhaps when we’re married, though. I can’t speak on too many Family secrets until then,” I say, watching her expression slip into an unreadably blank one at the mention of marriage.

“So... you *really* weren’t joking about that?” she asks, though she already knows I wasn’t.

“We should check the train first, and Nikolai knows more about the marriage stuff. He’s already done it,” I say, trying to slip out of the conversation before it gets too real.

I’m more than happy to marry Lola, but I want to give her time to digest everything. There’s no point in freaking her out this early on. She might get cold feet, and I need her in my life. I have to keep her.

Lola shrugs. “Whatever you want to do. You’re the boss.”

I take her passive acceptance as permission to bring her with me to watch the scanner as we go from section to section of the train looking for the stashed cargo from the outside.

I'd look like a complete fool if there turned out to be nothing on this train, but it couldn't be so. Lorenzo gave his life trying to get this train back. It must have something in it.

"Six, seven, eight," I count as we walk slowly down the train with the scanner. I'm looking for any difference between the cabins. It doesn't have to be big, just enough to tell me there's something there.

"Nine, ten... eleven?" I stop, studying the reading on the large, boxy display for a moment before showing it to Lola. "What does this look like to you?"

"Bathroom," she says with the utmost certainty.

Shit, she's right.

I sigh, continuing down the train. "Twelve, thirteen... Wait a second." I look up at Lola, feeling a surge of electric excitement. "This is it. Lucky thirteen."

"You sure?" she asks, leaning in to look at the monitor. "I thought thirteen was supposed to be unlucky."

"Unlucky for Lorenzo, but lucky for me," I reply, unable to hide a wild grin. "This is it. This is where the stash is hidden." My whole body is vibrating with a buzz of excitement I haven't felt since I slipped into Lola's apartment the first time I met her.

Finally having the Family heirloom back means so much to me. I've spent years trying to get it, and I'm minutes away from cracking this train open and finally holding it in my hands.

"Over here!" I call to a cluster of men I have waiting on the sidelines. "Bring me a crowbar. As a matter of fact, bring me two."

A few moments later, I'm able to hand off the scanner to them and enter the train with Lola. We're both carrying dark iron crowbars, but she looks like she'd rather not have one at all.

Not me. I'm going to fuck this compartment up until I find those jewels. According to the scans, they should be under the floor in the third cabin down.

I recognize the compartment we're in. It was the one right before I reached Lorenzo. In this case, it's not X that marks the spot.

It's death.

"Right here," I say, coming to a stop in front of the third cabin. "We should find the stash under the floor, though you might have to get through a few layers."

Lola nods, but waits for me to make the first move. I doubt she even wants to be prying floorboards up, but it's nice to have her here with me, if only to watch me uncover what I've been searching so long for.

I pause for a moment before I start, looking over the pristine floor and wondering how anything could be here. They did a great job of hiding the stash, I'll give them that much, but they won't be able to keep what's mine from me anymore.

I look over my shoulder at Lola as I bring the crowbar back. "You want to have the first swing?"

She shakes her head vigorously. "It's all yours."

"Just checking," I say with a grin before swinging the crowbar so hard into the floor that it nearly slips out of my hands.

It goes straight through the floor like a hot knife through butter, burying itself deep. I try to pull it out, but it won't budge at first. I have to plant both feet into the floor and lean back with my full weight to get it dislodged.

I stumble back, laughing as I regain balance.

Lola gives me an amused look, like I'm a boy who's making a fool of himself in the backyard after having just a bit too much caffeine at the family barbeque. "Don't hurt yourself," she says.

"A bit too late for that," I mutter, feeling a soreness in my shoulder that's probably not going to haunt me for the next few days. I'm in shape, but age makes healing take a hell of a lot longer than it used to.

That, and the hangovers. Jesus, those are bad.

I ignore the feeling and swing the crowbar again, but I'm not as heavy-handed this time. I make sure that I aim just beside the hole in the floor, breaking it open a bit wider. Now, I can get the end of the crowbar into apply leverage, tearing up the floor with ease.

It peels away like a banana, revealing several large potato sacks under the floor. I'm willing to bet my life that they're not filled with anything edible. What's inside would break my teeth.

I grab the first one, rolling it out onto the floor and sliding it toward Lola with my foot. "Tear this shit open. If you see something pretty, you can keep it, but look out for a large red ruby with a crest etched into the back. That's the Family heirloom."

"How big is it?" she asks, shrinking away from the bag at her feet like it's going to bite her.

I pull my fists together to show her. "About this big. It's cut very nicely, with gold inlay on the back."

Her eyebrows shoot up her forehead. "That's huge!"

"And expensive, which is why it was stolen. If you can help me find it, I would be forever grateful."

She nods, using the tip of her crowbar to tear into the first bag as I pull out the second. There are a few more in there, but I bust into the bag like my life depends on it, scattering the jewels across the floor as I sift through them.

I'm already on the third bag by the time I hear Lola gasp. I turn to see her holding up a beautiful crimson ruby the size of her fist.

But it's only one fist, not two.

I step toward her, my heart slamming in my chest as I get a better look at what she's holding. It must not be the crest, but... the gold inlay is there. And the etching...

"They broke it," I say, my stomach sinking so far into my gut that I feel sick.



“Maybe we can... put it back together?” Lola’s eyes search the pile of jewels at her feet. “If we find the other piece, we can do that, right?”

“Those selfish thieves broke my priceless ruby,” I say, gritting my teeth.

“Jasha, I’m so sorry,” she offers, but it’s not her fault. She could never do anything wrong, and I don’t want her to think she has to console me.

“Just give it to me,” I say, stepping up to her and taking it from her hands. I try not to snatch it, but I can’t hide that I’m angry about this. “I will do something with it. I don’t know. I’ll talk to Nikolai.”

Lola puts her hand on my arm, stopping me as I turn away. “We’ll fix it, Jasha. I’m sure we can do something.”

I shrug, feeling defeated, but I can’t forget what I’ve already gotten out of this mission. Instead of walking away empty-handed, I’m bringing the most incredible woman home with me.

And our baby. It’s a blessing that overrides the disappointment of the broken heirloom.

I toss the ruby into the pile of jewels behind me, shaking my head as a smile forms on my lips. “You know what? I don’t even care. You’re the only thing that matters to me.”

Lola looks a little scared as I kneel down in front of her, like I’m going to snap and rage out about the ruby, but I can’t be too angry about it. Sure, it’s a major disappointment, but I’ve had those before. Decades in the Bratva make a man tough to crack, and I’m not losing my cool for a red rock with some fancy etching in it.

I have something more valuable than money, more precious than a ruby, and more beautiful than the most flawless gemstone in the world.

I have Lola, and she’s everything to me.



## Lola

I knew Jasha was rich when I met him, but seeing his house for the first time feels like something out of a fairytale. It's a beautiful estate, with a massive garden out front and a driveway that loops all the way around the house.

Around the house, several acres of perfectly mowed green grass stretch out without a single weed or bump. It feels unreal, but when I step out of Jasha's luxury SUV in front of the house, I have no choice but to admit that it's all true.

I feel severely underdressed for such a pristine residence, especially since I'm supposed to be meeting Nikolai and his wife, Dream. Such a beautiful name. I'm sure she'll be a beautiful woman as well.

"Here we are," Jasha says as our driver pulls away, leaving us standing at the door. "Nikolai should be out here already, but he's probably late. I swear he's never on time since he had a child."

Just as he says that, the front door opens and a spitting image of Jasha steps out. He's a few years older, with some gray hair peppered into his dark curls, but other than that, they could be twins.

He looks at me, his eyes crinkling into a smile before his mouth does. "You must be Lola. It's a pleasure to meet you. Please, come in."

Jasha ushers me into the house first, and I sweep past Nikolai, inhaling the smell of cigar smoke and the same cologne that Jasha wears. They really could be twins.

"Nikolai, you ugly bastard," Jasha says as though he doesn't look just like him. He grins, punching his brother in the chest. "How the hell are you?"

Nikolai grabs the back of Jasha's neck, squeezing it so hard that I'm afraid Jasha is going to pass out. "Disappointed you're not dead," he replies, shaking him around.

Jasha breaks out of his grip, punching Nikolai again and laughing. “I told you, man. I’m immortal.”

I’ve never seen Jasha act so carefree as he does around his brother. It adds a fresh level of charm to him, making my love for him double on the spot. I have concrete confirmation that he’s a family man.

Nikolai turns his attention to me, ignoring Jasha as he punches him in the shoulder. “Dream should be down in a minute. She was just giving Lila a bath.”

Lila? That’s cute. It’s funny that our names are so similar.

I open my mouth to point that out, but just as I do, I hear a gleeful squeal from the top of the stairs. We all look up to see a beautiful woman with sparkling blue eyes carrying a squirming toddler with rosy cheeks down to greet us.

“Lila is very excited to meet you,” Dream says, setting her down on the floor at the bottom of the stairs.

“Lila and Lola!” Jasha says, as though he’s just making the connection.

“You didn’t realize that before?” I ask, shaking my head at him.

“I was too caught up in the clusterfuck that was hijacking a train to be thinking about names.”

Nikolai frowns, pressing a finger to his lips. “Not in front of Lila. She repeats *everything* she hears.”

Lila’s bright green eyes light up when she hears her name. “Train!” she exclaims.

Nikolai wipes his brow. “Thank goodness that’s what she took away from all that. Jasha’s not used to having kids around, but he’ll learn once his own is parading around the house, spouting profanity.”

I place my hand on my belly, smiling at Jasha. “So, everyone already know, huh?”

Jasha shrugs. “I may have let our little surprise slip.”

Suddenly, everyone in the room is looking at me, including Lila. In anyone else's house, I would feel overwhelmed and intimidated, but all I can feel now is the warm glow of a Family that truly loves and accepts me. Even if Dream and Nikolai don't know who I am, I can feel how happy they are that I'm here with Jasha.

"Come," Dream says, touching my arm with her hand. It's incredibly soft. "I'll make something for us to eat. I'm sure you both are hungry after such a long trip."

She makes it sound like we were driving here instead of fighting for our lives on a stolen train in the middle of a snowstorm. I hope I eventually become that casual about such treacherous Bratva business as she is. She seems so secure and confident about her role here.

We all go to the dining room for a quick bite to eat, and then I retreat to one of the bedrooms upstairs to get cleaned up before we head to the lounge to get to know each other better.

"I have clothes for you," Jasha says, pulling a bundle of glittering dresses out of the closet the moment the door to the bedroom closes. "Technically, they belong to Dream, but she has so many that she wanted you to have some until we could go shopping for you."

I take the bundle of dresses from him, and I'm surprised by how light they are. It's like I'm holding a bunch of feathers. "Are you sure I can wear these?" I ask, thinking how expensive they must be. I'm pretty sure half of them are silk.

"Of course, you can wear them. I'll get you some of your own, though, so that you're more comfortable," he says with a warm smile. "Come, I'll show you the shower."

He leads me by the hand into a bathroom that rivals the one in the hotel I stayed at when I spent my entire year's savings on a vacation to Paris. I was young and dumb then, but I had a hell of a time pretending like I was rich.

Now, I really am rich.

Before I can get lost in the splendor of the intricate black marble and gold accents, Jasha takes all his clothes off, leaving

nothing to the imagination as he steps into the shower. I've seen him completely naked before, but never have I had the time to study him for this long.

I stand there in awe of his physique long enough for him to grow impatient. "Come on, let's get cleaned up," he urges, but I have to take another few moments to watch his body as steaming hot water rolls over his tattooed skin.

I follow the water with my eyes, feeling a flutter in my chest at the sight of his rising manhood. That's the most dangerous weapon he has.

"Come here," he says, grabbing his cock quite suddenly and squeezing the base. The head of it swells in his hand, and he shakes it around under the water, spraying droplets all over the glass door.

I blush hard, even though I've done this before. It feels like it's always the first time, like I'm a nerdy virgin about to get fucked by the most popular guy on the football team.

I tell myself that I've done everything in the world to earn this, but I never feel like I really deserve it. He's so perfect that it hurts.

When my panties hit the floor I'm already wet, but it won't matter once I'm under the water. We're about to be drenched together.

Jasha's large hands find my body, running over my curves as the water encapsulates us in our own private paradise. It feels so good to be getting intimate here instead of the dirty floor of the train again, though I'll remember that time fondly.

I arch my back under the water, feeling the heat of the water bless my spine and take the tension out of my shoulders. It rolls down between my ass cheeks and pours onto Jasha's full erection as he brings it toward me.

With my hands on the wall, I push my ass out further, spreading my legs as he presses her cock right into my pussy without hesitation. My wetness allows him to slide in, and I feel myself stretching out for him, accepting his girth but

struggling with it at the same time. It feels so good to be full like this, satisfying in a way that nothing else can compare to.

Hot water runs down my back and wraps around my thighs. After having to withstand such cold temperatures on the way here, the heat feels like heaven on top the of pure euphoric bliss of sex.

I'm spoiled rotten by the experience.

Jasha pushes deep inside me, causing a gasp to escape from my lips. I hope the walls in this house are thick, because I'm about to be screaming from pure, unbridled pleasure.

"That's right, baby. Take it all the way," Jasha moans, thrusting deep and hard inside of me. He grabs my hair, pulling it just hard enough to elicit a whimper from me as he fucks me like a whore.

This is all I need in life. I want to be fucked like this every day by the man that I love.

I close my eyes and allow the pleasure to overtake me as I imagine I've already had our first baby. As Jasha unloads inside of me, I picture him getting me pregnant all over again, and I cum hard, legs shaking and pussy spasming around his throbbing cock.

Afterward, we wash each other's bodies and head downstairs to the lounge holding hands like high school sweethearts.





## Lola

“Oh, my goodness, I feel like I’m getting bigger by the second! When will it end?” I exclaim, clutching my full belly with one hand as I Jasha leads me with the other toward the garden.

“It will end when you have the baby,” Jasha answers, providing a practical answer for a purely rhetorical question. He always does that, but it’s cute. He’s just so used to coming up with solutions that he never stops to think if he even needs to.

“Better be soon,” I say, rubbing my belly. “I’m due in a week.”

He chuckles, but I know he understands my suffering. I’ve been through a lot for this baby, and he’s been there with me every step of the way. He’s held my hand through every doctor’s appointment, every wave of morning sickness, and every late-night drive to the grocery store to satisfy my cravings.

Jasha is the perfect man in every way. I’m infinitely lucky to have run into him twice, and even more lucky he stuck around the second time. I’m so glad I don’t have to make excuses to our precious daughter why her father couldn’t be part of her life.

I inhale deeply, taking a moment to appreciate the stillness of the autumn air before it’s overtaken by the cold.

And the noise. This will probably be my last week in a long time that I don’t hear a baby crying. With any luck, our little one will be like Dream and Nikolai’s baby Lila. She hardly ever cries.

But I’d love our baby just the same no matter who she turns out to be. I’ve never felt such an unconditional love to a person I’ve never met before, but the beautiful thing about having a child is that it changes you in ways that aren’t possible otherwise. In just nine short months, I’ve learned

everything there is to know about love, patience, and acceptance. Being pregnant is truly a blessing.

“The roses are still here,” Jasha says, steering me to the left as we meander through the garden. “Can you smell them?”

I inhale again, catching the sweet floral scent of a rose just past its prime. The nice thing about it is that no matter how old and brown a rose gets, it always smells good. They remind me a lot of my mother, who used to collect them and press them into books.

“I love this place,” I say as I breathe out. “I can see our daughter spending a lot of time here. She’d probably spot a few fairies, too.”

Jasha smiles, but there’s something deeper behind it, like he knows something that I don’t. Has he seen fairies here? I only mentioned them because when I was a little girl, I would imagine that there were fairies hiding behind every flower in the yard, and I’d get angry when my father pulled them out of the ground.

In retrospect, half of those flowers were weeds, but they were beautiful to me all the same.

But instead of talking about fairies, Jasha does something I probably should’ve expected, but that takes me by complete surprise.

He gets down on one knee and pulls out a black velvet box.

“Oh my god,” I whisper, stepping back as he flicks open the box and I see what’s inside.

It’s an engagement ring unlike any I’ve ever seen. In the heart of the intricate gold setting sits a colossal diamond, its perfectly cut edges catching the sunlight and scattering them in every direction. Bright red rubies surround the diamond, each one reflecting the rich colors of the roses beside us.

“Lola,” Jasha says, his voice low and steady, “Will you marry me?”

Tear rush to my eyes before I can stop them. “Yes,” I cry out, rushing into his arms as quickly as I can with my pregnant

belly.

I hug him so hard that he coughs, but I can't stop squeezing him. I'm overwhelmed with love, and I need to express it. I need to let this incredible man know how crazy about him I am.

When I pull away, he stands up and takes my hand. He slips the ring onto my finger and kisses it, his lips hot and soft against my trembling hand. "You deserve the world, and I intend to give it to you."

"All I want is you," I say, my voice barely more than a whisper. It's all I can manage with how full my heart is right now.

Jasha smiles, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepening. "I'm all yours, darling."

I look down at the ring, at the glittering declaration of ultimate commitment, and I still can't believe I got this lucky. "It's so beautiful," I say, in awe at how perfect it is. I don't think I've ever seen a diamond sparkle this much. Or rubies, for that matter.

"See the red stones here," Jasha says, tracing the jewels with his pinky. "Those were cut from the broken ruby you found on the train.

It's crazy that he's trying to give me credit for that. I may have picked it out of the bag, but he's the one who did all the work.

"I don't know what to say," I reply, studying the ring now like it's going to shatter if I turn it the wrong way. "It's incredible."

He smiles. "I could think of no better way to honor our growing Family than to use the ruby for your ring."

Tears come to my eyes again, and Jasha pulls me close, petting my hair and whispering into my ear. "You're my everything, Lola. My sweet, perfect everything."

# EPILOGUE

## Jasha

“Shh, watch, watch,” Nikolai says, his voice so low I almost miss it.

I turn to see Lila leaning over Jewel’s crib, his eyes wide with pure wonder at the baby sleeping there.

I wish Lola were here to see this. Lila is petting Jewel’s head so gently that her delicate little fingers are barely touching her. I can tell they’re going to get along.

I lean in toward Nikolai, lowering my voice to a soft whisper. “The girls outnumber us now, you know.”

He chuckles. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Yeah, and by the looks of it, Lila and Jewel are going to make a hell of a team when they get older.”

“I’ll have a heart attack.”

“You’re not leaving me here with all these girls alone.”

Lila turns to look at us, her eyes sparkling with excitement. She points her little finger into the crib. “Jewel!”

“That’s right, Lila. That’s your cousin Jewel,” Nikolai coos. I’m still not used to him talking like that, even after all these years. Even I’ve started doing it, and it’s freaking me out. How can such tiny creatures turn a monster into a teddy bear?

“Jewel!” Lila repeats, overjoyed about the baby in the crib.

To be fair, we all are.

Lila leans over the crib again, studying her cousin with bright curiosity. She stays like that long enough for me to record a video of her to send to Lola.

“So precious,” Nikolai says, shaking his head and smiling.

It’s good to see him like this, but even better to have the Family together once again. We’re going to have a big dinner tonight, and then retire to the lounge for a cigar and a glass of whiskey.

Life can't get much better than this.



WANT to know how Jasha's handsome and dangerous brother Nikolai met his wife Dream and ended up with a baby? [Read Nikolai's Baby now!](#)

# **PREVIEW OF NIKOLAI'S BABY**

## Dream

**T**hey're going to find me.  
And then I'm going to spend the rest of my life in prison.

I turn the dial down on the radio as it begins to crackle and lose signal. Bluetooth doesn't work in this old car, and the radio has gone from playing pop, to oldies, to static. It should be picking up some Mexican stations soon, but in the meantime, it's just me and my anxious thoughts.

When I was younger, I used to dream about taking a long car trip through the United States, stopping at old diners in the desert and winding my way up and around snowcapped mountains. It sounded like the best thing a girl could do in her early twenties, before she got bogged down by the oppressive responsibilities that all but the richest (and often, poorest) adults seem to have.

I had a map in my college dormitory, and I swore the second I got out I was going to take the longest trip I could.

But first I had to find a job.

And then I had to save up money faster than gas prices skyrocketed.

And once I had the money, my cousin Eddy got kidnapped by the Cartel.

So now, I'm taking that money and using it to get this bucket of bolts across the border with ten kilograms of a newly synthesized stimulant in the trunk.

It's not my idea of a fun road trip, but I'm not going to let a bunch of thugs kill Eddy. I don't care what he got wrapped up in. He's a good guy, and he doesn't deserve any of this.

Well, neither do I, but that's why I'm going to make this quick.

The road in front of me stretches out so far that it disappears on the horizon, and to either side of me there's nothing but dry earth and the occasional desert shrub. It's not much of a view,



but that's a good thing. Nobody else is out here, and that means I have a chance of getting across the border unnoticed.

Diego, my Cartel contact, assured me that getting into Mexico wasn't a problem. On the way out, however, there's a fifty-fifty chance of my car being torn apart by Border Patrol agents, but by that time, I'll be clean as a whistle.

No drugs here. Search all you like!

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't trust a member of the Cartel with the change in my pocket, but these aren't pennies we're talking about.

These are drugs, and the Cartel wants them badly enough to kidnap Eddy. They're not going to let me get thrown in jail and risk losing their prize.

That's what I tell myself, anyway.

In truth, I don't know what's waiting for me as I approach the Mexican border on this lonely stretch of cracked asphalt. I could be driving straight into a week-long interrogation in a room without windows.

And with this amount of drugs, they probably wouldn't care that I'm a U.S. citizen. I'm sure they'd go Guantanamo Bay on my ass in a heartbeat.

I wring the steering wheel with my sweaty hands and try to focus on something else, *anything* else, to take my mind off the grim reality of what I'm doing.

I turn the radio back on, and I'm met with an upbeat song in Spanish.

I must be close.

Sweat drips down my temple and I try to wipe it away, but my hands are too sweaty to do anything. I'm so hot now that I'm pretty sure I could wring half a gallon of sweat out of my t-shirt.

Driving through Texas without air conditioning was a mistake, but not bringing water was even stupider. I was too scared to stop at the gas station and pick anything up after I left Eddy's old apartment with the drugs. The adrenaline rush of leaving a

felony's worth of stimulants unattended in the parking lot would've killed me.

But dying of dehydration will be much worse.

I consider turning around. I passed a gas station about thirty miles back, and I don't have to be in Dimalona until Thursday.

No, I'm not risking another run through town. That place was crawling with Border Patrol agents, and I'm sure if they witnessed me driving back and forth at the Mexican border, they'd pull me over and search the car.

Hello, life in prison.

And goodbye Eddy.

I'm not sure which one would be worse, but I won't have to choose if I get caught with the drugs. The Cartel isn't going to keep Eddy alive if I lose the drugs he stole from them. They're mad enough already, and it was only by luck that they found my number in his phone and decided to try to get their drugs back.

About ten-thousand dollars' worth. That's what Diego told me, but the money isn't what I'm concerned about. Eddy means more to me than anything. If it wasn't for him, I would've been on the streets at the vulnerable age of fourteen.

I owe everything to Eddy and his life of crime, but karma has come to collect, and I'm the one who has to pay the price.

Lost in my thoughts again, I realize I'm going twenty miles over the speed limit just a second too late. Slowing down doesn't stop the big white SUV from pulling out onto the road behind me.

And once those lights come on, I know it's game over.

They found me.

And now I'm going to spend the rest of my life in prison.

[Read Nikolai's Baby now!](#)