



Let me in, Rapunzel.

Kidnapped
BY BRATVA

DADDY

ARIA R. BLUE

KIDNAPPED BY BRATVA
DADDY

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

ARIA R. BLUE

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To my readers. I love you.

I wish you to know that you have been the last dream
of my soul.

— CHARLES DICKENS, 'A TALE OF TWO CITIES'

KIDNAPPED BY BRATVA DADDY PLAYLIST

Graveyard Club- Witchcraft

Sasha Alex Sloan- Dancing with your Ghost

Alina Baraz- Off The Grid

Tame Impala- Let It Happen

Kat Dahlia- I Think I'm In Love

Harry Styles- Falling

Paloma Faith- Only Love Can Hurt Like This

Lana Del Rey- If You Lie Down With Me

Ed Sheeran- Thinking Out Loud

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Also by Aria R. Blue

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

JULIE

I sit cross-legged on my narrow bed and try to conjure good thoughts. Happy thoughts.

“Does that really work?” my cellmate, Chelsea, asks.

“It *was*,” I say, sighing in defeat.

“It didn’t really look like it was working, sweetheart,” she says, rolling over on her bed to face me. “Ask me how I know.”

I take a deep breath. There’s not a moment of privacy here, but maximum-security prisons aren’t exactly designed for luxury.

“How, Chelsea?” I ask.

“Your eyebrows,” she says. “They were all scrunched up. You were trying too hard to be all Zen, but it was stressing you out even more.”

I give up on meditation and look at Chelsea.

Prison tattoos cover every inch of her skin, and she’s been sweet to me ever since I got here. She was also one of the leading members in a cult in the early 80s responsible for mass murder. She’ll serve time until her last breath, but somehow, she’s made peace with it.

“Does it get easier?” I ask her.

“Being here?” she asks.

I nod.

“That’s a heavy question, sweetheart.” She blows out a breath. “I guess, after a while, you get used to it. You accept things for what they are instead of wishing for something different.”

I frown.

I don’t know if I can ever do that.

She stands to stretch, giving me a glimpse of the fading tattoos on her stomach.

“Don’t overthink it,” she says. “It only makes things worse.”

I nod, knowing she’s right. But what makes all this worse is that I’m not supposed to be here. And this is the longest I’ve gone without seeing my sisters.

The correctional officer arrives to let us out for breakfast a moment later.

I hurry to tie my hair into a braid.

“Move it, Carpenter,” the guard says.

Shackles are slapped on my wrists before I can protest. The guards herd the prisoners like cattle toward the mess hall. A lump grows in my throat, just like it does every morning.

I don’t belong here.

They think I’m an FBI officer who went rogue, but they couldn’t be further from the truth. They have it all wrong.

“Oats or cereal?” the cafeteria lady asks.

“Um, cereal,” I say. “Just a little bit.”

She scoops dry cereal into my bowl before moving on to the next inmate. I’m handed a milk carton at the end of the line.

I turn around, clutching the tray to my chest.

Women in beige uniforms gather around the tables. I quickly sit down at one of the empty ones.

Anxiety fills my stomach, instantly killing any appetite I may have had.

I open the milk carton and pour it over the cereal. I grew up poor, so I know better than to waste perfectly good food, even when I'm not hungry.

"*Rapunzel.*" A tall woman sits beside me, so close that her thigh touches mine. "You look beautiful, as always."

They call this woman Crazy Bianca. She's notorious for being violent and unhinged. And ever since I got here, I've become her new favorite toy.

"Bianca, I need you to sit in front of me," I say, giving her a sharp look.

There's no room for weakness in prison. Showing fear of any kind is not an option.

Instead of doing what I asked her to, Bianca leans in to sniff my hair.

"It's much more cozy like this," she says.

I take a bite of the cereal, pretending not to be affected by her proximity.

"We can see each other better if you're sitting in front of me," I say.

"I wonder if you taste as sweet as you look, *Rapunzel,*" she says.

I shovel more cereal into my mouth and force myself to chew before turning toward her. Her face is so close to mine that I can smell the peppermint from her toothpaste.

"Sit in front of me," I say. "Please."

"You know I'd do anything for you," she says, standing. She's a tall woman, a little over six feet in height. If it weren't for the possessed look on her face, she would have been beautiful. "You're my only weakness, *Rapunzel.*"

She keeps calling me that.

Rapunzel.

She has a thing for my waist-length blonde hair. If I had access to scissors, I would cut it all off. I know it would make

me less attractive in her eyes.

Bianca takes a seat opposite me.

“I brought you something,” she says, placing a Danish pastry on my tray.

I stare at the custard-filled flaky pastry. It’s not part of our menu, but Bianca has been here for a long time. She has connections with everyone, even the kitchen staff.

She’s basically royalty in this prison.

“You didn’t have to,” I say.

“All you had to say was thank you.” I glance up to find a feral look in her eyes.

“Thank you.” I take a deep breath.

“You’re not eating it.”

“I’m saving it for later,” I say.

“Eat it now, Rapunzel,” she orders.

I look at the Black woman. She’s smiling at me so sweetly that you’d think we were long-lost friends. But something’s not right about her eyes.

She’s evil.

Down to her core.

I’ve heard of incidents that happened inside this very prison. Women were brutally killed, and the only thing they had in common was that Bianca had taken a liking to them.

I take a bite of the pastry.

Buttery sweetness fills my mouth. As a child, I used to have a major sweet tooth. But now, the taste of the pastry just makes me nostalgic for things I’ll never get back.

“Do you like it?” she asks.

I nod.

She watches me until I finish the rest.

Her penetrating gaze makes my skin crawl, but I force myself to hold eye contact. I can't ever let her think she has the upper hand.

"There's something I wanted to discuss with you." Bianca leans over the table.

I glance around at the other inmates. All of them are eavesdropping on our conversation, but I know none will intervene.

"Are you listening, Rapunzel?" Bianca snaps.

"I'm listening." I turn back to her soulless eyes.

"I want to make a proposition," she says.

"What kind of proposition?" I ask.

"I can take care of you. I know your paperwork hasn't been processed yet, so I can give you some of my things."

The prison has a commissary where we can buy items like shampoo and ramen. I would kill for both right now, but I don't let her see it.

Because I know she's not offering it from the goodness of her heart.

There's a catch.

There's always a catch.

"Just let me have one hour with you, Rapunzel," she says. "And I'll give you anything your little heart desires."

"I'll have to think about it," I reply carefully.

"I have stuff," she says, not taking her eyes off me. "I can introduce you to a whole new world if you let me."

She means opium and other drugs.

I don't know how she does it, but she runs a whole side business inside these prison walls.

"I'm good," I say.

It wasn't what she wanted to hear. She stands up abruptly.

“You’re making a big mistake, Rapunzel,” she says before walking to her usual table.

I take a deep breath after she leaves.

I could be her next victim.

I learned self-defense, but I’m still a petite woman. I know I won’t stand a chance against her strength, especially if she’s carrying weapons.

My stomach knots as the guards escort us out of the mess hall.

The horrible possibilities of what she might do to me swirl inside my brain, making me nauseous.

“Miss Carpenter, you have visitors,” a prison officer says.

I look at her, wondering if this is some sick joke.

I haven’t had any visitors since I came here. And I wasn’t expecting any, considering both of my sisters are involved with mafia men.

“Is it my sisters?” I ask the officer. I don’t want to see anybody else.

“Do I look like your personal butler?” the officer snaps.

“No, it’s just...a lot of people don’t like me right now,” I tell her. “Because of the misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding, my ass,” she says. “I heard about what you did. It’s despicable. You deserve every bit of hate you’re getting.”

I didn’t do it.

I want to scream it in everybody’s faces, but I know they’ll only hear what they want.

“I don’t have all day, Carpenter,” the officer says with a hand on her hip.

“Okay,” I say, letting her lead me toward the visiting room.

I’m the youngest of three sisters.

We didn't grow up with much, but my older sisters still found a way to spoil me. They worked hard so I wouldn't have to. They were the mother I never had. They were the father who neglected me. They were all I had.

And now, they think I'm a traitor to my country. An FBI agent gone rogue.

Belle is the first one to see me. "*Julie.*"

I rush toward them. A thick piece of plexiglass separates us. I place my palm against it. Belle places her palm over the other side of the glass. We're not even touching, but it's the most warmth I've felt in weeks.

I'm immediately yanked back and handcuffed to the table. My wrists are raw and chafed, but I've gotten used to the pain. It's nothing compared to what I'm feeling inside.

My throat is tight as I look at Hazel, my eldest sister. "Hi, Hazel."

She's quiet, her lips pursed tightly as she watches me.

Belle leans forward. "I'm sorry it took us so long. There was so much paperwork, and they came for an interview. And you know, with the family—"

I widen my eyes at her, telling her to stop talking.

They record every conversation here, even if we can't see the cameras and recording devices. Not long ago, I was on the other side of this glass, interviewing criminals and getting them to reveal information.

"Yeah, I know, I know," Belle says. "It's just, we've been worried sick. All of us. We're working to get you out of here as soon as possible, but—"

"All the evidence points that I'm guilty," I say.

Belle licks her lips. "We'll find something, Jules. We're sure of it. We have the best criminal lawyers working night and day on this case. It's only a matter of time now."

"I didn't do anything, Belle," I say, looking at her.

Belle holds up a hand. “You don’t need to tell us you’re innocent, Julie. We know you are. Right, Hazel?”

I glance over at Hazel, but she’s simply watching me.

There’s no emotion on her face. Whereas Belle has always been the emotional one, Hazel has always been more pragmatic.

She only believes in what the evidence points to.

She doesn’t have to say a word.

I know what she thinks.

I suck in a breath. “Hazel, they set me up. I would never betray my country. You know that, right?”

The suspicion doesn’t leave her face.

I went to Quantico. I made sacrifices and overcame demons to finish my training. I’m supposed to be strong. But having Hazel look at me like I’m a criminal breaks something inside me. My eyes mist with tears.

“Hazel, what’s wrong with you?” Belle hisses, elbowing her. “Say something.”

Hazel takes a deep breath. “I don’t care if you’re innocent or guilty, Julie. You’re my sister. I’ll do whatever it takes to get you out of here.”

“*Hazel*,” Belle snaps. “Our little sister is *suffering*, and you’re accusing her like everybody else? What the hell?”

“All I know is that she’s keeping a piece of information to herself,” Hazel says, her face still stoic. “Isn’t that right, Julie?”

Belle looks at me then.

Both of them await my reply.

These people have known me all my life. They know my heart. They know my soul. But they still doubt if I’m telling the truth.

I know I’ll never recover from this. Even if they find a way to prove my innocence, I’ll never be the same person again.

“I have no reason to withhold information, Hazel,” I say.

“Now, why don’t I believe that?” Hazel cocks her head.

“Oh my God. Why are you even here?” Belle turns to Hazel, twin spots of color blooming high on her cheeks. “We don’t even know what she’s going through, and you’re making it worse.”

Hazel continues to watch me.

“If you want us to help you, you need to tell us *everything* we need to know,” she says. “I spent *hours* looking through everything the lawyers had collected. We still don’t have anything to prove you’re innocent.”

I notice the dark circles under her eyes and hate that I’m the cause of her pain.

“I could always tell when you were lying, Julie,” Hazel says, shaking her head.

“*Stop*,” Belle says, clenching her fists. “We’re a family, for God’s sake. We’re not supposed to turn on each other when times get rough. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, Hazel, but stop it.”

“Belle,” I say, pressing my fingertips against the glass. I notice smudges left on the glass from the other prisoners before me. “It’s okay. I’m okay. It’s not that bad here. And I know it’s only a matter of time before the truth comes out.”

Belle takes a deep breath and nods rapidly. She needed to hear that from me.

“I just...I don’t want you to think for a second that this will be your future,” Belle says. “You understand that, right?”

“Thank you for saying that,” I say.

“I’m going to find out the truth either way,” Hazel says. “And I hope for your sake that you haven’t been hiding anything.”

Belle’s face falls instantly.

“What is *wrong* with you?” she shrieks.

I stand, cutting the visit short.

This is because of me. Belle's agony, Hazel's fatigue, their pain. I'm the source of it all, so it only makes sense that I should distance myself from them.

"I have to go," I say, glancing behind my shoulder at one of the prison officers.

"Wait, already? You just got here," Belle says.

"She's leaving early," Hazel says. "She knows I'm onto something."

I can't even look at them anymore.

Never in a million years did I imagine we'd be divided like this. We went through so much together—so many life events and challenging times—only to be reduced to strangers.

Distrustful of each other, wary of each other's secrets.

I can hear Belle crying.

I can feel the heat of Hazel's suspicion.

"I love you no matter what, Julie." To my surprise, it's Hazel. Her eyes have softened.

I didn't do it, I want to say. But it'll only fall on deaf ears.

"I love you, too," I say instead, waving at them. Belle blows me a kiss. Hazel nods at me.

As I'm taken toward the exit, I think about the day my world came crashing down.

My name has been dragged through the mud.

The career I worked so hard for is unsalvageable now.

"Carpenter, you have another visitor," another officer calls out. "He's not on your pre-approved list, but he claims to know you. Would you still like to see him?"

Electricity bolts down my spine.

I don't have to turn around to know who's waiting for me on the other side.

ALEKSANDR

Even dressed in beige from head to toe, she looks like a goddess.

I watch the shock and confusion collide on her beautiful face.

Her long blonde hair is tied back in a braid, but a few errant strands have escaped to frame her cheekbones. Her eyes are mesmerizing—the brightest green, like morning sunlight falling over a blade of grass.

But they dim too quickly.

Come on, little kitten.

She moves toward me reluctantly. She's a little panther—sleek and lightweight. She has the grace to match too. Her eyes are distrustful as she approaches me.

“Aleksandr.” She frowns.

“Julie.” I smirk.

Her name feels so right rolling off my tongue.

And it pleases me that she uses my full name instead of calling me Alex or my Russian nickname, Sasha.

She slides into her seat and narrows her eyes at me.

“You're here,” she says.

“It appears so,” I say, taking the chewing gum from my mouth and discreetly placing it under the table. It has a nano

jammer embedded in it that will prevent our conversation from being overheard.

“What was that?” she asks, sitting up in alarm.

“What was what?”

“I saw it,” she says.

“You saw nothing,” I say.

Her eyes are wild, panicked. “They’ll think I have something to do with it.”

“Julie,” I say. “Look at me.”

Her chest heaves, but she obeys my command. Her eyes lock on mine, and something about her wide-eyed gaze turns me on.

“You don’t understand. I could get into trouble for this,” she says. “If that piece of chewing gum isn’t—”

“All you need to know is that I bought us a few moments of privacy,” I say. “And like you said, it’s just a piece of chewing gum.”

Her features relax, but not by much.

“What are you doing here?” she asks.

“I’m here to give you an update,” I say. “I have my lawyers working on the case, and they found something.”

“My sisters have lawyers too,” she says. “I appreciate you trying to help, but I don’t need it.”

I close my eyes for a moment. We’ve lost too much time already. I don’t want to waste another second.

I open my eyes and pin her down with a heavy stare.

“I missed you, Julie,” I tell her. “I never had the chance to say this before, but—”

“No.” She shakes her head, pleading with me not to continue.

We last saw each other at a wedding reception. I had asked her for a dance. She took my hand, and we danced until the

band stopped playing.

When I leaned in to kiss her at the end of the night, she pulled away. She left without saying goodbye.

That was two years ago.

I never saw her again.

She's an FBI Special Agent. I'm a criminal.

My brothers and I own casinos by the US-Canada border. We're monopolizing the casino market in North America, but it's just a front for our other businesses.

Julie and I are from different worlds.

But for her love, I'm willing to give it all up.

We were friends before, but she's looking at me like I'm some stranger. Like those nights at the casino never happened. Like her heart didn't race every time I was near her. Like all of it meant nothing.

"You said that your lawyers found something?" Her voice contains a tiny sliver of hope, and it shatters what's left of my heart.

"Yeah, they did. They found that your case is completely hopeless," I say. "There is absolutely nothing that's in your favor."

"If you came here to cheer me up, you're doing a stellar job," she says.

"That's why there is only one solution to this." I raise my eyebrows.

It takes her only a second to catch my drift.

She shakes her head again, her lovely eyes as wide as saucers.

"I've been in your shoes before," I say. "It can be done."

"This isn't the same," she says.

"You're right. My situation was much more difficult. I'll take care of the details. All I need is for you to trust me.

And *make sure you eat more potatoes*. Your face looks too gaunt.”

I enunciate each word so she understands that it’s not just words.

I shouldn’t have worried.

She’s a smart girl. She understands this isn’t about the potatoes, but the man who serves the potatoes in the mess hall. His name is Pavel, and he’s on my payroll. All she has to do is go to him, and he’ll take care of the rest.

“I can’t just—”

I shake my head slightly, telling her not to finish her sentence. People may not be able to hear our conversation, but lip reading isn’t all that difficult. I can’t jeopardize the plan before it’s even begun.

“How is the gym here?” I ask her.

“The gym?” she asks.

“A little training will do you some good,” I say. “Start light though, with the ten-pound dumbbells.”

One of the dumbbells in the gym has been hollowed out and filled with sand and a piece of paper detailing the escape plan.

Everything has already been set up.

Every little detail has been planned out. Even the location of this booth was no accident. There’s a blind spot in the cameras. They’ll be able to see Julie, but they won’t be able to see me.

“I can’t,” she says. “I...I won’t.”

“I’m sorry if you misunderstood,” I say, leaning forward. “I’m not here to give you options. I’m just telling you what’s about to happen.”

“There will be consequences if I’m caught, Alexandr,” she whispers, imploring me with her eyes.

“I’ll make sure there won’t be,” I say. “Nobody will ever hurt you ever again.”

“You don’t get it.” She shakes her head. “It’ll make me look guilty in their eyes.”

“You’re already guilty in their eyes,” I point out. “That’s why you’re here. And besides, if anybody can find the answers, it will be you. Nobody knows your case better than you do. And you can’t do shit if you’re cooped up inside this place.”

I can see that my words are sinking in.

She knows it’s her only option.

“If I get caught...” she says.

“You won’t,” I promise.

I want to tell her the details, but we’re surrounded by too many people. That’s why I asked her to trust me.

It will be staged to look like a kidnapping.

At the stroke of midnight, the door of every single prison cell will open. Most inmates won’t notice, but Julie and I will slip out before the ruckus begins. We’ll take the secret passageways built to protect the prison staff in case of an emergency just like this.

She’ll escape.

In the investigation that will follow, they’ll learn she couldn’t have done this without outside help. I’ll make it look like she was taken against her will.

Kidnapped.

“One more thing,” I say, leaning in.

Julie does the same even though she doesn’t look happy about it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see that the woman sitting in the booth closest to me is eavesdropping. From the looks of it, she’s here to visit her daughter, who’s refusing to have a

conversation with her. So instead, she's taking more interest in mine.

I pivot.

"I heard that you're unable to access the commissary?" I ask.

"Um, yeah," she says. "How did you know?"

"I have a friend who works here," I say. "I'll make sure they clear all your paperwork as soon as possible."

No such thing will happen, but I need to throw the nosy woman off my scent.

"Um, okay," Julie says, following along. "Thank you."

"I heard something else," I say.

"About?"

"Your new nickname." I smirk.

She narrows her eyes at me. "Don't say it."

"Rapunzel," I say. "It suits you."

It suits her situation too. She'll be escaping this tower come midnight.

"I hate it," she says.

"I think it's cute," I say.

"You're lucky there's a partition between us." The anger in her eyes makes her look all the more adorable.

"From what I remember about Rapunzel, she found everything she was looking for outside the tower. All she had to do was look out of her little window."

I can see from the weariness in her eyes that she understands what I'm trying to say. The woman sitting next to me is now in the middle of an argument.

It's safe for us to speak now.

"It will be sooner than you think," I say. "I need you to trust me, okay? I'll never let you get into harm's way."

“Oddly, I believe you,” she says. “But I don’t believe you’re one hundred percent sane.”

“If only you knew the half of it, *tigrenok*,” I say, calling her a tiger cub in Russian.

She sucks in a breath.

I taught her a few Russian words when we were friends at the casino. It started as a friendship because neither of us was ready for more. We talked for hours, watched movies together, healed in each other’s presence. However, my feelings for her didn’t remain friendly for long.

Things changed for me rapidly.

Nothing changed for her.

Her heart was frozen in time. It belonged to another.

My madness and obsession grew in magnitudes with her every smile, her every laugh. She was a balm for everything that tormented me.

She sighs now.

“What if I don’t want to do this?” she asks.

“You always have choices, *tigrenok*,” I say. “I just hope you pick the right one.”

The prison officers come to take her away. My jaw tightens at the sight of the shackles on her wrists.

I don’t like it.

The only scenario I’ll accept restraints on her is if she’s bound to my bed.

My mind paints an exquisite picture—morning sunlight falling on her lithe, radiant form as she wiggles on my bed. I need her so much that it hurts not to have her.

I’ve waited like a saint.

From now on, I won’t let her out of my sight. I have eyes and ears everywhere. I’ll be watching her every move. And once I have her, I’ll keep her. Whether she likes it or not.

“Goodbye, Aleksandr.”

“See you soon, *tigrenok*.”

JULIE

*A*s I walk away from the visiting room, my body feels lighter.

It's like he reached into my very soul and undid every knot inside my body that was causing me pain. He replaced it with something hot, heavy, needy.

There was a dark possessiveness in his eyes.

Like he doesn't care anymore.

When we first met two years ago, my heart was in pieces. He helped me pick them back up.

He was the friend I needed him to be and nothing more.

But even when I was living under a big rain cloud, he was the sunshine. He was the warmth that touched my skin, making me feel better just by existing.

He was different then.

He was sensitive and sweet. I knew he had another side to him, a darker personality that lurked underneath. But I didn't make much of it.

Until now.

I got a peek at that bossy, dominant side of him today. It doesn't help that he's so much bigger now, with rippling muscles and a powerful frame. Two years ago, he was tall and on the leaner side. But now, he's built like a powerlifter, with thick veins covering his forearms and a broad chest that's *way* too distracting.

I always found him attractive, but now, my desire is a tsunami taking me under.

It feels like I'm breathing fire instead of air. It's corrupting me from the inside out, changing my chemistry until I can barely recognize myself.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" a woman screams, throwing up her arms.

I blink as I pass by one of the inmates. I was staring at her without meaning to.

"Sorry," I mutter.

I don't have any chores today, so I spend the rest of the morning in the library. I find the thriller I started yesterday, but I can't concentrate on the book.

Instead, I go over every word he said.

I replay every look he gave me.

Even though he let his darkness show, there's more to him. He's yin and yang—both dark and light. Even as he makes lava pool in my core, his eyes have a playful glimmer.

There's a certain *joie de vivre* about him—a spark that can never be dimmed.

I used to be playful and energetic too. But that part of me is dead now.

It died with *him*.

Pain washes through my chest as I think about the first man I ever loved.

Derek.

He was my best friend and my first love. He taught me everything I know and took everything from me when he left. He's no more now, but not a day goes by without me thinking about him.

I knew in my heart that no other man could ever take his place.

But then I met Aleksandr.

I flip through the pages of the book I'm holding, not reading a single word. My mind alternates between the two men who were once in my life.

The intercom startles me out of my daydreaming.

“Attention all inmates, this is a lunchtime announcement. Lunch is now being served in the main dining area.”

The *potatoes*.

Fuck. I've been so consumed by his presence that I forgot the real reason he was here.

As I head toward the mess hall for lunch, something strange happens. My stomach growls with hunger.

For the first time in days, I'm hungry.

Everything outside is the same as it was this morning, but everything inside me has changed.

I can smell the food—pasta and small servings of fresh fruit.

It's similar to every other lunch I've had here, but for the first time, I'm looking forward to it.

I'm grinning as I join the line.

“Hey, Rapunzel.” Crazy Bianca's breath is hot against my ear. “I heard you had a few visitors this morning?”

I turn around to look at her. “Yeah, I did.”

“Who was the man?”

“My sisters came to visit me,” I say automatically.

“Who was the man?”

And in that moment, I make up my mind.

This life is not for me. I can learn to adapt and survive, but it won't be easy. I have to go with Aleksandr. I don't know what the future will hold, but even a life as a fugitive has to be better than this.

He asked me to trust him.

At the time, I didn't think much of it.

But to go through with this, I have no choice but to trust him.

“A little more, please,” I ask, holding my plate toward the lunch lady.

She raises her eyebrows. She knows I usually prefer small portions.

But right now, I’m ravenous, even with Bianca breathing down my neck.

“I’m going to find out who he is,” Crazy Bianca whispers in my ear. “And I’m going to *end* his life.”

Usually, I tune her out.

It’s the best way to deal with this situation.

But today, something inside me snaps.

I whirl around to face her. She’s nearly six feet tall. I feel like a child standing before her, but my voice is steady as I say, “You will do no such thing.”

Rage flashes across her eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me you have a lover, Rapunzel?”

“Because it’s none of your business, Bianca,” I say. “And we’re not friends.”

“You’re *mine*,” she says, throwing her plate to the floor and sending pasta flying everywhere. “*You are mine*. I will have you. Just watch.”

She advances on me, trying to grab my hair, but she’s pulled away by security and escorted out of the mess hall.

There’s dead silence as everybody watches me.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen that before.” My cellmate, Chelsea, cuts the line to join me. “Nobody ever stands up to the queen.”

Bianca is the self-anointed queen around here.

Her word is law, and she has everyone wrapped around her finger. But I never liked a bully. It’s why I joined law enforcement in the first place.

“Somebody had to put her in her place,” I say. But I can’t hide the tremble in my voice.

I walk to the end of the line. Sure enough, a Russian man serves the roasted potatoes.

“Potatoes?” he asks.

I nod and hold my tray out toward him. He drops something small and metallic in the corner of my tray before piling it up with roasted potatoes.

“Thank you,” I say, looking him in the eye.

But he’s already moved on to serving Chelsea.

I sit at one of the empty tables with my heart in my throat.

To my dismay, people join me at the table this time. I think I just became famous for standing up to Bianca.

It wasn’t the smartest move.

The last thing I should do right now is draw attention to myself.

“Hi, I don’t think I introduced myself. I’m Anna.” A redhead beams at me as she sits beside me.

I give her a small smile. “I’m Julie.”

My cellmate, Chelsea, takes a seat to my right.

“Girl, you don’t need no introduction,” another girl says. “All of us know who you are. We were just staying away because you’re a fed.”

“Was,” I correct. “I *was* a fed.”

Even that doesn’t dampen my spirit as I dig into the pasta. I know from working in the kitchen that one of our chefs is an Italian who makes authentic pasta dishes.

However, I’m careful not to touch the potatoes. Not when everyone’s eyes are on me.

“We overheard one of the guards talking about you,” Anna, the redhead, says. “They said that you were in Vermont when you got caught. How did they find you?”

Chelsea takes one of the roasted potatoes from my plate. “Yeah, Jules, tell us your story.”

I clear my throat. It’s not a memory I want to relive, but they’re all so eager to hear it that I don’t want to let them down. “I was on the run. The same people I worked with, who I once considered friends, hunted me. It was all a misunderstanding, but they were quick to turn on me. I made it all the way to Vermont. I couldn’t use my credit card and ran out of cash, so I survived on whatever I found in the forest. For a second there, in the middle of nowhere, I thought I was safe.”

People nod with sympathy.

They’ve all been in my shoes at some point in their lives.

“What tipped them off?” Anna asks.

“I made a call,” I say. “It was through a burner phone, but they traced it to me anyway.”

“Who did you call? A boyfriend?” Chelsea steals another roasted potato from my tray.

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. “My sisters. I wanted to tell them that I was okay.”

Anna places her hand over mine. “You can eat with us from today, Julie.”

I smile at them and angle myself away from my cellmate, who’s been eating all my potatoes. The conversation shifts to a new male guard who they all find irresistible.

As they talk, I think about everything that’s coming.

Aleksandr asked me to trust him. As an FBI agent, I’ve seen the darkest sides of humanity. As a girl, I’ve been through heartbreak and pain and grief. It’s not easy for me to trust.

But I trust Aleksandr with my life.

He’s a ruthless mobster, but he’d take a bullet for me in a heartbeat.

I wish there was another way to do this, but he’s right. Not even the best lawyers can get me out of this situation.

I'm being framed for providing sensitive information to a terrorist organization.

At first, it appeared to be sheer bad luck. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But after diving deeper into the allegations, it became clear that someone set me up. My personal accounts were being used for correspondence with the terrorist group. I was being targeted.

I had no choice but to run.

Chelsea reaches for another one of my potatoes. My heart drops when I see a glint of silver.

I place my hand over the potatoes and give her a playful smile. "I was saving those for later."

"Sorry," she says sheepishly. "I finished all of mine and didn't think you'd mind."

I can't keep my hand over the potatoes forever.

I need to create a diversion. Fast.

So I clamp my hand over my mouth and stand.

"I think I'm going to be sick," I announce.

While everyone's looking at my face, I slip my hand underneath the potatoes and curl my fingers around the...*key*. It's a key.

And then I dash out of the mess hall.

Some of the guards step forward, but they relax when they see I'm only heading toward the bathroom. I stay there for a while, my heart thumping against my rib cage as I stash the key into my bra.

I look at my reflection in the mirror.

This is only the beginning.

JULIE

Everybody is fast asleep.

But I'm wide awake, curled up on the bed with my back to the wall.

I've carried out the rest of the tasks Aleksandr gave me. Inside the dumbbell, I found a map. It's a plan B in case he can't get inside for whatever reason. The key I got from the mess hall fit perfectly into my cell's window. I pushed it open to find a bag of clothes waiting for me on the windowsill.

I don't know how he did it, but I'm not surprised.

Aleksandr escaped from a Russian prison a few years ago. He knows better than anyone how one operates.

My cellmate snores softly.

Hours pass, but I can't sleep.

Doubt flickers through my consciousness. I don't know if I can do this.

I don't know if I *want* to do this.

He promised he'd make it look like a kidnapping, but I highly doubt anybody would believe a convict was *kidnapped*.

I close my eyes, resting them for a moment.

I startle when I feel a hand pressed against my mouth.

I'd fallen asleep.

"Rapunzel." Seductive darkness cloaks me.

My pulse leaps to my throat.

This is nothing like how it was this morning.

No glass partition separates us. I can smell his intoxicating scent now—all male testosterone and clean laundry. I can hear the richness of his voice.

And he leans down, so his face is right in front of mine.

“It’s time to go, *tigrenok*.”

He removes his hand from over my lips.

“I don’t know if I want to do this,” I whisper.

I see movement behind him. I’m about to scream when he clamps his hand down over my mouth again.

“Of course you want to do this,” he says. “It’s your only option. And besides, prison doesn’t suit you, princess.”

I peer over his shoulder.

“Who is that?” I ask.

It’s a girl. She’s dressed in the same beige uniform as the rest of us, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen her around here. She has the same petite frame as me, and her hair is the same shade of blonde.

“Why is she here, Alexandr?” I ask him.

“She’ll be your replacement for when they come to do a head count after the security breach.”

“You’re going to take my place?” I ask the girl.

Instead of answering me, she turns to look at Aleksandr.

“She’s been instructed not to speak to you,” he says. “It’ll be useful for when they question her with a lie detector test. The first question they’ll ask her is if she had any contact with you. And to answer your question, yes, she’ll temporarily take your place.”

I sit up. “That sounds risky.”

Aleksandr’s proximity does crazy things to my pulse. I feel my heart beating. *Everywhere*.

I'm glad this prison cell is bathed only in faint moonlight because I'm pretty sure I'm blushing.

"She'll be compensated for her sacrifice," he says. "And plus, she's a budding actress. She can handle herself."

I can't let an innocent person take my place. She looks like a sweet girl. I can't sentence her to this life.

"I can't let you do this," I say, placing a hand on Aleksandr's chest.

I mean to push him away, but he's too strong. My hand lingers over the hard planes of his chest. He glances down at where we're connected.

He places his hand over mine and pries my hand off his body.

His voice is a shade darker now. "It's cute that you think you have a choice."

It happens again.

The richness of his voice awakens something inside me. I want to wrap myself inside it and stay there until everything gets better.

He's a bad man. A con artist. A wanted fugitive.

But he's the only one I find...comforting.

I'm pretty sure something is wrong with my head.

He peels my blanket off me. "You're not dressed."

"I changed my mind," I say, scrambling to my feet. The difference in height between us is comical. I look like a child next to him. But still, I muster up all my courage and do my best to appear intimidating.

"Julie, now is not the time to chitchat," he says, stepping toward me. "We're on a tight schedule."

"I don't want to go anywhere with you," I say, stepping back and tripping over the edge of my bed.

His arm shoots out like a bolt of lightning, curling around my bicep before I can fall. He tugs me toward him like I'm

nothing but a rag doll.

“Where do you think you’re going, *tigrenok*?” he asks.

“Aleksandr, I can’t do this,” I say. A sob rises up my throat. “I’ll be throwing everything away if I leave like this—my career, my family, everything I ever cared about.”

“You’ll be doing no such thing,” he says. “I’ll make sure of it.”

I take a deep breath. “What if it doesn’t work out?”

We hear the jingle of keys as one of the guards patrols the corridor outside.

“Anastasia, get on the bed,” Aleksandr orders the actress.

She does as she’s told, resting her head on the pillow. Her blonde hair fans out. I find it eerie how even the texture of her hair is the same as mine. It’s almost as if her appearance was customized by someone who knew every little detail about me.

Aleksandr drags me to the corner of the cell, the one place hidden from the guards’ view. He crowds me against the wall, his body fitting snugly against mine.

Panic rises inside me.

I haven’t had enough time to think this through.

“It’s not right,” I hiss. “She could get into trouble because of me.”

His palm presses over my mouth, silencing me.

His chest is pressed up against my face. The scent of him floods my lungs. It feels like an elixir that’s bringing me back to life.

But I know I can’t fall for his charm.

Aleksandr might get me out unscathed, but I know he can’t promise the same for the girl.

I wiggle against him. When he doesn’t let up, I nip his palm.

He smirks, but his eyes turn darker.

“Stop. Moving,” he hisses.

I pause, discovering why a second later when something big and hard welds against my stomach.

I *really* hope that’s a torchlight or something because no man could possibly be *that* big.

He doesn’t have to tell me twice.

I turn as still as a statue, pressing my face against his solid chest. Tiny butterflies erupt inside me, making me feel strange things.

I felt this all before.

I never thought I’d feel it again. I never thought it could be so intense.

He steps away a moment later, but his hand remains over my mouth.

“You bit me,” he says, sounding amused.

“I’ll do it again,” I warn. The words come out all muffled, but he understands me just fine.

He’s pinning me to the wall with nothing but his hand over my mouth.

“I’ll let go of you, but you have to promise you’ll stay quiet,” he says.

I glare at him.

“That’s what I thought.” He sighs. “I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this, but I came prepared.”

He takes his hand off me.

It’s not like I’ll scream for help and get him into trouble, but I can still stall him.

I can still reason with him.

“Aleksandr, I’ll never forgive you if you—” I watch in horror as he rips off a piece of silver duct tape from the roll and smoothens it over my mouth.

“And I would never forgive myself if I let you stay here,” he says. “We’ll talk later, *tigrenok*.”

I can’t believe the nerve of this man.

His eyes stay on mine for a second too long before they dip down to my beige uniform.

“You should have changed into the clothes I gave you,” he says. “You should have followed my orders.”

He takes the clothes he left for me. It’s jeans and a white T-shirt. I don’t have to try them on to know that they’re exactly my size.

My breath hitches when I realize what he’s about to do.

His fingers dip under the hem of my shirt, grazing the bare skin of my belly. He bunches the fabric and lifts it up and over my head.

He does the same to my pants until my clothes lie in a beige heap on the floor.

I’m now standing before him in nothing but my bra and panties.

I fight the urge to cover myself.

I’ve always been self-conscious about my small breasts and slight figure. But his eyes leave a trail of fire as they roam over my body.

His calloused hands dig into my rib cage.

“Everything needs to go, *tigrenok*,” he orders. “They sew trackers into the clothing here.”

I glance down at myself.

I knew he wanted me to change into the clothes he left outside the window, but I didn’t because I was conflicted. I didn’t know if I was making the right choice.

I know it’s too late now.

The only choice he’s giving me is the dignity of taking off my undergarments on my own.

But I'm paralyzed. I can't bring myself to move a single muscle.

"Julie, don't make me do it," he growls, glancing at his watch.

I shake my head, trying to tell him I can't go with him. I can't let another person take the fall for me.

"You leave me no choice then, Rapunzel," he says, his hand moving to my back as he unclasps my bra.

My skin is gasoline, and his touch is the flame.

All of me *ignites*.

I can barely breathe.

His eyes remain on mine as my bra falls to the floor. Cold air bites my nipples, making them tighten into sharp peaks.

"Arms up," he orders gruffly.

I'm not supposed to like the way this man orders me around.

But I do.

I really, really do.

I lift my arms, and he tugs the white shirt down my torso.

I don't know why, but I find myself arching into his touch. My nipples graze against his rough hands, making him growl from a place deep within his chest.

My breaths are turning into gasps. The scent of his aftershave fills my lungs, making me heady.

"The jeans," he says, handing them to me. "*Now.*"

I shake my head, pleading with him not to do this. I have to stay here.

I can't leave.

I can't do this.

His eyes turn so dark they nearly look black. He drops down to his knees. He's so tall that the top of his head is at the same level as my breasts.

He yanks my panties down, leaving me with squirming hips and lava between my thighs.

I know he can smell my arousal.

The air feels more electric. I glance at the actress, but she's pretending to be asleep. And my cellmate, Chelsea, sleeps like the dead. I know without having to ask that he gave her something to make sure she wouldn't wake up in the middle of the night.

That's why he's so comfortable to have his face inches from my bare pussy.

The air is charged with electricity now.

He drags the ruined panties down my thighs.

But his movements are clinical and precise. He doesn't let himself take any pleasure in what he's doing.

He tugs a fresh pair up my hips.

His touch doesn't linger, but I find myself leaning into him.

Five minutes with this man, and I already feel like an addict.

I have no control over my own body.

I have no reign over my mind.

All I can do is watch as this man dresses me like I'm a doll.

He pulls the jeans up my thighs and tugs the zipper up. It sends a pang of desire to my core, leaving me needy and achy.

He stands.

"Good girl," he says, fastening the final button of my jeans and using that hold on me to tug me against him.

We're touching again.

I can feel that hard part of him against my belly. It's the culprit behind why I'm losing my mind like this.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" he says, studying my face.

And then he steps away.

He pulls out a vial filled with a dark, viscous liquid.

It looks like...

“Blood,” he says. “It has your DNA in it.”

My eyebrows knit together in confusion.

“They’ll look for signs of struggle,” he explains, taking my hand and dipping my fingers in the blood. He wipes them against the wall behind us, leaving streaks of dark red.

And then he washes my fingers with a bottle of packaged drinking water.

I realize in this moment that I never really had a choice in this.

He planned out this escape meticulously.

It was going to happen whether I agreed or not.

He’s wearing a black turtleneck and black dress pants, but he throws on a janitor’s outfit over it. He finishes off the look with a staff ID card.

I peer over his shoulder to see that he brought a cleaning cart with him as well.

He brings it toward me.

“Come on, we’ve wasted too much time already,” he says. “The security walls won’t be down for much longer.”

I shake my head.

He sighs like he’s being forced to deal with a child. He stalks toward me, easily throwing me over his shoulder and depositing me into the cart.

He closes the lid.

Before I can protest, the wheels underneath me start rolling.

I start to hyperventilate.

Aleksandr’s plan is already in motion.

I had my chance to stop it, but I spent that time gawking at his chiseled body.

Aleksandr starts whistling as he wheels his cart.

The bastard is actually whistling.

He's breaking me out of a maximum-security prison, and he feels relaxed enough to whistle.

I squeeze my eyes shut to drown out my thoughts. But visions of him dressing me flood my mind.

I don't know why I liked that so much.

I don't know why I like *him* so much.

My eyes fly open when I hear it.

The explosion.

ALEKSANDR

I can't get the smell of her out of my mind.

She's throwing me off my game, pulling my focus from carrying out the plan. To distract myself, I start whistling.

I take the secret tunnels built over a hundred years ago.

Once I reach my car, I call my brothers through my Bluetooth earpiece. Andrei and Ruslan are overseeing this entire operation.

"Should I go ahead?" Andrei asks.

"Do it," I say.

I glance behind me just in time to watch the explosion.

A bright orange cloud blooms in the sky. It's really something to see—like fireworks to mark Julie's new independence.

She devoted herself to the FBI, and they turned their backs on her.

They don't deserve her. I do.

She's in my arms now, staring up at me with wide eyes. I put her on her feet, staying close to her in case she tries to run.

But she's rooted to the ground.

I run my knuckles down her cheek. She's beyond beautiful.

It took every last shred of my willpower not to fuck her against the prison wall.

She was wet.

I could smell her desire for me. I *still* can.

Letting her go the first time was a mistake. And now, I'll spend every day of my life compensating for the lost time.

"Aleksandr, you're behind schedule." Andrei's voice comes through the speakers.

I didn't realize I was staring at her.

I clear my throat and tell my brothers I've reached the car.

"Hurry up," Ruslan grunts.

I disconnect the Bluetooth earpiece and open the trunk of the car. There's a special compartment built into the back where even the scanners won't be able to detect her.

"Get in," I tell Julie.

She shakes her head, beseeching me with her eyes.

"This is just to get you through security. You can sit next to me once we're a safe distance away. Okay?"

A single teardrop streaks down her cheek.

I don't know why I feel compelled to do it, but I take the tape off her mouth and brush my thumb over her full bottom lip.

I'd thought about us like this so many times.

I push my thumb against her lips.

She resists for a moment before parting her lips for me, sucking me deeper into her warm mouth. The velvet softness of her tongue turns my recklessness up a notch.

I pull my thumb out.

And I replace it with my lips.

I kiss her like the world is about to end.

She gasps against me, but I'm gripping the back of her head to hold her steady. My fingers dip into the mass of her silky golden hair.

She whimpers against me, and that sound unlocks something inside me.

I make up for every night I wanted her by my side.

With my lips on hers, I reforge the connection between the dwelling place of our souls. I drink her in like she's the only thing I need for sustenance.

We're two fires colliding.

She moans against me.

And then, she bites my lower lip. Sharp enough to draw blood.

My little tigress.

I wipe the blood off my bottom lip. She's a feral little thing. And I wouldn't have her any other way.

"We're going to have to tame you later, my wild *tigrenok*," I say. "But until then, don't make another sound."

"Aleksandr, please, I—"

"I'm a devil you can't bargain with, princess," I say. "Your fate was sealed the moment you looked at me with those fuck-me eyes."

"It's not too late," she says. "You can put me back in the cell, and I'll forget any of this ever happened."

"Get in the car, Julie," I say. "Don't make me tie you up."

Her eyes blaze with desire.

She likes the idea of me tying her up.

I want to further explore that idea, but I can't get carried away with my lust. There's plenty of time for that later.

I lift her off her feet and place her in the hidden compartment. She starts fighting back, clawing at me with her nails and whimpering for me to let her go.

But she's no match for my strength.

I lock the compartment. It's similar to the kind used by cartels to ship drugs across borders, but it can be used for just about anything. I modified it by adding an oxygen ventilation system so she can breathe.

As I close the trunk, the other prison staff filter out into the parking lot.

The shift just ended.

I exit with the rest of the cars.

There's not a single hiccup in the plan. I grin when I hit the highway with my precious cargo in the back.

"Is it done?" Andrei asks through the Bluetooth speakers.

"It's done."

JULIE

J wake up to soft caresses against my cheek. I lean into it before remembering where I am and who I'm with.

Tears flood my eyes immediately.

He cups my jaw and forces me to look at him.

"I don't like it when you cry," he grunts.

When he says that, more tears roll down my cheeks.

I sniffle and sit up. "I made the wrong choice. I should never have agreed to come with you."

"Is this because of the girl I left in your place?" he asks. "They won't make her serve your sentence for you, Julie. She'll be freed by the end of the week. And plus, she's made her choices. She's an aspiring actress who works in a coffee shop. She needs the money."

"They'll investigate this," I say. "They'll keep tabs on her to see if she's involved with any suspicious activity. How do you think your two hundred grand will look in her bank statement?"

"Who said anything about a bank statement?" he replies. "And that girl wouldn't have lifted her pinkie finger for two hundred grand. She demanded three times that."

"You gave her over half a million in cash?" I ask.

"Let's just say she'll be receiving lots of Amazon packages for the rest of her life," he answers.

I nibble on my bottom lip.

I should have known that he would have thought this through. He does this kind of stuff for a living, after all.

“You’ve changed, Aleksandr,” I say.

“In what way?” he asks.

“In every way,” I say. “You were someone I could count on before. I barely recognize you now.”

He laughs, but it’s humorless. “You always knew *exactly* who I was.”

Tears overflow again. “You were gentle before. You were kind.”

His jaw flexes. “It was what you needed from me then.”

We never spoke about it, but I think he always knew. He always knew about Derek, my lost love.

He knew about my broken heart.

But now, everything is different.

Aleksandr’s dark eyes contain no compassion, only an invitation to let go. To sin.

He moves closer.

I tip my head all the way back. He’s so tall that it’s dizzying to look up at him.

It’s the middle of the night.

We’re by the highway. I’m faintly aware of the cars passing by.

But Aleksandr has all of my attention as he pulls me out of the compartment. Closing the trunk, he leaves me wedged between him and his car.

I haven’t forgotten how it felt to have his lips on mine.

He stole that kiss.

Two parts of me were at odds when he pressed his lips against mine. He stirred up emotions inside me that have been slumbering for eons.

I saw colors.

For the first time in a long time, I wanted to sit in front of a blank canvas and see where my paintbrush would take me.

But the other half of me that's still loyal to Derek wanted to curl up into a ball and cry.

"So many thoughts inside that mind of yours," he whispers. "I can see every one of them in your eyes, *tigrenok*."

"I just want to go home," I say. "To my sisters."

He shakes his head. "They won't be able to protect you like I can."

"I can't stay with you," I say.

"You're afraid you'd like it," he murmurs, his eyes dipping to my lips.

"No," I say. "It's just...not right. I wish you didn't break me out of prison."

"If it makes you feel any better, I'll treat you like a captive," he says.

He binds my wrists behind my back.

I gasp when I feel cold metal against my skin. He snaps the shackles in place.

"You had no right to—"

"I have every right to do whatever I please with your body," he says, resting his hands on my hips.

The weight of them is enough to make heat blaze between my thighs.

The yellow and red of the passing cars flash over his face. I'm shrouded in darkness.

"And you'd let me, wouldn't you, princess?" he croons. "In fact, you look forward to it."

I didn't know I could burn like this.

But absence makes the heart grow fonder. And I missed this man over the past two years. I missed my friend.

I trap my bottom lip between my teeth. He lifts and places me on the closed trunk. My thighs widen on their own, letting him wedge his hips between them.

He takes my lower lip between his teeth. I can feel his hard cock against my thigh again.

“You don’t know how much power you have over me, *tigrenok*,” he whispers. “My whole world revolves around you.”

He’s everything I didn’t know I needed.

His sweet heart and dirty mind make me forget why I’m supposed to resist him.

His palms mold my backside, drawing me closer. I’m not wearing a bra, so my hard nipples graze his chest. He leans over me, roughly grabbing one of my breasts and tugging at my nipple. My back arches into his touch.

A moan forms in my throat.

“I can make you forget, *tigrenok*,” he says. “I can make you forget about every bad thing that ever happened to you.”

And without asking, he presses his lips against mine again, stealing yet another kiss from me.

It ignites a fire inside my body, leaving me craving more.

I know I need to put an end to this before both of us get burned.

My hands are bound. My body is trapped.

All I can do is nip his lips a second time.

He pulls away. His dark eyes smolder as they look at me.

“You bit me,” he says.

“You kissed me without asking,” I say.

“This smart mouth,” he says, cupping my chin and tipping my face up. “It’s going to get you into a lot of trouble. I put everything on the line to save you, and this is how you show your gratitude?”

My thighs spread wider as he pushes his hips against me, making sure I can feel every inch of his big cock.

“I didn’t want to be saved,” I whisper.

He really thinks he’s some dark prince who saved me from the tower. But reality is much more complex than that. I can see the motivation in his eyes.

He doesn’t plan on letting me go.

He wants to *own* me.

I just traded one prison for another.

“There you go again with that smart mouth,” he says, slapping one of my tits. It’s not gentle. It’s a sharp sting that I feel deep inside my core.

“I never needed your help, Aleksandr,” I say. “I never asked for it.”

“I know just what I need to do with you,” he says. “I’ll have to break you into submission before putting the pieces back together how I see fit.”

“Good luck with that,” I say.

His eyes glint in the dark.

He slaps my other tit. Cars are passing by. People can see a grown man slapping my tits out of their windows.

“You like that, don’t you?” he asks, hefting my breasts as he rubs his cock against me.

“I don’t,” I say, just to rile him up even more.

“If you didn’t want your tits slapped, you should have worn a bra.”

“*You* were the one who dressed me, Aleksandr,” I say.

He pinches my nipples from over the T-shirt, making waves of heat crash inside my body.

“I only had to do that because you refused to do it yourself,” he says. “But that’s what you wanted all along, isn’t it? You wanted my hands touching your body.”

His English is fluent, but his Russian accent slips through, giving his words a dark edge that makes my toes curl.

“You can act innocent all you want, *tigrenok*,” he says. “But I see you for who you are. I know what you want.”

“What does that word mean?” I ask, closing my eyes and telling my heart to calm the fuck down. “*Tigrenok*?”

“Tiger cub,” he rasps. “You might take your little claws out from time to time, but that doesn’t change the fact that you belong to me. Every *inch* of you belongs to me.”

His hands roam my backside, slipping inside the waistband of my jeans. He kneads my ass like he just can’t help himself. His touch feels illicit, like he knows he shouldn’t be doing it but can’t resist.

“Do you have any idea what the scent of your wet little pussy does to me?” he asks. “I almost wanted to fuck you right in front of the prison guard who walked by. Maybe I would have let him watch.”

My thighs clench around his hips. He clasps the inside of my thighs and pushes them back apart.

“Don’t push me away now,” he says, pressing his cock flush against my pussy. “Do you like the idea of other men salivating over your hot little body, *tigrenok*?”

My head drops back.

He licks the column of my throat before grabbing the back of my neck, forcing me to keep my eyes on him.

“You *do*.” He smirks. “You like the thought of other men losing their minds over you. I bet you would put on a show, making these pretty tits shake the whole time. I bet you’d let me spread your thighs and feast on you while they watched.”

He unbuttons my jeans and slides the zipper down. He glances down at my white panties.

“Is this princess pussy wet for me, Julie?”

I shake my head, trying to move away from him. He grabs the back of my head, holding a fistful of my hair as he thrusts

his hand inside my panties.

He groans softly when he feels how wet I am.

“How will I ever get work done again if I know this wet little pussy is right across the hall?” he asks.

Thunderbolts strike against my core as he moves his hand, exploring me as he pins me down against his car. His body covers mine, but if the vehicles on the highway were to slow down, they’d know exactly what we were up to.

“You keep looking at the cars. Does it make you horny that people may be watching you?” he asks, pressing his thumb against my clit and rolling it until stars burst behind my eyelids. “They would pull over, all scandalized, ready to call the cops on us. But then they would glimpse your creamy thighs and bouncing tits. They’re only men. They wouldn’t be able to help themselves. They’d reach their hand down their trousers and think about being in my place. They’d hear your moans and see the way your perfect ass moved against my cock, and they would stroke themselves harder until they came in their pants. Is that what you want, *tigrenok*?”

I’m so delirious that I can’t get a single word out.

Aleksandr lives life on the edge.

He’s unlike anyone I’ve ever known. He lives for the thrill of it all. And he has nothing to lose.

As he whispers these filthy things in my ear, I feel a heavy knot in my chest loosening. It makes space for him, inviting him in. I bite his shoulder as he thrusts a finger into my pussy.

He freezes, slowly moving his head back to look at my face.

I blush all the way to my hairline.

“Julie.” He whispers my name like it’s a prayer. “I didn’t know.”

I’m hit with an intense urge to wrap my arms around him. I want to pull him close to me. More than anything, I want to go back to the way he was with me before he found out that I was untouched.

“All this time?” he asks, searching my face.

Two years have passed since we last saw each other.

A lot is supposed to happen in two years. Lovers are supposed to come and go. Life is supposed to be lived. Drunken nights with strangers are supposed to lead to love that only lasts one night.

But all I had was my family and my one goal. Nothing else.

He rests his forehead against mine. “Everything I said... that must have been too much. I’m sorry.”

It *was* too much. It was unlike anything I ever imagined.

But I still want it.

No. I *need* it.

I shake my head. “I liked it.”

His grip on my waist tightens. He lifts his face to look into my eyes.

Something is forged every time we look at each other. It’s a bond that feels as ancient as time itself.

“Don’t say things like that, *tigrenok*,” he says. “It makes me want to do bad things to you. It makes me want to be a bad man.”

I’m so desperate for his touch that I buck my hips against him.

“Please.” The word is but a whimper.

Yet it’s enough to make desire flare in his eyes again. It’s like watching a beast awaken from its slumber. The man I know is replaced by a monster, his pupils dark and possessive, his grip on me turning stronger.

“I have to warn you—a man like me isn’t capable of being gentle,” he says, his fingers dancing over my belly. The featherlight touches land inside me like nuclear weapons. I’m so close to detonating...and I don’t want to do it without him.

“I want to come,” I say.

He twists my panties, making the material dig into my clit. It's abrasive and rough, just like everything else about him.

"You want to come," he repeats, gripping my throat and forcing eye contact.

He seems to need this.

He seems to almost be checking in with me, making sure I'm still comfortable with what we're doing.

I nod, gasping when he starts moving the fabric of my panties, sliding it up and down my pussy.

"Aleksandr, please," I gasp.

"Fuck, I love my name on your lips," he says, bringing his forehead down to mine. "I want you to scream it when I take that cherry for the first time."

Using his grip on my panties, he tugs me closer until he's pressed up against me again. I'm dizzy with desire.

He's the only one who can extinguish this growing fire inside me.

"I'll have to teach you everything," he says. "I'll have to teach you what to do with a cock."

He thrusts his hand inside my panties again. And this time, it's rougher than before. He grips me with a sort of madness that should send me running. But instead, I look into his eyes, letting our proximity do all sorts of dangerous things to my mind.

"Do you like it when I'm rough with you, *tigrenok*?" he asks, rolling his calloused thumb over my clit again. "It's okay. You don't have to admit it out loud. All of your secrets are safe with me."

The way he's touching me, the words he's growling against my ear, the hot length of him grinding desperately against my thighs—all of it makes the flame inside me burn brighter.

"You can come now, *tigrenok*," he says. "Get filthy all over my hand."

It's like I've been waiting for his command.

I come undone.

He growls and takes his cock out. I scramble back at the sight of it. It looks like it's almost...*angry* at me, like it's accusing me of riling him up like this.

“Get used to looking at it, *tigrenok*,” he says. “Pretty soon, you'll do much more than just look at it. I'm going to make you take this cock. It's going inside that tiny little pussy. I don't care if it doesn't fit. I'll *make* it fit.”

He examines me in the dark.

My parted lips, my spread thighs, my hard nipples. He strokes himself slowly, gazing upon me with lust in his eyes. I didn't think catering to a man's fantasy could be so hot, but the way he's looking at me now ignites my lust all over again.

He keeps one of his hands against my pussy as he strokes himself with the other.

“Fuck, you're getting even wetter,” he says. “I didn't know it was even possible to find such a horny virgin. Look at you, spreading your thighs so perfectly so I can see all of you. I bet you're flexible too, although I'll have to test that out later.”

My pussy clenches.

I draw my thighs closer, but he grips my knee sternly, telling me to keep them open.

“This pussy is going to be the root cause of my misery,” he says. “I'll have to watch you parade around in tight tank tops and little skirts that are too small for you. But I won't say anything because I like watching you in clothes you've grown out of. But one night, I'll decide that I've grown tired of just watching. I'll come to take what's mine. I'll pry your thighs open and muffle your screams until I've buried every inch of my cock inside that forbidden hole.”

My heart races as I process his words.

This is no ordinary man. He's a man who takes. That's the life he's accustomed to.

I know in this moment that my fate is sealed.

My fate, destiny, karma, whatever you want to call it, all of it has led to this man right here.

My throat tightens when ropes of come leave his cock. He throws his head back and curses my name as he comes. When he's done, he takes the last bead of come from the tip of his cock and seals the distance between us.

"You want to come again, don't you?" he asks.

I nod, licking my lips.

"Fuck, what are you doing to me, Julie?" he asks. He's so close right now that I can see the vein at his neck pounding. His hand shakes as he takes that finger, the one with the bead of come on it, and places it right against my opening.

My eyes shoot up to look at him.

He doesn't even bat his eyelashes.

I moan when he thrusts that finger inside me. I'm so wet that it doesn't hurt as much as last time.

He slides it into me all the way, pushing against my resistance.

"This tight little pussy is going to rule my whole world now," he says, curling the tip of his finger inside me. It grazes against a part of me that makes me burn for more.

We instinctively know each other.

He knows exactly what to do with my body. And I don't think it's just because he's more experienced than I am.

"You're clenching so hard around my finger, *tigrenok*," he says. "You're so tight that I'll have to shove my cock inside you."

He draws his finger out and thrusts into me again, making me cry out and clutch his shoulders.

This feels different from what he did the last time. My back arches as he does what he pleases to my body. He thrusts

into me over and over again, grinding his knuckles against my clit at the same time.

And when he leans down to take my nipple into his mouth, it's sensory overload.

I can't control it any longer.

I'm gasping for air as he watches me.

"You're waiting for my permission," he marvels. "I swear you're an innocent angel sent to hell just for me. Come for me, angel."

I scoot closer toward him, needing his weight on me. This doesn't just feel like a mating. This feels like falling into something I have no control over.

It's too much.

I combust.

And then I'm boneless.

My eyes grow heavy as he lifts me against him. He takes the shackles off, and then he does something no man has ever done before—he kisses my forehead.

My arms are free, but they feel too heavy for me.

He holds me against his chest and deposits me in the passenger seat. I feel him placing the seat belt over me and reclining my seat all the way back.

Knowing he'll watch over me, I drift into the deepest sleep I've had in a long time.

ALEKSANDR

She looks so vulnerable when she sleeps.

I keep stealing glances at her as I drive. A familiar possessiveness creeps up my spine. I'm meant to protect this girl.

We might not see eye to eye right now, but she'll come around.

I'll make sure of it.

"How far along are you?" Andrei's voice comes through my earphones.

"You don't have to stay up for me," I whisper, careful not to wake her. "Get some rest. I'll see you guys in the morning."

"Don't be an idiot," says another voice. It's Ruslan.

Andrei, Ruslan, and I were in a Russian gulag together. It's an off-the-charts prison that's not supposed to exist. It's where they send people they don't plan on ever releasing. They only kept us alive to make us do manual labor. And when the prisoners got too old to work, they disappeared.

We escaped from that place.

Better yet, after living through that hell, we went on to build an empire in North America.

"Did she put up a fight?" Andrei asks.

"She did, but I have it under control," I say.

“I swear to God, if the FBI comes knocking on our door, we’re disowning you,” Ruslan says. He can’t for the life of him understand why I wanted to break Julie out of prison.

He doesn’t trust her.

Neither does Andrei, for that matter, but both relented when I told them I would do it with or without their help.

“It’ll be fine,” I say. “I have everything under control.”

I glance in the rearview mirror again.

A white Toyota has been trailing us for over an hour.

In my line of work, I’m trained to be suspicious of everyone and everything. There are no such things as coincidences.

“You say that every time, Sasha,” Andrei says, calling me by my Russian nickname. “But if you need help, we’re just a call away.”

“Like I said, everything is under control.” There’s an edge to my voice that wasn’t there before.

I know I fucked up when the two of them turn quiet.

Andrei’s rough growl comes through. “What’s wrong?”

After the years we spent together in Nordvik, the Russian prison, my brothers know me better than I know myself.

“He always does this,” Ruslan says. I can’t see him, but I know he’s shaking his head.

“Nothing is wrong,” I say.

I know I should tell them about the white Toyota.

But my ego won’t let me.

They always think of me as the weakest link, as the little brother who’s incapable of doing anything without guidance.

I want to prove them wrong.

But I’m not stupid enough to put Julie’s life at risk.

“Give me a minute,” I tell my brothers.

Before informing my brothers, I need to confirm whether the white Toyota is a threat.

I slow down.

If this were just another car, the white Toyota would pass me.

Instead, the other car slows as well.

Under different circumstances, I'd be grinning because I love nothing more than a good challenge. But with Julie asleep next to me, the stakes are higher.

I have something to lose now.

"You're being tailed, aren't you?" Ruslan asks.

"Maybe," I mumble.

I'm never going to hear the end of it now.

My brothers insisted that breaking someone out of a high-security American prison was risky, especially a high-profile FBI agent who threatens national security. Considering our history in Russia, we try to stay as far away from the limelight as possible.

But for Julie, I was willing to risk it all.

I didn't have a choice.

It was just something I had to do. It was either this or living in agony for the rest of my life knowing she was wasting away in prison for a crime she didn't commit.

"Tell me the make of the car," Andrei says, getting down to business.

"White Toyota," I say. "It looks like a Camry. One of the newer models."

"Can you see the license plate?"

"It's too dark," I say.

I take the next exit.

The car follows. They know that I know. The only thing left to do is get rid of them.

The car is gaining on me. I try to make out who's behind the wheel, but the headlights are too bright.

"Aleksandr?" Julie straightens in her seat. "What's going on?"

She looks so adorable right now, with her blonde hair ruffled and her eyes still heavy with sleep.

"Go back to sleep, *tigrenok*."

"You're speeding," she says, looking at the dash and then at the side mirror. "Are we being followed?"

Her voice contains no trace of panic. She's good at controlling her emotions in stressful situations.

"How long?" she asks.

"I noticed it an hour ago, but I didn't know for sure until now," I tell her.

"An *hour*?" she asks.

"More cars were on the road then," I say. "It could have just as easily been a coincidence."

Ruslan's voice comes through my earphones. "Okay, listen up. We'll send help, but I need your exact location."

"Who is that?" Julie asks.

"It's Ruslan," I say, connecting him to the car's speakers and handing Julie my cell phone. "Can you send him our location?"

She takes the phone from me.

If she's surprised, she doesn't show it. I usually don't conduct any business through my phone, but these are extenuating circumstances.

Julie quickly finds Ruslan's contact and sends him our location.

"Done," she says. "What else can I do?"

"How good is your aim?" I ask, glancing over at her.

She bites the inside of her cheek as a smile spreads over her face.

“Not too shabby,” she says.

I open the sunroof.

“Listen carefully,” I say. “Underneath the back seats is a collection of guns. Choose one. This car is bulletproof, but I need you to stay covered at all times.”

I press the button underneath the steering wheel that opens the weapons compartment. Tiny lights illuminate the compartment, making the guns gleam in the dark.

Julie picks her weapon of choice and checks the ammo.

“Aim for the tires,” I instruct. “We’ll deal with the man later.”

She nods, bracing her feet against the floor as she stands. I drive carefully, trying to look out for any potholes that might throw her off balance.

She pulls the trigger.

Her aim is perfection.

But so are the tires.

They must be made of reinforced rubber because there’s no puncture. The other car doesn’t slow down.

“Get back down,” I say.

She lowers herself into her seat. “Who do you think it is, anyway?”

“We’ll figure that out after they’re dead,” I say.

“Sasha, keep us updated,” Andrei says through the speakers.

“We just tried to fire at them, but they’re in an armored vehicle,” I tell him.

“We?” Andrei asks.

“Julie did the shooting,” I say.

“You handed her a gun?” he asks. “Are you out of your mind?”

I glance at Julie. She doesn’t look offended in the least.

“You’re also on the speaker,” I say. “And she heard every word you said.”

“Hi, Andrei,” Julie says.

Andrei is quiet for a beat. He doesn’t think very highly of Julie. Not after what she did the last time.

“Hello, Julie,” he says finally.

Ruslan interrupts. “We sent a drone, Sasha. It will protect you and try to throw them off your trail. Can you estimate how many people are inside the car?”

“It’s too dark to see, but my gut tells me it’s just one person,” I say.

The drone arrives.

Before attacking the enemy, it will scan the area, searching for potential threats— weapons and humans alike.

I hear Andrei and Ruslan muttering to each other. Their words are hurried, and I can’t make out any of it.

“Alex, stop driving,” Ruslan screams. “There’s a bridge coming up. Whatever you do, don’t drive over it. It’s rigged. I have reason to believe that whoever is behind you is herding you toward it.”

A fucking *bomb*?

Rage shoots up my spine, making me see red.

Under different circumstances, I would find it amusing that someone’s trying to kill me. But I have Julie sitting next to me now.

The past few hours come rushing back.

The white Toyota kept a safe distance for the first couple of hours. But in the past sixty minutes, it made it obvious that it was tailing me. They *wanted* me to take that exit. They *wanted* to lead me toward that bridge with the bomb.

For all I know, they have multiple bombs set up in this area.

I want to see their fucking face. I want to see them piss themselves in fear.

“Alex, did you hear me?” Ruslan screams again.

“He heard you,” Julie says. “He has a weird look in his eyes.”

Adrenaline hums through my body. My fingers curl around the steering wheel as bloodlust laces my every thought.

“Is his right eye twitching?” Andrei asks.

Julie looks at me. “Yes?”

“*Blyat*. That’s the look he gets before he does something reckless. Sasha, I beg you, don’t do anything stupid. The drone will carry out the attack.”

“*Tigrenok*,” I say. My voice is calm. *Lethal*. “There’s a long-range sniper rifle in the back. Hand it over to me.”

She looks conflicted, but she fetches the rifle for me. She instinctually trusts my chaos.

It pleases me to know that she obeys my orders.

I take the rifle from her and slam the brakes. The white Toyota rolls to a stop as well.

I don’t say a word as I check the magazine and grab my night vision eyewear.

I throw open the car door.

“You’re not wearing a bulletproof vest,” Julie protests.

I stand behind the door, positioning the heavy rifle against my shoulder. The other car has stopped a safe distance away, but I can see it clearly through the lens of the rifle.

I take a deep breath, and I start firing.

I *keep* firing.

I can hear my brothers yelling at me. I can hear Julie pleading for me to get back in the car.

I focus on the target as I empty bullet after bullet.

The motherfucker returns fire, but he doesn't have the kind of ammo I do. He's got nothing on me.

I aim for the glass, the weakest part of the car. It's made of aluminum oxynitride, a bulletproof material that can withstand several bullets. But I'm waging *war*.

The glass shatters.

I can see him now.

I aim for his arms, incapacitating him. I riddle his flesh with bullet holes. I grin when I hear the melody of his screams.

However, none of my shots are fatal. He's not getting an easy death.

He was going to harm my Julie.

Orange and red flood my vision once again as I walk toward him.

I open his door and find him slumped on the seat with his head tucked into his chest. He's losing consciousness because of the blood loss. In a few minutes, he'll go into hypovolemic shock.

I'm looking at the last few minutes of a man's life.

This pathetic man, he really thought he'd touch my Julie.

I grab the bloody collar of his shirt and tug him up. "Who sent you?"

He's too far gone to speak.

Quickly, I glance around the inside of his car. He's alone, but there's a file on the passenger seat.

I grab the file and open it.

It's a photo of Julie.

My blood runs cold. This man wasn't after me. He was after Julie.

For some reason, I assumed it was one of our many enemies, perhaps the Greek mafia in New York City. Things have been tense between us ever since my brothers and I started expanding and taking their clients.

I glance back at my girl.

She's still in the car.

I put the folder away in my jacket and find the smelling salts I always carry with me. I place it underneath the man's nostrils.

It doesn't work, so I inject his body with a stimulant.

"Wake up, *mudak*," I say.

Julie steps out of the car. She starts walking toward me.

"Aleksandr," she says. "I don't like this. Can we get out of here?"

"Julie, get back in the car."

"Aleksandr, that man is dead," she says, covering her mouth. "Let go of him."

"Dying," I say, slapping his face again. One of his eyes cracks open. The drug is making its way through his system.

He starts sobbing when he sees me.

"Who do you work for?" I ask him.

"Anonymous...client," he gasps. "Please...I have a family."

"Do I look like I fucking care?" I scream in his face. "Look at me, motherfucker. Look at my face."

Tears stream down his face now.

"Alexandr," Julie says.

I drag the man out of the car.

He's bleeding profusely through his right arm. I must have hit his brachial artery.

"Oh my God, what are you doing?" Julie asks.

“I need answers from him,” I say, dragging him toward our car and depositing him in the trunk.

I slam it shut.

Julie just stands there, looking at all the blood on my hands.

“He needs to go to the hospital,” she says.

“He’ll be lucky if I send him to hell in one piece,” I say.

“I’ve never seen you like this,” Julie whispers, shaking her head as tears fill her eyes. “You’re... enjoying yourself.”

Tonight, she’s seen the monster in me. The depraved part of me beyond saving. The darkness inside me that separates me from the rest of humanity. And she doesn’t like it.

“Get in the car, Julie,” I tell her.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “I refuse to be a part of this.”

“What, are you scared of a little blood?” I ask, moving toward her. She takes a step back and runs away from me.

She makes it to a nearby tree when I catch her.

I pin both of her wrists to the tree.

“Where do you think you’re going, *tigrenok*?” I growl. “Did you really think it would be that easy to escape me?”

“This isn’t right,” she says. “I made a vow to protect this country from men like you. This goes against everything I set out to do.”

“Is this about *him*?” I spit out. “Do you still think about him, *tigrenok*?”

Her eyes immediately fill with tears again.

“Don’t,” she says. “This has nothing to do with him.”

There’s a man who has been in her heart for a long time. Losing him made her lose herself. He turned her into this. And the thought of him enrages me almost as much as that bomb a mile away.

“When I had my hand over your pussy, did you close your eyes and imagine it was him?” I growl.

She struggles against me. I’m pinning her to the tree with one of my thighs. As she struggles, my thigh ends up between her legs, rubbing against her tight little cunt.

I glance at her wrists. They’re stained with the man’s blood.

It doesn’t look right on her.

But when I look into her eyes, I see that she’s quieter. My knee digs against her clit, and her lips are parted again. I don’t know what possesses me, but I need her.

The rush from earlier still bubbles in my veins.

I lean in, brushing my lips against hers and grinding my knee harder against her cunt.

She places her hands against my chest. “There’s a dying man in your trunk, Aleksandr. And you have a responsibility to warn the local police about the bomb. Someone else could get injured.”

I blink.

She’s right about the man. And what she said about the bomb hasn’t even crossed my mind. It only highlights the differences between us.

She’s all light, and I’m all darkness.

Our lives were never supposed to collide, but they did.

And nothing will ever be the same again.

“Look at me,” I growl.

She does.

“Don’t even think about running from me. I *will* find you, and I *will* punish you. Do you understand?”

She nods, but it’s not enough.

“Use your words, *tigrenok*,” I say.

“I understand,” she says.

With her beautiful eyes on me and her pliant body underneath mine, it takes every ounce of my willpower to peel myself off her.

She walks back to the car.

My eyes are drawn to her wrists again.

The traces of blood don't look right. It feels like I'm dragging her into something she was never supposed to be a part of.

Like I'm responsible for making an angel fall.

JULIE

The silence between us is thicker than ever.

I can't bring myself to even look at him.

But every cell in my body is still aware of him. Every thought in my head still revolves around him.

Aleksandr's knuckles are white around the steering wheel. I don't have to look to know that he still has that deadly gleam in his eyes.

I've never seen anything like it.

I saw the predator that lurks underneath his skin. It was vicious and out for blood. And it scared me.

What scared me even more is how much I liked it.

The power he exuded turned me on.

It shouldn't.

I'm a good person.

I glance down at my lap. I already have blood on my hands.

Aleksandr stops the car by the side of the road.

A figure steps out of the shadows. It's a man holding a briefcase.

"Who is that?" I ask.

"An associate doctor," he replies.

Associate. It's just a fancy word for people on his payroll.

The doctor slides into the back seat.

“Thank you for meeting us on such short notice, Dr. Greyson,” Aleksandr says. “The patient is in the trunk.”

“What state is he in?” the doctor asks.

“He’s bleeding, but he’ll be fine,” Aleksandr says.

“Can I see him?” the doctor asks.

“In a few minutes,” Aleksandr says.

“He was in a critical state, Aleksandr,” I snap. “Maybe you should let the doctor look at him.”

Like lightning, Aleksandr grabs my jaw. He forces me to look at his smoldering eyes.

“Let’s get one thing straight, *tigrenok*,” he says. “I’m the one who calls the shots here, not you.”

His dominant tone makes my thighs clench together. His eyes soften by a fraction when he sees the fright in my eyes.

He releases me and resumes driving.

His shirt is soaked in blood that’s not his. His eyes still have that glow of murderous rage. This is how I need to remember him.

He’s not the easygoing friend I once had.

He’s a dangerous mobster.

The only good news is that his brothers are working to defuse the bombs—multiple explosives were found in various locations along the East Coast.

I’m so lost in thought that I almost overlook the landscape we’re passing through—the gentle slopes of the mountains, the forestland, the waterfalls.

This isn’t just any small town.

This is Silver Falls.

I whip toward Aleksandr. “Is this some kind of joke?”

“It was the nearest town,” he says. “And going to the city isn’t safe right now.”

“Where are you headed?”

“There’s only one refuge in this town,” he says.

“Turn back,” I say, gritting my teeth. “Right now.”

It feels like something nasty is crawling up the inside of my throat. My cheeks prickle with heat.

This is Silver Falls, the town where I grew up.

I know the entire town. I know its secrets. I know the hidden gems we don’t tell the tourists about. I have memories everywhere.

It was paradise.

Until it was not.

“You don’t understand,” I say, trying to plead with him. “I can’t be here.”

His jaw grinds back and forth. He knows exactly why. “It’s too late to turn back now.”

“You’re heading to Blackwood Estate, aren’t you?”

Aleksandr’s eyes flick to mine. I see the answer on his face.

“I don’t want to burden my sisters,” I say.

My sister, Belle, lives with her husband and kids in Blackwood Estate. Even though she believes I’m innocent, I don’t want to endanger her family.

I can’t forget that I’m a fugitive.

She could get into trouble for aiding one.

“They’re your family, Julie,” Aleksandr says. “You’ll never be a burden to them.”

“It’s the middle of the night,” I say. “I can’t just show up at her doorstep. It’s not fair to her. She has a *family*, Aleksandr. Please. I can’t involve her in this.”

He looks straight ahead.

He’s already made up his mind.

Things between us have shifted. He's still pissed that I tried to run. Even though I didn't make it far, he didn't like that I tried to leave in the first place.

All that remains between us now is distrust.

I stare at the road and push the memories to the back of my mind.

"I know a place," I whisper. "We'll be safe there."

"Where?" he asks.

"It's a cabin in the mountains," I say. My breathing quickens. I don't know what this will do to me, but it's my only choice. "It's isolated from the rest of the town and off the grid. We can stay there."

He looks at me for a moment before nodding.

My tongue feels thick in my throat as I give him the directions.

We take the mountain road. I feel every pothole, every rock, the crunch of gravel under the tires. When we reach the cabin, I can barely breathe.

"Is there a key?" Aleksandr asks.

"Birdhouse," I say, stepping out of the car.

The doctor assists Aleksandr as he pulls the wounded man out of the trunk. The doctor fusses over him, telling us he might not make it.

I watch Aleksandr's face.

He has so much contempt for a man on the verge of death.

And then I turn to look at the cabin.

I used to come here all the time. It doesn't belong to anyone now, but there was a time when it used to be my haven. I used to come here with my canvas and paint.

If I listen closely enough, I can almost hear the laughter. The moments of happiness seared into my brain like a disease.

Aleksandr touches the back of my bicep.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

His head lowers, casting a dark shadow over me. And in that darkness, I feel like I can breathe again.

I nod. “I’m fine.”

And then I stride ahead, opening the door for the men to pass through. I pause at the threshold.

When I woke up this morning, I had no clue I’d end up here. So much has happened in less than twenty-four hours.

I close the door behind me.

It’s too late to go back now.

ALEKSANDR

This cabin means something to her.

I glance around. It's unimpressive. Plain.

But Julie looks as pale as a ghost.

It's obvious she used to come here. My jaw hardens as I think about her coming here with that other man. The one who broke her heart.

I study the cabin again.

And this time, I see it through her eyes. I catch a whiff of paint in the air. The large windows overlook rolling green hills and a glittering river in the distance.

The doctor runs around the cabin, trying to disinfect every surface.

He picks up a syringe and loads it with some drug.

"What is that?" I ask.

"Anesthesia," he replies.

"He doesn't need anesthesia," I say.

"But I have to operate on him," he says.

"Set up an IV line, give him whatever medications he needs to stay alive, but make sure he feels every ounce of pain," I say.

Julie is watching me again.

She keeps doing that.

It's like she can't believe I'm the same man she used to have movie nights with.

But everything was different back then. She needed me to be gentle with her. I could see the jagged edges of her heart, and I knew she wouldn't be able to handle my intensity.

What she needs right now is for someone to take control.

The patient starts screaming.

Julie swallows, slinking further into the wall, like she's trying to become one with it. Every time I look at her, all I can see is the way she looked at me when I was holding the gun. That fear in her eyes.

And something else.

A desire that is born in darkness.

I could read every thought inside that pretty little head of hers.

The scumbag on the table screams again. The doctor cleans him up to examine the wounds. His shirt is peeled off, revealing a bulletproof vest underneath. That vest is the only reason he's alive and breathing right now.

The damage isn't as bad as I thought, but he still needs some IV and blood transfusions.

He screams harder as the doctor starts extracting the bullets.

"For God's sake, just give him something for the pain," Julie exclaims, lifting her hands to her mouth. She looks positively traumatized.

I don't understand why.

"Take a walk with me," I say, heading toward her.

I reach for her elbow, but she turns her body away, avoiding me.

"*Julie*," I growl.

She's really testing my patience today. She doesn't know I've been running on fumes for the past few days.

She turns and storms out the door.

I follow her, but something on the wall catches my eye. It's a blue handprint. It looks small enough to be a child's, but I know it's Julie's.

My blood rushes to my ears when I see another one beside it. This one is in red. A man's hand.

I step outside.

It's late summer, but it's colder at this altitude in the middle of the wilderness. I shrug off my jacket and place it around Julie's shoulders. It comes all the way down to her knees.

"Who else knows about the cabin?" I ask her.

"Is that what you wanted to talk about?" she asks, turning around to glare at me.

I fight back a smile. She's so tiny that I can't help but be amused every time she gets mad.

"Yes," I say. "Among other things."

"If you must know, the cabin belonged to Derek," she says, looking away from me. "His grandmother left it to him."

"Did he have any other family members?" I ask.

"Not that I know of," she replies.

"Do people in town know about it?"

"We never invited anybody else up here, so as far as I know, nobody knows about its existence."

I try not to think about Julie being alone with some other man. I never thought I'd be a jealous man, but here I am, fuming about something that happened nearly a decade ago.

She avoids my gaze.

I stride up to her and cup her cheek in my hand.

"*Look at me,*" I order.

She defies me. My fingers tingle with the need to bend her over my lap and spank her into submission.

My hand wraps around her throat.

“I told you to look at me, *tigrenok*,” I say.

Tears well in her eyes again, overflowing down her cheeks. When one of them hits my hand, I let go as if I’ve been electrocuted.

“Help me understand why you have sympathy for a man who tried to blow up our car,” I say slowly, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

“You really don’t get it, do you?” she says. “It’s not about him. It’s *you*.”

“What about me?” I ask.

“*Everything* about you,” she exclaims. “When I first met you, you were sweet and sensitive. But it was all a lie, wasn’t it?”

“You’re one to talk,” I say, raising an eyebrow.

“That was different,” she says.

When we first met two years ago, she was undercover. She lied to everyone about who she was. I knew the truth, but I played along, letting her think she was fooling everyone.

“Both of us were in a different place then, Julie,” I tell her.

She’s all but hyperventilating now. “You weren’t who I thought you were. You never should have come for me.”

“You’re worried I might tarnish your reputation,” I say.

She’s heaving now, sobs bursting through her. “I don’t give a damn about my reputation.”

“It’s always been about revenge for you, wasn’t it?” I ask. “It’s why you became an FBI agent.”

“Not revenge,” she says. “Justice.”

“Same thing,” I say.

“I became an agent to put men like you away, Aleksandr,” she says. “Men who kill first and ask questions later. Merciless men who don’t care who gets hurt as long as they win.”

“And you know something?” I hiss, gripping her hips. “I’d do it all over again. If anybody messes with me or mine, I won’t hesitate to rip their heart out from their chest.”

She purses her lips and looks into my eyes.

Somehow, I’ve broken her trust.

She thinks torturing the man trying to kill us is a crime. I wonder what she’d think about everything else I did to get to where I am.

“Are you hungry?” I ask her.

She blinks. “What?”

“Food,” I say.

Her eyes soften. “Yeah. I am hungry, actually.”

I trace my knuckles over her sharp hip bones.

“You haven’t been eating,” I say.

She chews on her lower lip. “It’s the anxiety. It kills my appetite.”

“Are you anxious right now?” I ask.

“More than ever,” she says.

“I picked up some food for you while you were sleeping,” I tell her.

Her eyes widen, and I immediately know she’s interested.

No woman likes to go too long without food.

“Come with me,” I say, leading her toward the car.

Next to where I keep the weaponry is another nook that keeps food warm. I retrieve the food.

A smile tugs at her lips. The sight of it sets my world right again.

“You got me a pizza?” she asks.

“And boneless chicken wings,” I say.

A meal I carefully curated just for her.

I've been in her place before. And one thing that kept me going was thinking about everything I would eat once I escaped prison.

I reach into the car refrigerator and get the soda can and dessert.

We walk farther away from the cabin. The grass underneath us is soft as we sit on top of the hill.

Julie reaches for a slice of pizza. She takes a bite and groans. "So good."

Her shoulder brushes against mine. I want her in my arms. I want to hold her as she eats.

"Thank you," she says, glancing over at me. "You didn't have to."

"I wanted to," I say.

There's still suspicion in her eyes, but she puts it on hold for now.

"I feel like everything will change tomorrow," she says. "My face is going to be all over the news again, isn't it?"

"That depends on how long it takes them to figure out you're missing," I say.

"The actress," she says. "Are you sure she'll be okay?"

"I promise she'll be fine," I say.

"What happens after?" Julie asks. "When they find out that I'm a fugitive?"

"We'll worry about that when the time comes," I say.

She glances back at the cabin. There's no electricity inside, but we can see the doctor working by the light of the LED lantern.

"I guess it'll be easy to ignore the world for a little while over here," she says. "Since there's no electricity or internet."

"I can have those set up if you want," I say.

"I'd rather stay off the grid," she says. "I'm not ready to face everything yet."

“You can take as long as you need,” I assure her.

She looks up at me. Despite everything, there’s so much hope and trust in her eyes.

She trusts me to take care of her.

A sense of responsibility settles over me. It’s heavy, but it’s a weight I’m honored to carry.

“I never thought I’d return to Silver Falls again,” she says, glancing at the rolling hills. “I never thought I’d have the courage to, after everything that transpired.”

I open the pastry box.

“You remembered?” she asks, her eyes widening when she sees the blueberry cheesecake with the thick graham cracker layer.

As if I could ever forget.

When she finishes eating, she rests her head against my shoulder.

“You didn’t eat anything,” she says.

“I wasn’t hungry,” I say, breathing in her scent.

Life was too hard on her. She went through things she never should have, and it made her lose a part of herself. I don’t care how long it takes, but I will spend the rest of my life trying to restore that innocence she once had.

She falls asleep on my shoulder. I gather her in my arms and look at the town that raised her.

Sleepy green hills kissed by soft sunshine.

We could stay here. We could go off the grid and spend time getting to know each other.

Julie stirs in her sleep, turning her face away from the rising sun.

I rest my hand over her hip and kiss her head.

A few years ago, I thought freedom was all I ever wanted.

But the girl I'm holding in my arms has shown me there's so much more to life. Meeting her made me yearn for things I never thought I wanted.

A place to call home.

A family.

One woman for the rest of my life.

If only we could set our differences aside.

JULIE

I'm bound by shackles again.
I can't move an inch.

I start to hyperventilate for a moment, thinking that the worst has happened. I'm back in prison.

But then I catch a whiff of his scent.

Aleksandr.

He's holding me against his chest. His arms are tight around me even in his sleep, like he's afraid to let go.

My heart starts to race again but for different reasons now.

He's a man in his prime—all sturdy and masculine.

I try to extricate myself from his bind but I only become hyperaware of how big he is. His cock is hard against my belly now.

It elicits things I've never felt. Butterflies and everything.

He groans, cupping my ass as one of his heavy arms remains around my back, caging me against him.

I glance up to see he's still asleep.

There's only one thing left to do now. I need to slide down his body. So I wiggle against him, lowering myself. I can feel his heart beating against my ear now. The rise and fall of his muscular chest makes me want to stay there for a moment.

But I need to go to the *room* before he wakes up.

I slither down his body, wiggling until I'm near his stomach. A little lower, until my lips are right over his cock.

And my body has the strangest response to it. My mouth waters.

I lick my lips.

Long fingers slip into my hair. "What do you think you're doing, *tigrenok*?"

My heart trips over itself. "I-I didn't want to wake you."

He raises an eyebrow.

"It was an accident," I add.

His hand wraps around my loose waves. His hips move the slightest inch, positioning himself closer to my mouth. When I see his cock move, I turn toward it, accidentally brushing my lips against the swollen ridge.

He tugs at my hair. "Do you know how many times I wanted you like this? Waking me up with my cock buried down your pretty throat? And now you expect me to let you go because it was an accident?"

My body is a traitor.

It melts at every dirty word that comes out of his mouth.

I always knew being entangled with a man like him wouldn't end well. When he confessed his feelings to me two years ago, I fled. Even though he meant so much to me, I ran away.

I didn't belong in his world.

And he didn't belong in mine.

He releases my hair and cups my chin.

"You're sad again," he observes.

"I was thinking about you," I say, licking my lips again.

He fists my hair. "Lick those pretty lips one more time, and I'll have to shove my cock inside you."

Heat burns a trail of fire down my body, from my lips to the pearl between my thighs. He said that like it would be a punishment.

“You’re forgetting that I can read your every thought,” he says. “Would you like it if I used your mouth for pleasure, Julie?”

His words make me blush. They’re crude and refreshing.

Honest.

He utters every thought that passes through his mind. I know Aleksandr is many things, but he’s not a liar.

I glance back at the cabin. I see a movement from behind the curtains.

“You want me to lick your pussy in front of them?” he asks. There’s a dangerous glint in his eyes now.

I know he’s not joking. He’d actually do it.

I rapidly shake my head.

“Next time you do something like this, it’s going to end with your ass in the air as I take what’s mine,” he says. “Do you understand, Julie?”

I nod.

But he’s not satisfied. “I want to hear you say it, *tigrenok*.”

“I understand.”

“Now, give me a kiss as compensation for making my cock so hard,” he says, rolling me over and dragging me up his body. My thighs spread open for him, letting him settle his hips between them.

He rubs his thumb over my bottom lip. Having him so close always makes me breathless.

I gasp as his lips come crashing down on mine. They’re so hot against me, so feverish. His strong hands pin me in place, keeping me from wiggling around as he drinks from me.

He takes and takes until he’s satiated.

Until my stomach is a fluttering mess.

“Run, *tigrenok*,” he grunts, rolling off me.

Primal instincts kick in. When a man like Aleksandr tells you to run, you run. My legs feel wobbly as I stand and run toward the cabin.

I notice another car around the back. Someone else is here.

Looking back at Aleksandr, I see he’s heading toward the woods.

The cabin’s front door opens, and Inessa Reznikova steps into the sunlight. She’s wearing a huge grin on her face as she tackles me.

“Oh my God,” she squeals. “It’s been so long, Jules.”

I met Inessa and Alexandr at the same time. We never stayed in touch, but I always considered her a dear friend.

“Inessa. *Hey*,” I say, squeezing her back tightly. “I didn’t know you would be coming.”

“Andrei didn’t want me to tag along, but I wore him down,” she says. “I had to come see you for myself. How are you?”

I glance back at the woods. I wonder what Aleksandr is up to, but I think I know. The very thought of him makes my skin tingle all over.

“Is Aleksandr behaving?” she asks.

“He’s been good to me,” I say, turning back toward her.

“Of course he is,” she says. “He talks about you every time he comes over for dinner.”

“He does?” I ask.

“You’re basically *all* he talks about,” she says. “He *worships* you, Julie. But you knew that.”

“That was never my intention,” I say.

Inessa looks at the cabin. A chill travels down my spine when I see the giant man watching us.

Watching *her*.

“Sometimes even the best-laid plans can go awry, leading you to the most unexpected places,” she says. “And that’s not always a bad thing.”

The man she’s looking at, her husband who’s nearly twenty years her senior, held her captive in his tower. She was his enemy’s daughter. He was going to use her to get to her father, but they found something neither of them expected—love.

“Come inside,” she says. “You must be starving.”

The day is bright and sunny. But as soon as I step inside, a chill passes down my spine.

I can still hear laughter from years ago. It echoes in these walls, mocking my unrequited love.

There’s no trace of the doctor or the bullet-riddled man. They must have moved to another location in the early hours of the morning.

My eyes are drawn to the wall by the front door. I could have sworn that just last night, I saw the handprints Derek and I left here all those years ago. They’re gone now.

Andrei steps into the living room, crossing his arms when he sees me. He’s not even pretending to like me. But then again, I didn’t expect him to.

“Julie,” he says. “I never thought I’d have the pleasure of crossing paths with you again.”

“Hi, Andrei.” My heart beats so hard in my chest that I think I may pass out.

“*Babe*. You’re freaking her out,” Inessa says, striding toward her man and resting her hand on his chest. “You promised that you’d go easy on her.”

“This *is* me going easy on her,” Andrei says, taking Inessa’s wrist and spinning her around until her back presses against his chest. His boulder-like shoulders curl around her, encaging the girl. His big palm nearly covers her entire waist as he kisses the top of her head.

I feel the need to give them privacy, so I head toward the kitchen.

Someone scarier than Andrei cooks bacon and eggs on a portable grill. When he glances up, his eyes do all the talking.

“Hey, Ruslan,” I say. “Do you need any help with the food?”

“Aleksandr said that this cabin belonged to your ex-boyfriend?” he asks.

A lump grows in my throat, hardening until I can’t get a word out.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, fully turning toward me now. He’s holding a spatula in one hand, but he might as well be pointing a gun at me. “Do you not understand my accent or something?”

I swallow. “I don’t like talking about what happened in Silver Falls.”

“That’s not what I asked you,” he says, distrust dripping from every word.

I guess I deserve it.

Inessa returns to my side. “Is Ruslan bothering you, Jules?”

Her cheeks are flushed, and her mouth looks plumper than it did just a moment ago. Her hair is in a state of disarray too. That must have been one hell of a kiss.

Ruslan points his spatula at me again. “I don’t care what any of you think, but I refuse to trust her until I’m given a reason to.”

My mouth turns dry. “Fair enough.”

“She did us dirty two years ago,” he says. “She was going to turn us in. She was going to ruin everything.”

“But she *didn’t*,” Inessa says. “That’s what all of you seem to forget. Yeah, she might have come to your casino undercover. But she never reported any of you even though she could have.”

Andrei joins us, standing protectively behind Inessa.

Ruslan wordlessly puts the bacon and eggs on a large plate. There's also rosemary potatoes and a fresh pot of coffee. My stomach rumbles at the sight of all the food.

It's the strangest thing. I don't remember the last time I had an appetite like this.

"What was your relationship with Derek?" Andrei asks.

Inessa gasps and turns around to slap his chest. "I told you to leave her alone."

"It's okay," I blurt out. "I know they're protective of Aleksandr."

"We're also not thrilled to have you back in our lives," Ruslan adds coldly.

"I know," I say. "And to answer your question, Derek was my childhood best friend. This cabin belonged to him."

"Your relationship was never romantic?" Andrei asks.

"It was one-sided," I say. "I was the one who loved him."

"And he's dead now?" Andrei asks.

The question feels like a punch to the gut.

"You don't have to talk about it, Julie," Inessa says, glaring at her man. "It's none of their business."

"We didn't want this either," Ruslan says. "But Alex *made* it our business."

"No, shame on *you*," Inessa says. "You of all people should have more sympathy for her. The poor girl just got out of prison. Do you really think she wants to spend her first day of freedom being grilled by your questions?"

"It doesn't really feel like freedom," I whisper.

The men look at each other. Understanding passes between them. They've been in my shoes before. They're *still* in my shoes, forever fearing the day they'll be caught and sent back.

"If anything, I feel more scared now than when I was in prison," I admit.

“You have no reason to be scared,” Inessa says. “You have us.”

Ruslan cracks more eggs on the grill, sprinkling them with salt and seasoning. He remains quiet as he listens to the sizzle of the eggs.

I don’t talk about Derek. Ever.

But these people deserve to know. They’re putting everything on the line by helping Alexandr.

Ruslan hands me a plate. My mouth waters, but I know I need to give them answers first.

“Derek and I were friends our whole lives,” I say. “I was a little younger than him, and he used to mentor me.”

“Mentor you for what?” Andrei asks.

“He was an artist,” I say. “He taught me everything he knew. We spent hours together, painting and making art in each other’s company. At that time, it felt like he was the only person who really understood me. He became my first love.”

“Julie, you really don’t have to—” Inessa says.

“They deserve some honesty from me,” I say, cutting her off. And then I turn to Alexandr’s brothers. “But everything changed when Derek went to New York City to pursue his dreams. He wrote letters, telling me about his new life. In his final letters, he wrote that he borrowed money from some shady Italian people. And I never heard from him again.”

My investigation showed that he was being threatened by the New York mafia.

He made one mistake, and he paid for it with his life.

There wasn’t sufficient evidence showing that the mafia harmed him, so the case was dropped. But my heart never forgot about him.

It still remembers him.

It still reminisces about what we could have been.

It thrashes against my rib cage now, not able to handle the flood of memories.

More than anything, I wish that Aleksandr was here. I don't know why, but he makes everything better. He makes me feel stronger.

"That's all I have to say about Derek," I say.

"One of the rooms in the cabin is locked," Ruslan says. "Do you know why?"

I hold eye contact.

"It's always been locked," I say.

"Why do I get the feeling that you're lying to me?" he says, walking toward me. He's still holding that goddamn spatula in his hand.

"I have no reason to lie to you," I say.

The cabin door opens, and Aleksandr steps inside.

"What's going on?" he asks, glancing between all of us.

"We were just catching up," Ruslan says, retreating into the small kitchen.

"In all the years I've known you, I've never *once* seen you catching up with someone," Aleksandr says, storming toward us.

I step between them, placing my hand on Aleksandr's chest before he does something stupid. "They were just asking questions. It's okay."

"You don't need to answer anybody's questions, *tigrenok*," Aleksandr says, pulling me toward his chest.

"*Tigrenok*?" Andrei chuckles. "She's already your tiger cub? And what are you, the tiger daddy?"

Ruslan huffs at the eggs.

"Don't give me any ideas," Aleksandr says. "I will nauseate you with the cheesiest nicknames for the next few days. Isn't that right, *malishka*?"

He leans down, stealing another kiss from my lips.

My core clenches. He keeps stealing kisses, and I like it. I like it way more than I should.

He drags me away from his friends, shooting a glare at Inessa. "I trusted you to keep them in check."

Inessa purses her lips and slaps Andrei's chest again. "This is all your fault."

He grabs her hand, kissing the inside of her wrist.

I know that there will be more questions. There will be more distrustful glances. But I need to soldier through it because I don't have any other choice.

Aleksandr wraps his arm around my shoulder.

"Where's the doctor from last night?" I ask him.

He glances back at me. "Don't worry about it."

"And the man?" I ask.

"Eat your breakfast first, Julie," he says. But then he glances at my plate and lifts a strip of bacon off it. He exclaims loudly, "Ruslan, I'm eating off the same plate as Julie."

"If I wanted to poison her, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now," Ruslan says, emerging from the kitchen with more food.

Aleksandr narrows his eyes at his brother, chewing thoughtfully. And then he pats my arm.

"It's safe," he tells me.

"I didn't know that was something I needed to worry about," I say, glancing at Ruslan. He doesn't look the least bit apologetic.

If anything, he looks pissed off, like he's mad he didn't come up with the idea to poison me.

Well.

This will be fun.

ALEKSANDR

All of us sit down around the coffee table. Andrei, the fucking giant he is, takes up an entire loveseat. His wife squeezes in next to him.

Julie is chewing thoughtfully on a piece of bacon when we hear the screams.

She freezes mid chew.

I grit my teeth.

“I thought I told her to be quiet,” I say, turning toward Andrei.

“She said it’s more fun when they scream and beg,” Andrei says, shrugging.

“Oh my God, is that the man from last night?” Julie asks.

Everyone resumes eating, but Julie pushes her food away.

The screams increase in volume.

I sigh.

The day has just begun, but it feels like a long fucking day already.

The cabin looks less ominous in the daylight. It seems like a place where an old lady might live with her cats and bake brownies to take to her grandkids on the weekends.

But in the bedroom with the flowery wallpaper, a man is being tortured.

The screams turn into whimpers.

The bedroom door opens.

“It’s been a while, *Jasmine*,” Oksana calls out. We hear a faucet being turned on and off before she steps into the living room.

Oksana is Andrei’s little sister. Her white cane clicks in front of her as she walks. Black sunglasses cover her eyes.

Julie’s eyes widen when she sees the brunette.

They never got along before.

Back when Julie first met my family, Oksana was undergoing treatments. The doctors were optimistic she would regain her eyesight, but it didn’t work out in the end. She might be disabled, but she’s still one of the fiercest women I know.

“How are you, sweetie?” Oksana asks, smiling like a Cheshire cat as she walks around the loveseat.

Ruslan scoots closer toward me to make space for Oksana. She slinks into her seat like a feline before turning toward Julie.

I scoop Julie into my lap to make her more comfortable.

“I’ve had better days,” Julie replies finally.

I hand my girl a glass of water, which she gratefully accepts.

“You would never believe this, but I was thrilled when Aleksandr proposed this idea,” Oksana says. “I was looking forward to seeing you again, considering how we left things the last time. If there’s one thing I hate, it’s unfinished business.”

“Oh, goody.” Julie sighs.

Andrei grins, looking between the two women.

Ruslan caters to Oksana’s needs, handing her a plate of food. She reaches for a butter knife from the coffee table, gripping it tightly in her fist.

Julie looks up at me.

She's going to kill me, she says with her eyes.

I hold her tighter against me. I actually wouldn't put it past Oksana to try.

"Describe her face to me," Oksana says, tapping Ruslan's shoulder.

Ruslan tells her that Julie is scared shitless.

"I'm not going to lie. This is shaping out to be a pretty good day." Oksana grins.

Andrei clears his throat. "Did you get the man to talk, Oksana?"

His wife elbows him in the ribs. "No business talk while we're eating."

Andrei nods, but Oksana completely ignores Inessa's one rule.

"You should have seen him," Oksana says, perching her black sunglasses on top of her head. "He pissed himself in fear. But he maintains that he's working on behalf of an anonymous client."

Inessa glares at the rest of us, daring us to ask more questions.

Before this escalates into another fight, I change the topic.

"We found a few canoes in the shed," I tell Julie. "Do you want to go out on the lake? It's a beautiful day."

"What a great idea. Go canoeing while we do all your dirty work," Oksana says, slathering her buttered toast with copious amounts of jam. She's always ravenous after inflicting pain on our enemies. I told her once that she could benefit from a psych evaluation. She replied that I could benefit from having my voice box ripped out.

I ignore Oksana and focus on Julie.

"Is there anything special you want to do today?" I ask her.

She bites down on her lower lip and shakes her head. “Not really.”

“It’s your first day as a free woman,” I say. “There must be *something* you want to do.”

She lifts a shoulder. “I would love to see my sisters and the kids.”

“I thought you didn’t want to go to Blackwood Estate?” I ask. She seemed horrified by the idea of staying with them last night.

“I don’t want to speak with them,” she says. “I just want to see them from a distance. They came to visit yesterday, but it didn’t feel right. I just want to see them living their normal life. I want something normal.”

A hush falls over the room.

Andrei, Ruslan, and I are thinking the same thing—about the day we reclaimed our freedom. We didn’t get a chance to celebrate it. We went straight to work, building an empire and paying back debts. But deep down, that’s what the rest of us wanted as well.

To experience something normal again.

“Done,” I say. “We’ll go to your sister’s after breakfast. Anything else?”

“Is it safe for me to go outside?” she asks. “What if someone recognizes me?”

“Let me worry about that, *tigrenok*,” I say.

Oksana chokes on her orange juice. “Did he just...?”

Andrei grins. “Apparently. And don’t tease him about it. He’ll just use cheesier nicknames.”

I glare at the two of them before turning back to Julie. “As I was saying, *printsessa*, we’ll be careful. Silver Falls gets a lot of tourists, correct? We’ll pretend to be tourists for as long as we stay here.”

Julie glances around at all of my friends—at Andrei’s bulky form, Ruslan’s scowl, and Oksana’s attitude. Inessa is

the only one of us who's even remotely normal.

“Silver Falls mostly brings in hippies and college kids,” she says. “No offense, but you guys will stick out like a sore thumb.”

“She has a point,” Inessa says.

“We won't go out as a group, then,” I say. “It'll just be you and me. What else do you want to do?”

I hold her tighter. I can feel that tension melting from her body. “A day on the lake doesn't sound so bad. And there's a bakery in town I really like...”

“No wonder he's calling you his little tiger cub.” Inessa grins. “You found the way to his heart.”

It's no secret that I have a major sweet tooth. But it does remind me...

“I have something for you,” I say, reaching into my pocket and holding out four of my purple chocolates.

Inessa gasps.

Julie plucks one of the chocolates from my hand. The crinkle of the purple aluminum foil makes Oksana take notice.

“Is that what I think it is?” Oksana asks.

Ruslan is about to answer, but Inessa beats him to it. “Yeah, the mysterious purple chocolate.”

“What's the big deal about this chocolate?” Julie asks, biting it in half.

It has a dense chocolate coating and a molten chocolate hazelnut filling inside. It's unlike anything I've ever tasted, and I've had a lot of chocolates in my life.

“They're his pride and joy. He never lets us have any,” Inessa says. “It's all I ever dreamed about, but he won't let me touch them.”

Andrei clears his throat and turns to his wife. “All you ever dreamed about?”

“You know what I mean,” Inessa says. “Even you couldn’t get your hands on them.”

I’m looking at Julie, though. There’s chocolate smeared over her lips, and she’s grinning from ear to ear.

“I think I get it,” she says, nodding. “This was a whole spiritual experience.”

She plucks another one from my open hand. And before I can stop her, she throws it toward Inessa. Andrei’s impulses kick in. He stops the chocolate in its trajectory like he’s protecting her from a hand grenade.

“What are you doing? You’re going to crush the whole thing in your meaty fist,” Inessa shrieks, voicing my own fear.

But Andrei opens his palm for her. It’s uncrushed.

“Why don’t you let your friends have any?” Julie asks, turning to look at me.

I wrap my arm around her waist again, tucking her closer into my chest.

“They’re a limited edition,” I reply. “It’s a family recipe from Switzerland, and they produce on a very small scale.”

Inessa sighs as she eats the chocolate for the first time. “I think I just saw God.”

“You guys are ridiculous,” Oksana scoffs. But her voice sounds wistful.

Julie snatches another one from my hand. I wrap my fingers around her wrist.

“That better be for you,” I say. But she plucks the chocolate using her other hand and hands it to Ruslan. He promptly passes it to Oksana.

There’s a hint of a smile on Oksana’s face as her hand closes around the chocolate.

“Tell the new girl that a piece of chocolate won’t make me trust her,” Oksana says.

“Tell her I’m sitting right here,” Julie replies, taking the last one. My heart starts to race. *My chocolates.*

But when she glances up at me again, I find her smiling.

For that smile, I would never eat a purple chocolate again.

JULIE

Everything feels different in the daytime.

I didn't think I would ever relax again, but sitting next to Aleksandr, I feel like nothing bad will ever happen to me.

We're driving through the path in the woods. It circles around the whole town, leading us directly to the Blackwood Estate.

"How much do you trust this man?" Aleksandr asks.

"Who, Leo?" I ask.

He nods. "Yeah."

"He's my brother-in-law," I say.

"Do you trust him, though?" he asks.

"Well, he's never given me a reason to distrust him," I say. "He's good to Belle. He's a good father to the kids too."

"He's also squeaky clean," Aleksandr says. "You don't think that's suspicious, considering his family history?"

"He chooses to remain separated from the criminal world," I say. "He's a good man, Aleksandr."

The Blackwoods rose to fame selling illegal liquor during the Prohibition era. But Leo Blackwood never took a liking to the family business.

He lives with my sister, Belle, in the Blackwood Estate. It's separated from the rest of the town. For many years, Leo

lived alone inside his giant mansion.

But his whole life changed when he met Belle.

She brought light and love into his life. The sound of children's precious laughter filled the empty halls. Belle even got him to host Christmas parties on the estate, inviting everyone in town.

I glance at Aleksandr. He has a death grip on the steering wheel again.

Something I said upset him.

Maybe he doesn't like me talking about other men.

Maybe it's my blatant hatred against crime families in general. I don't think they're all bad people, but I know for a fact that they do bad things. It comes with the profession.

"The bakery isn't that far away," I say, pointing at a side road. "We could get something for the road."

"Say no more," he says, swerving immediately.

I giggle. It's a sound I didn't know I still made. He glances at me, that possessiveness burning in his eyes again.

It's too much.

It reminds me of last night when he had his hands all over me. *Inside* me.

"I almost forgot how obsessed you are with sweets," I say, shaking my head. "It's been so long since I last saw you."

"Seven hundred and seventy-two days," he whispers in Russian.

He doesn't know I've been learning Russian.

I picked up a few words during my stay with his family. And in the years after, I took some classes. The language made me feel like I was still in Aleksandr's life.

I don't tell him that I understood him.

I clear my throat. "How is the casino?"

“We’re doing more than just casinos now,” he says. “We have clubs and jewelry stores.”

“You’re not staying at El Dorado anymore?” I ask.

El Dorado is the name of the casino by the edge of the US-Canada border. It looks over Niagara Falls, and it’s also where I first met him.

Aleksandr shakes his head.

“Ruslan’s taking care of the diamonds, and I take care of the clubs,” he says.

I want to ask him more about his clubs, but I quell that impulse. “Do you still hang out with your brothers all the time?”

They’re not related by blood, but what they have is stronger than blood.

He nods. “Of course, they’re family. It feels weird to go too long without seeing them. But I don’t see them as much as I would like.”

“Have you found anyone?” I ask, playing with the hem of my cardigan.

“What do you mean?”

“You must have women in every city you go to.” I try to smile, but my face feels too stiff.

“I think you know the answer to that,” he says, glancing at me. “I was waiting for you to come back home, Julie. And then I got tired of waiting.”

A dark pit of desire forms inside my core.

Fuck me.

That’s not good.

“What about you?” he asks.

“What about me?” I say.

“Is there someone out there I need to murder?” he asks casually.

“There was a girl in prison who had a crush on me,” I say, grinning at him. “Her name was Bianca.”

His eyes dance as he looks at me. “I’m not sure how I feel about *that*. I’ll have to get back to you when I decide.”

My throat feels a little tighter as I think about her.

Crazy Bianca wasn’t just someone who had a crush on me.

I could see the obsession in her eyes. She wanted to *own* me, whether I liked it or not. But Aleksandr doesn’t need to worry about that. She’s out of the picture now, anyway.

“You can stop the car over here,” I say, peering through the tree branches. To the naked eye, there’s nothing but more forest land, but I know this town. I know the bakery is a short walk away.

“Stay here,” I say, unbuckling my seat belt.

“Why can’t I come with you again?” he asks.

“Because everything about you screams Bratva,” I say, grinning at him. “I can pass for a college kid, but a man like you will draw too many eyeballs.”

“Did you just call me old in the nicest way?”

I grin at him. “I’ll be back in five.”

I’m opening the door when he grabs my wrist, tugging me toward him. Something cold slides against my wrist. I glance down to see the tennis bracelet he clasped over my wrist. It’s the perfect size, wrapped snugly against my skin.

But I know it’s not just any piece of jewelry.

It’s a collar.

I glance up at him, fury blazing in my eyes. “Is this necessary?”

“Until you prove yourself worthy of my trust, it’s necessary,” he says.

“You’re never going to change, are you?” I ask. Blood rushes to my cheeks as my chest rises and falls.

I don’t have to examine the diamond bracelet to know I won’t be able to remove it. Only he can.

It’s a monitoring device so he’ll always know what I’m up to.

“I guess now isn’t a good time to tell you that your angry face makes me hard as fuck?” he asks.

“You might be the same man, but I barely know you,” I say, glaring at him.

“People change,” he says.

“Take it off,” I say, holding out my wrist. “I’m only going to a bakery.”

He wraps his hand around my throat. “It’s to make sure that you won’t even *think* about running again. It’s a reminder of who you belong to.”

“It’s a fucking collar,” I say. “Like I’m your dog.”

His fingers tighten over the delicate skin of my neck. “Everything you say and do only keeps making my cock harder, *tigrenok*.”

“I’m not going to bring any pastries back for you,” I threaten.

He smirks, gently squeezing my throat and forcing me to give him my complete attention. My pulse beats wildly against his palm, a dead giveaway of my arousal.

He brings me closer until his face is inches away.

He leans in, tugging my bottom lip with his teeth before pressing his lips against mine. Golden lava pours into my veins, making the whole world seem brighter.

Making me feel invincible.

I place my hand over his.

He steals another kiss. “Bring me back something that’s as sweet as these lips.”

His touch, his proximity, and the scent of his aftershave all awoken something dormant in me.

In these moments, it feels like our fates are all tangled up. Not aligned neatly, but an infuriating tangle that can't be undone.

I stayed away from him for a reason.

But I can't remember why as he watches me with such dark determination.

“Get the pastries, *tigrenok*. Before I end up devouring you right here in this car.” He releases me.

My legs are wobbly as I step out of the car.

I know he's watching me.

Growing up around my voluptuous sisters, I always felt self-conscious about my body. I thought I would have a major glow-up once puberty knocked on my door. I waited for my ass to grow and my boobs to fill out. But I had no such luck.

My body remained slender and petite.

I never really thought of myself as sexy, but with the way Aleksandr tracks my movements, I feel...beautiful.

I feel wanted.

Cherished.

Being the object of his desire is utterly intoxicating.

I pull the baseball cap lower over my head as I walk.

I know every store in Silver Falls. I know every family. And they know me.

But I've been to Quantico.

While training to be an FBI agent, I learned how to stay hidden. How to blend in.

And today, I disguised myself to look like another city girl who came here for a weekend getaway. As long as I keep my eyes aimed down and conversation to a minimum, I should be okay.

The tiny bell over the bakery door jingles as I open it.

The scent of oven-fresh bread and rich coffee assaults my senses. A tourist couple sits by the window. Their giant backpacks rest on the floor beside them. The boy says something that makes the girl laugh.

I wish I had something that simple.

With alarm, I realize I'm not thinking about Derek right now, but Aleksandr. I want to sit in this bakery with him, talking about nothing for hours and just being a normal couple doing normal things.

I glance down at the tennis bracelet.

We'll never be normal.

"How can I help you, miss?" I glance up to find a man in chef whites walking out of the kitchen holding a tray of giant cinnamon rolls.

It's Mr. Allen.

His familiar voice makes me feel like I'm truly free. Like I'm finally home.

This man helped my sisters and I when we were at our worst. There was a time in our lives when my older sisters struggled to put food on the table. I started noticing they were eating less so I'd have enough.

Mr. Allen gave us fresh bread and leftover pastries every week so we wouldn't starve.

I miss that about Silver Falls.

People gossip about each other all day, but everybody steps up when one of us needs help. They don't turn their faces away from people in need, and that's not something you can find everywhere.

Mr. Allen grins at me, but I don't smile back. I can't risk him recognizing me.

Before I left the cabin, Inessa put some makeup on my face. She filled out my eyebrows, making them twice as big.

And then she contoured my face in a way that made me look completely different.

But just to be safe, I inject a chirpy LA girl accent as I speak. “Um, can I like, get ten of the cinnamon rolls?”

“Good choice,” he says. “They’re fresh out of the oven.”

His voice is warm and friendly.

I put my phone in his face, recording him as he places the pastries in a box.

“My followers are going to love this,” I say, chewing obnoxiously on my gum.

Bless his heart, the sweet man looks at the camera and waves at it.

A teenage kid walks out of the kitchen holding a tray of pumpkin pie slices.

I point at the pumpkin pie. “And ten of those as well, please.”

Mr. Allen chuckles. “Your order just reminded me of someone who used to come here a long time ago. She used to get the same thing every time. One cinnamon roll and one slice of pumpkin pie to take home to her sisters.”

I glance up at him.

I try to maintain a resting bitch face, but a smile cracks through.

Our gazes clash, and his eyes widen for a moment.

So I play the tourist card. “I heard that there are a lot of hidden waterfalls here. Is it true that the locals, like, keep the best ones a secret?”

He grins. I notice that the lines on his face are deeper. They’re all smile lines, telling me he’s had a happy life.

I heard through my sisters that Mr. Allen has his hands full with grandkids now. But he still comes to the bakery every morning to do what he loves—delighting people through food.

“I’ll tell you the secret spots, but you’ll have to keep them a secret,” he says, handing me the bag.

“Why?” I ask.

“Littering,” he says. “Not all people pick up after themselves. It ruins the experience for everyone.”

“Oh yeah, I so get that,” I say, nodding solemnly.

There’s a twinkle in his eye as he hands me the map to Silver Falls. He circles all of the best spots with a pen.

“I’m only sharing it with you because you remind me of our Julie,” he says.

Before he figures out the truth, I hand him the cash for the pastries and put some extra change in the gratuity jar.

As he starts to put the money away in the cash register, he frowns.

“Thank you,” I say, turning away as I realize my mistake. My cheeks flame. I can’t believe I slipped up.

“You gave me the exact amount. How did you know the prices?” he asks, stopping me in my tracks.

Neither of the pastries I got were in the display case. Their price tags aren’t visible anywhere else, either.

I’m forced to think on my feet. “This bakery went viral. My friends were here a few weeks ago and told me I had to try them out.”

He doesn’t question my lie.

“And thank you for the advice. *Byeee.*”

I leave the bakery, but I can feel him watching me as I walk away.

I’m good at blending in when I don’t know the people, but it’s harder to lie to those you know.

As I walk back toward the forest, I feel Aleksandr’s eyes on me. I can’t see him, but he can see me. I can feel him watching me.

I glance down at my wrist.

The diamond bracelet glitters under the sunlight, reminding me I'm tied to him.

When I return to the car, I find him leaning against it.

There's a newspaper tucked under his arm. His eyes stalk me as I close the distance between us. And before I realize what I'm doing, I wrap my arms around his middle.

His powerful arms close around me. His palm cups the back of my head.

I can hear the sound of his heart beating.

"What happened?" he asks. "Did they not have the pastry you wanted?"

I chuckle, burying my face deeper against his chest. His hands might slit a man's throat without a second thought, but he's holding me like I'm a newborn. Like I deserve all the love and protection in the world.

"They had my favorite pastries," I say. "He even threw in some extra ones."

"What's the problem, then?" he asks, his hand stroking my back.

My body instantly reacts to his touch. My nipples pebble against his hard torso. I try to step back, but his arms tighten around me.

"I knew the owner," I say. "Mr. Allen."

Aleksandr pulls away, searching my face for the answer before he asks the question.

"Did he—"

"He didn't recognize me." I sigh. "But he said that I reminded him of Julie. They must have heard about what happened, but he still remembered me affectionately."

"Well, of course they do," he says, rubbing the backs of my arms. "You're very lovable, *tigrenok*. Come on, we still have to stalk your sisters and their kids."

"We might not even see them," I say.

“I’ve arranged it,” he says.

“Um, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll see,” he says.

“Wait a second, do they know that I’m coming?”

“Sort of,” he says.

Unbelievable.

“We should really work on setting some boundaries,” I say. I hold up my wrist. “First the leash, and now this.”

He removes the bracelet and slips it into his pocket.

And then he gathers my wrists in his hand, holding them behind my body. He tugs down on my arms, making my back arch. My tits are pointed toward him now.

“This is how I like you,” he says, his predator gaze moving down my body.

A shiver passes down my spine.

I feel myself getting tangled deeper and deeper into his web.

He presses a soft kiss to my lips before moving down to my neck.

I moan softly.

I never thought being dominated by a man could be such a turn-on, but I love every thing Aleksandr does. I love every filthy word that comes out of his mouth without restriction.

“It’s like you were brought to this earth so I could fuck you,” he groans, pushing his pelvis against my thighs, forcing me to feel how hard I make him.

“That’s offensive, Aleksandr,” I murmur. He bites down on my neck, making my core tighten.

“You were also made to take all of my come,” he says. “Every time I look at you, all I can think about is shoving my cock deep inside your tight little pussy. I’m going to come inside you every fucking night, Julie. And you’re going to take it. You’re going to like it.”

His words are gasoline, and his touch is the spark. When the two combine, it's only inevitable that I'll combust for him.

His hand slips down the front of my tank top, cupping a breast as he tugs my hard nipple.

That's all it takes to send me over the edge. I push my breasts against him and whimper at the sky as my body trembles with the force of the release.

I'm gasping when I come back down.

He's staring at me. Color blooms high on my cheeks.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"For what?" he whispers, brushing the back of his knuckles against my flaming cheek. "You're my miracle. My little virgin miracle."

There's a rustle in the branches behind us. Both of us turn to look.

"There are a lot of deer in the area," I tell him.

My body aches for more, but Aleksandr's eyes watch the trees like he's expecting someone to jump out with guns blazing.

He looks almost angry with himself as he takes my hand and leads me toward the car door.

"Get in," he says, helping me in. He drags the seat belt between my tits, securing it in place.

The act of him looking out for me like this awakens the desire in my core. I like being pampered by him. I like it when he anticipates my every need.

"Julie," he growls. "*Behave.*"

I nod, eager to please him.

I think I'll do anything he wants me to. I'll even give him my soul if he asks nicely.

I don't understand why he has this kind of power over me.

He walks around the car and picks up the newspaper that he placed on the roof. I reach for the newspaper when he's

seated, but he doesn't let go of it.

"There's nothing worth reading," he says. "Just the usual politics and tragic tales."

"I like reading the cartoons," I say, tugging at it.

But he refuses to let go. Instead, he stashes it away in the weapons compartment underneath the back seat.

Weird.

I'm about to call him out on his strange behavior when he places his hand on my thigh.

Every thought leaves my mind. I lose the ability to form coherent sentences.

His hand remains on my thigh as he backs the car out and resumes the main path we were headed on. He doesn't know it, but this simple act keeps my thoughts from racing. It grounds me and makes it feel like everything will be just fine.

I glance out of the window as he drives.

Every tree feels familiar. My fingers itch to hold a brush again. I want to paint this.

I glance at Aleksandr.

I want to paint him.

ALEKSANDR

The gates of the Blackwood Estate swing open for us.

Leo Blackwood is expecting us, but the security still scans our car. When they find my mini armory, they report back to their boss.

His voice comes through the two-way radio. I catch snippets of the conversation. “Leave their vehicle outside. Provide them with transport.”

“Do my sisters know I’m coming too?” Julie asks anxiously.

“Just Leo,” I say.

I didn’t really have a choice. Leo Blackwood is a recluse, but he’s very protective of his family. Nothing happens in Silver Falls without his knowledge. His security is expansive and detail-oriented. He hears about every person who enters this town.

My brothers and I were no exception.

He was the one who reached out to me, asking me what the fuck I was doing in his town. When I told him his wife’s sister was with me, he relaxed, but not by much.

A black Lincoln Navigator rolls to a stop in front of us. They scan our bodies for weapons before letting us enter the car.

“He’s so extra.” Julie sighs. “I’ve known him for over a decade. Does he really have to do this every time?”

“It’s not you that he doesn’t trust,” I say. “It’s me.”

“I know, but it’s still so over the top,” she says.

The car drives us around the circular driveway leading to the entrance of the Blackwood home.

Leo Blackwood himself waits for us outside his castle. His arms are crossed in front of his chest. A mask covers half his face, but his stance exudes power.

He gives me a once-over and a nod, but he smiles for Julie.

“Welcome home, Julie,” he says. “I was happy to hear that you got out of prison.”

“Thanks,” Julie says, rubbing her elbow. “Does Belle know?”

“No, but we heard the news about the—”

“Where are the kids?” I ask, interrupting him.

Leo looks at me, pausing as he studies my face. I raise an eyebrow the tiniest fraction, trying to get the message across without words. Unfortunately, Julie sees it too.

“O-kay,” she says. “What was all that about?”

Before I can reply, we hear a shriek of laughter.

“Come,” Leo says. “The kids are playing in the backyard.”

Leo leads us inside the house. We walk through curving stairways and over black-and-white-checkered marble floors. All the windows are open, letting in the fresh breeze and morning sunlight. Giant Monstera plants and vases filled with colorful flowers are present at every turn. He leads us into his office.

From here, we can see the open backyard through the windows. An oak tree blocks half of the window.

“They shouldn’t be able to see you from here,” Leo says.

Julie sucks in a breath when she sees her sisters and the kids splashing each other in the pool. Belle and Leo have twins who are around twelve years old. Hazel has two girls, one a feisty teenager and the other a sassy five-year-old.

Hazel's husband, Armando, is here as well, hoisting the giggling little girl on his shoulders as she plays chicken fight with one of her cousins.

Julie places her palm over the windowpane.

"They've grown so much," she says. "They look taller every time I see them."

Leo nods, looking at his family with tenderness. My eyes drift to the mask on his face. It kind of makes him look badass.

He catches me staring.

"Nice house," I blurt out.

"It is now," he says.

Julie turns to smile at him. They look like they're sharing some inside joke. My fists clench. I don't like her smiling at another man.

"The estate was all cobwebs and mold before Belle came here," Julie explains. "She made this house into a home again."

My hand splays over Julie's back, holding her small waist as she watches the kids play.

"They've been worried about you, Julie," Leo says. "Belle hasn't been sleeping well. She wakes up at odd hours of the night, and I'm worried about her health. Are you sure you don't want to talk with them?"

"I can't involve them," Julie says. "Not until my name is cleared."

Leo's face remains hard, but I can see the doubt in his eyes. He's not sure if Julie is entirely innocent. They don't know her like I do.

She values justice more than anything else.

"Belle is certain of your innocence, but Hazel has doubts," Leo says slowly. "Is there any chance you might have gotten involved in something without meaning to?"

“She’s here to see her sisters, not talk to you,” I snap, giving Leo Blackwood a stern look.

His jaw hardens, but he nods, stepping away from us. He stays in the room but offers Julie and me some privacy.

“Thank you for letting me come, Leo,” Julie says, turning to her brother-in-law. “It means a lot to me.”

“You’re always welcome here,” he says. “You know that.”

There’s a knock on the office door. Leo opens the double doors, letting in two of his guards. They stand against the wall with their hands clasped in front of them. Leo says goodbye to us and heads to the backyard to join the kids.

“I wish I could be with them too,” Julie says. “I would do anything to hug the kids again.”

“It’s okay to change your mind, *tigrenok*,” I say.

“I can’t,” she says.

We watch as Leo Blackwood appears in the backyard. He’s not wearing his mask as he cannonballs into the pool. The kids shriek and swim away to give the giant man some space.

With alarm, I notice that one of the kids is staring at us. It’s the five-year-old.

She screams joyfully and runs toward the house. She stops by a flower bush, ripping some flowers before disappearing from view.

“That’s Kylie,” Julie says, sucking in a breath. “Do you think she saw us?”

“Yep,” I say.

Hazel’s eldest daughter, Kelsey, is the only person who notices the kid’s strange behavior. The girl lowers her sunglasses on her nose to squint at her little sister.

“We should go before she gets here,” Julie says. “Right?”

There’s an excited flush to her cheeks, and she doesn’t move a muscle.

“It’s your call, *tigrenok*,” I say.

“Auntie Julie?” We turn as one to find a little girl in a unicorn bathing suit standing by the door. “*Auntie Julie.*”

The guards try to stop the girl from entering, but the five-year-old dashes past them like they aren’t seven-foot-tall giants who could stop a train in its tracks.

“Oh my God, Kylie,” Julie says, scooping the girl into her arms. “I missed you so much, kiddo.”

“What are you doing here?” Kylie asks, cupping Julie’s face. “You never come here.”

Julie presses a kiss on either side of the kid’s face. “I came here to see you.”

Kylie searches Julie’s eyes. “You’re a liar.”

Julie’s eyes flood with tears. “I’m sorry I haven’t visited you in so long, Kylie.”

Kylie’s anger fades away when she sees her aunt’s tears. She parts her lips, thinking of something to say to make her aunt feel better. Her gaze lands on the tiny flowers she’s clutching in her hands.

She thrusts her hand forward. “These are for you. I plucked them myself.”

Julie’s eyes dance with mirth as she takes the flowers. The little girl wipes her sweaty hands on Julie’s cardigan.

“Are all of them for me?” Julie asks.

“Yeah. For your hair,” Kylie says. “To make it prettier.”

Kylie kicks her feet, asking to be put back down. She makes her auntie sit on a couch so she can place flowers in her hair. The girl’s hands are little, but she manages to plait Julie’s hair into a pretty braid. And then she proceeds to place the little flowers in her hair. They’re of different colors—light blue, lavender, and white.

I never imagined I’d find something so mundane so fascinating. But every little thing about Julie is magic.

When Kylie finishes with the braid, she turns Julie around and smiles in satisfaction.

“You’re so pretty, Auntie Julie,” she says.

I agree. I can’t stop looking at my girl. Soft curls frame her flushed face. The rest of her hair is in a braid decorated with flowers.

The little girl glances up at me. “Are you Auntie Julie’s boyfriend?”

“No, he’s a friend,” Julie corrects immediately.

Friend. I’m going to make her eat her words later tonight. I will bury my fingers inside her tight little cunt and ask her if friends do things like that to each other.

“What’s your name?” the little girl demands.

“Alex,” I tell her.

“Julie and Alex, sitting in a tree,” she says, giggling her little heart out. “K-I-S-S-I-N-G.”

“Okay, that’s enough, you little monster,” Julie says. “Your mom is probably looking for you now.”

“Come join us,” Kylie says, jumping to her feet and tugging at Julie’s arm. “I learned how to swim like a butterfly. I’ll show you. And later, you can throw rings into the pool, and I’ll get them all. I’m good at everything.”

Julie looks at me for help. The flowers in her hair make me tongue-tied. She looks so pretty that all I want to do is kiss her for hours. I want to kiss her until my name is the only word she remembers.

“Purple chocolate,” she whispers.

Kylie’s suspicious eyes light up when she hears “chocolate.”

I’m really starting to regret introducing my purple chocolates to Julie.

“We have some pastries in the car,” I offer, trying to get the little kid excited about those.

“No. I want purple chocolate,” Kylie demands, narrowing her eyes at me.

My heart skips a beat as I reach into my pocket. My emergency purple chocolate. I place it in the girl's small hands, but I don't want to let go of it.

"*Aleksandr*," Julie snaps.

I let go.

"Listen, Kylie," Julie says, holding the girl's arms. "You and Uncle Leo are the only ones who know I'm here. Auntie Belle and your mother don't know yet."

Some of the gooey chocolate drips to the unicorn on the girl's tummy. She's not even eating it right.

But then she looks up at me. Her eyes are delighted. She appreciates the chocolate like I do.

"Thank you, Julie's boyfriend," Kylie says.

Julie hides her face in her hand. "Oh God, she's going to tell everybody."

I sit down next to the girl. Chocolate covers half of her face now, and I have to admit, she's kind of cute.

"Okay, little human," I say. "What your aunt is trying to say is, she wants to surprise everyone later, so you need to keep this visit a secret."

"A surprise party?" Kylie gets to her feet and starts jumping up and down.

"Yes, a surprise party," I say. "Do you like them?"

"I *love* them," she squeals. "When is it?"

"You'll find out soon," I say. "But you can't talk about Auntie Julie's visit to anyone else. It will ruin the surprise."

The little girl nods, taking the job very seriously. She pretends to zip up her lips and throw away the key. But she's still bouncing on her feet from all the sugar she just had.

Julie takes her hand, taking the girl toward the bathroom, probably to wipe her mouth.

The guards step in front of Julie, blocking her path.

I'm on my feet, instantly at Julie's side.

“What’s going on?” Julie asks, confused.

The guards look at each other before informing her, “The child needs to be watched over at all times.”

“I’m her aunt,” Julie says, instantly getting upset. “I would *never* hurt her.”

Kylie tugs Julie’s hand, making her look at her cute face.

“They’re always grumpy, Aunt Julie,” she says, sticking her tongue out at the guards.

This five-year-old has more emotional intelligence than most adults I know. Not only does she understand other people’s emotions, she always tries to make them feel better too.

Julie bends down to press a kiss on her forehead. “I love you so much, baby.”

And then without looking at the guards, Julie lets go of the kid and walks past them to the bathroom alone. I hear the sound of a faucet being turned on.

The guards take their place in front of the kid, guarding them from me now. I raise my hands, moving back toward the couch.

“Stop scaring Julie’s boyfriend,” Kylie says, shoving at the guard’s legs. Kylie’s entire face turns red, like this is a battle she picks with them every day but never wins.

I decide then that kids aren’t so bad. Especially when they act as the most adorable wingman.

Julie returns with a wet washcloth to wipe all signs of chocolate from her niece’s face.

They hug and say goodbye.

As we’re about to walk away, Kylie calls my name.

“I want a whole box of purple chocolates next time I see you,” she says, tipping her chin up like a queen.

“Would you like a bunch of diamond tiaras as well?” I ask sourly.

She narrows her eyes at me and then nods. “Lots of chocolates and lots of diamonds. Don’t forget.”

What have I gotten myself into?

But then the glare drops, and she runs toward us, barreling into our legs as she squishes us in a hug. Julie lowers to her knees to give her a proper hug, but I awkwardly pet the girl’s head like she’s a horse.

When it’s time to go, Julie loops her arm through mine, holding my bicep as she walks.

She seems happier now.

We’re escorted back to the front gates in Leo’s car. She rests her head on my shoulder during the short drive.

I’ve accomplished a lot in my life. Back in my day, I was conning Russia’s wealthiest families. I became a part of their circles and stole their black money and priceless art. And after I got out of prison, I forged alliances with influential people, rubbed shoulders with high society, and ultimately took our businesses to the next level.

But this moment right here, with Julie resting her head on my shoulder, feels like the biggest accomplishment of all.

JULIE

Aleksandr is a man of his word.

He brought me out to the lake in the evening, just like he said he would.

We stopped by the cabin for a shower before coming out here. I changed into a flowy white dress I borrowed from Inessa, but I kept the flowers in my hair.

We sit in the middle of a serene lake watching the sunset, but my mind is on overdrive. Too many thoughts fill my head. And as a result, I'm not enjoying anything.

"I kind of feel bad about this," I say.

"About what?" Aleksandr asks.

"We haven't done anything productive all day," I say. "Your family is here to help me uncover the truth about my arrest, but we left them alone to do all the work on their own."

"There's something you need to know about my family," he says. "You kind of did them a favor."

"I don't follow," I say.

"You gave them a reason to meet up," he says. "They'll never admit it, but they're grateful to be working on something together again. A lot of things have changed in the past two years, Julie. We still see each other on the weekends and holidays, but it's not like it used to be."

"You're not just saying that to make me feel better?" I ask, biting down on my lower lip.

“All I’m saying is that work can wait,” he says. “There’s no rush to figure everything out all at once.”

“We can’t keep living like this, though,” I say. “Always in fear of being found out, not knowing what the next day will bring, always on edge.”

He leans forward, his eyes locking on mine as he rubs my bare knee. That simple touch makes flowers bloom to life inside my core.

And it acts as a balm to my racing mind.

“Do you know why I brought you out here, *tigrenok*?” he asks, moving closer to me.

“Why?” I swallow.

“I wanted to have a word with you,” he says.

“Yeah?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says. “You introduced me to your family as your friend. But that one word doesn’t seem to encapsulate everything you are to me.”

“We’re not friends?” I ask. That’s what we were two years ago.

His eyes darken.

The evening breeze makes my hair blow around. The water ripples as he continues staring into my soul. Even the sun itself seems to pause on its way down.

When he looks at me like this, my whole world freezes.

He’s all that exists.

My heart trips over itself as I try to understand the meaning of these emotions.

“Friends don’t touch each other like we do,” he says slowly, his hand traveling up my thigh.

My lips part as his fingers ghost over my pussy.

“I’ve been thinking about this tight little pussy all day, Julie,” he says. “It rules over my entire world. It governs every thought in my head.”

My thighs fall open as he continues stroking the soft skin of my inner thighs, his touch hovering everywhere but never landing in one place.

“Good girl,” he says. “Let me touch you like this. Let me put my hands on this tight little pussy.”

He pushes my panties to the side, but he doesn't touch me. He glances back at me again. The fire in his eyes burns hotter than ever. It burns for *me*.

“Now tell me, *tigrenok*,” he says. “What am I to you?”

Daddy.

The word burns bright behind my eyelids.

I don't know where it comes from, but it's already on the tip of my tongue. He wraps his hand back around my throat, keeping me from swallowing the word.

“You're my daddy,” I whisper.

My voice is so quiet that I half expect the lake breeze to carry it away. But he hears me.

He lets go of my throat. I lick my lips, afraid of what he might think of me now.

But the fire in his eyes burns even brighter now.

“I'm your daddy,” he repeats, tasting the word in his mouth. “And you're my princess.”

I push into his touch, wanting more of him. *Needing* him right there.

“And have you been a good little girl?” he asks, pulling his hand away from between my thighs.

I bite my lip in frustration. “I don't know.”

“You haven't,” he says, eyes flashing with so many emotions that I can't make out any of them. “You've been a bad little girl. And do you know what happens to bad little girls?”

“They get punished?”

“They get punished.”

His hands move to his belt buckle. He tugs at his belt, removing it. I can see that hard part of him straining against his trousers.

“Feel it, princess,” he says. “Feel what you do to me.”

“I’ve never had this punishment before, Daddy,” I say, looking up at him from underneath my lashes.

“You’re old enough to take *different* kinds of punishments now,” he says, his hand pushing down the front of my dress to grab one of my breasts. He tugs at a nipple, making me moan. “I’ve been watching you, pretty girl. I know that you’re ready now.”

“Ready for what?” I ask.

“For all of your punishments,” he says, his hand moving to my other breast. “You can touch me now.”

“Over here?” I ask, placing my trembling hand over the outline of his cock. It’s wider than my open hand. I’m in awe as I watch him get even thicker under my touch.

“Right there, princess,” he says, exhaling roughly. “Right fucking there.”

My heart thuds hard against my chest. I don’t know where we’re heading with this. All I know is that falling into this role feels so natural.

It feels right to let him take care of me. Control me.

The waves keep rolling underneath the canoe. The rock of the lake lulls me into a feeling of security. Out here in the water, nothing can touch me.

But I know Aleksandr brought his men out here. They’re dressed as tourists, but they’re patrolling the land, scouring it for any threats.

But every time I’m with Aleksandr, it feels like we’re living in our own world.

“Keep stroking me,” Aleksandr says. “Your hand feels so good on my cock.”

He picks up the paddles and brings us back to the lakefront. He helps me get out of the canoe.

There's soft sand beneath my feet and a darkening forest behind us. I can hear birds chirping before they settle down for the night.

He lays down a blanket for us.

And then he lays me down on it.

He props his elbows on either side of my head as he lowers himself on top of me.

"Say it again," he says.

"Say what again?" I ask.

"You know the word, princess," he growls.

I lick my lips. "Daddy."

"I'm your daddy now, aren't I?" he asks, his hand gripping my knee and dragging up my thigh. "And you're my little princess. All mine to dress and feed and take care of."

He lowers his head, kissing along the length of my collarbone.

"That tickles," I say, giggling.

"Oh yeah?" he asks, his hand dragging higher up my thigh. His thumb brushes against my heated sex, digging into the soft flesh. But his hand drags up and down the length of my thigh. "Does this tickle too?"

His thumb digs deeper into my clit with every slide of his hand, like he's stealing illicit touches.

"Kind of," I say. "But it also feels good."

"I'm supposed to be punishing you," he grunts, his thumb sliding under my panties to check how wet I am. "But you're so pretty and wet between your thighs that I can't think about anything else."

"I don't want a punishment," I say. "I'll be good."

"Oh, I'll make sure that you will," he says, nipping the delicate flesh of my neck before rising.

He gets to his feet.

I'm still lying on the blanket, a slave to my desires.

"Get on your knees, baby girl," he says. "Show me how sorry you are."

I whimper as I get on my knees.

The blanket is soft underneath me as I stare up at him. He brushes his thumb against my lips and tells me I look really pretty tonight.

"Touch that part of me that's always hard for you, princess," he says.

My hands cup his groin again. A delicious shiver passes through me at the thought of him inside me.

"Why is it always so hard, Daddy?" I ask. "It keeps digging into my belly every time you hug me. And it gets bigger every time I sit on your lap."

"It means you're a woman now, princess," he says. "And I'm starting to see you as one. Take me out now. Look at what you do to me."

I do as he tells me to, pulling his cock out. It's so big that I can barely wrap my hand around it.

"It looks so angry, Daddy," I say, looking up at him.

His fingers tangle in my hair. "And whose fault is that?"

"I do this?" I ask, feeling every vein under my fingertips. "Does it hurt?"

"It always hurts," he says. "But you can make it hurt less."

"How?" I ask.

"I'll feel a lot better if you let me shove it inside your holes," he says.

"And if it doesn't fit?" I ask.

"I'll make sure it fits," he says. "Let me worry about that."

He groans as I start stroking his cock. He's a powerful man in his prime. And I'm just a girl on my knees, doing what he

wants me to.

“Open your mouth, sweetheart,” he says, brushing his thumb against my lips. “Let me have this pretty mouth.”

I part my lips for him.

The head of his cock nudges against my open mouth. I moan as his flavor bursts on my tongue—a little salty, a lot masculine. It captures his essence, and I’m *starving* for it.

“Fuck, you’re enjoying this,” he grunts, pushing his cock deeper into my mouth. “Do you understand now why I had to keep you locked up in your room? It’s so I could have this mouth all to myself. I know you’re a little tease who likes making men lose their minds for you, but I still want you all to myself.”

I take my time learning the shape of his cock. He’s inside my mouth, but it feels like he’s the one consuming me. The flowers in my hair fall to the blanket as he grabs my hair and pumps in and out of my mouth.

“Who owns you, princess?” he asks, thrusting brutally into my mouth now. “Who do you belong to?”

He pulls out to let me speak.

“I belong to you,” I say, looking up at him. He shoves his cock back into me and fucks me with more ruthlessness than before.

His complete ownership over me feels good. I like that he’s greedy.

He pulls his cock out of my mouth. It shines in the fading sunlight, slick with my saliva.

He cups my jaw.

“You’re going to let me do whatever I want to you, aren’t you?” he asks.

I nod.

“But it’s really important that we keep it a secret, *tigrenok*,” he says. “I have no business touching you

under your little skirt. I'm not supposed to put my hand between your thighs to check if you're wet."

"But I am," I say, letting my knees fall open. "I'm always wet."

A shudder passes through him at the sight of my slick flesh. He falls to the blanket, gripping my thighs and spreading them farther apart. I'm on my back now.

He pushes my panties aside, looking at my gash. He spreads it with his fingers. His hands look so big on my body, his index finger covering the entire length of my slit.

"I should know better, but I can't stop thinking about this pretty pussy," he says. "Do you know what a man does to a woman when he's horny?"

He's watching me, cupping my cheek so sweetly. I shake my head.

"This little hole right here," he says, pressing down over my entrance. "It's supposed to take my cock. I'm supposed to cram it inside you until you get used to how big it is."

"And if it hurts?" I ask.

"Then I'll lick you until you get wet enough to take me."

He presses a kiss over my pubic bone. It makes me feel like I'm growing wings—like I can open them and fly if I wanted to. His kisses are hot and urgent as they travel down to my sex. When he sucks my clit into his hot mouth, I see a thousand sunrises behind my closed eyelids.

It gets way too bright before suddenly, it's midnight.

His wicked tongue moves down my slit, sawing up and down with purpose. It dips into my molten channel, drawing as much honey from it as I can give him. And when I feel like it can't get better than this, he pushes his index finger against my ass.

"This," he says, dipping his finger into that forbidden hole. "This is where I'll take you when you're being a brat."

I groan when he pushes in even deeper.

My first instinct is to reject it. But then he bites down on my inner thighs and tells me to relax.

“Be a good girl for Daddy,” he says. “Let me explore your body. Your tight little holes are made for me, princess.”

I groan when he starts to push in and out of my ass. While doing so, he continues lavishing my clit with attention, creating exquisite tension in my core.

“This is what happens when you prance around in tiny little skirts,” he says. “Every time you sat on my lap, all I wanted was to push your scrappy little panties to the side and push my big dirty cock inside you. And if you screamed for me to stop, I’d slap your bratty tits and start fucking you harder.”

He spits on my pussy and rubs circles over my clit, taking me near the edge but not letting me go over it.

“I saw you touching yourself last night,” he says.

“How’d you know?” I ask, playing my role.

“I have a camera installed in your bedroom,” he says. “Daddy watches over every single thing you do, princess.”

“You watch me?” I ask, scrunching my nose. “But I change my clothes in my bedroom.”

“It’s not my fault,” he says. “If anything, you need to blame these pretty tits. I can’t start my day without watching them jiggle for me. I stroke my cock as you rub lotion all over your skin after your shower.”

His obsession is dark. It has horns, a tail, and a forked tongue. But I love it.

He’s giving me something I never had.

“What else do you do, Daddy?” I ask, threading my fingers into his silky hair as he takes control of my senses.

He owns me now. Just like he always should have.

“Some nights, when I get really, really hard, I come to your bedroom to watch you sleep,” he says. “I put my cock against your pretty pussy and watch as you moan for more in

your sleep. I jerk off against your pink cunt, and leave my come inside your panties.”

He reaches up my body, pushing my dress aside to grope my breast. He tugs at my nipple, making my back arch.

“Are you scared, *tigrenok*?” he asks.

I hesitate for a moment.

I really should be. But I’m not.

“There’s something you should know,” he says, kissing up to my belly button now before taking my nipple into his mouth. “There’s a reason I brought you here. Not a single soul can hear you here. I can have my way with you, and you’ll have no choice but to take it.”

My heart races.

Blood rushes everywhere as he continues to leave a trail of hot kisses over the most sensitive parts of my body.

He grips my neck.

“I own you,” he says, his eyes burning a hole into my soul, carving his own name there. “Do you understand that, *tigrenok*?”

Before I can agree, he flips me over on the blanket. I see the flowers on the white blanket and the green forest beyond. He snakes an arm around my middle and continues his sweet assault on my clit.

“I’ve wanted you like this for so long,” he says. “Alone and under my mercy. You have no choice but to let me push my big cock inside you now.”

He spreads my cheeks apart, muttering in Russian about how sexy I am. I can feel cool air hitting my sex as he admires me.

It should be demeaning, but I like how rough he is with me. I like how he’s always so close to snapping and unleashing that beast inside.

He grabs the flesh of my ass before spanking it. My skin burns under his fingertips, but I arch my back, needing more

of his ministrations.

He leans down over me, brushing my hair out of the way to whisper filthy things in my ear.

“How can something feel both right and wrong at the same time, princess?” he grunts in my ear, pushing his cock against my opening. “I’ll be looking at the pretty little flowers in your hair as I take you from behind.”

He lifts my ass higher.

I get goose bumps everywhere. They have nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with how exposed I am to him. He’s about to own me in ways no other man has.

He pushes against me.

I turn around to look at his bare cock. “You’re not wearing any protection.”

“And I never will,” he answers. “I’ve waited for this pussy for far too long. Nothing will come between you and me as you take a man’s cock for the first time. Besides, I have a very important task to accomplish here.”

He pushes into me, meeting my resistance.

I can feel him becoming one with my body. We’re no longer two hearts, two minds, two bodies.

We’re entangled all around each other. We’re one.

“What’s your important task?” I ask.

“To make sure I spill every drop of my seed deep inside your fertile pussy,” he says, pushing in the rest of the way.

He grunts when he feels the way I cling onto his cock for dear life.

“Fuck, you’re so fucking tight, princess,” he says. “It almost feels like you’re trying to strangle me, like you want me to hurry up and breed you already.”

I moan against the blanket as he bottoms out inside me.

It hurts so bad. But despite his urgent words, he’s gentle with me.

He kisses my shoulder blades. I never knew that I liked to be kissed there. I didn't think it'd make me melt the way it does.

"You're a virgin, but you wiggle your ass like a whore," he says. "I must be the luckiest man on earth to be the one to find you."

He grips my ass, his fingertips digging into my flesh as he pulls out only to plunge back in.

"Fuck, forgive me, angel," he says. "I told myself I'd be gentle, but all I want to do is rut into you like an animal."

He thrusts in again, bottoming out inside me. Fireworks go off behind my closed eyelids.

"Fuck," he grunts. "Let me hear you say it, princess. Who's fucking you?"

His teeth graze against my shoulders as he pummels into me with shallow thrusts that have my tits bouncing. He cups one, pinching my nipple like he can't help himself.

"Say it the way I like it," he says. "Who's about to come inside your cunt?"

"Daddy is about to come inside me," I repeat.

I see swirls of color. Ruby red, amethyst violet, champagne gold. I want to throw all of it on a canvas and see where it takes me. It seizes me, taking control of all of my senses.

"You take it like a champ," he says, rolling his hips against mine.

He fucks me so good that I lose sense of time.

The pleasure is overwhelming. I didn't know something that hurt so much could feel so good. I arch my back, letting him have all of me.

He flips me around and spreads my thighs wider apart, hooking his arms underneath my knees and folding me in half for his pleasure.

"I knew you'd be as flexible as a doll," he says. I gasp, feeling him hit a spot that makes everything fuzzy and golden.

“You’re going to make it so easy for me to make you mine.”

His cock is buried deep inside me as he leans down to kiss me.

He groans when our tongues meet.

When we’re joined like this, no words are needed. Our bodies do all the talking. Something shakes free from inside me as he thrusts into my body.

Guilt.

I’ve been holding on to it for so long that it’s been eating away at me, keeping me from living life the way it’s meant to be. I threw myself into work and told myself I was prioritizing my career.

But with Aleksandr inside me like this, I realize that I’ve been desperately trying to protect myself.

I didn’t want to get hurt again.

And I thought that exploring the magic between Aleksandr and me would tarnish the memory of my best friend.

I can’t help it. The thought of Derek brings tears to my eyes. I try to blink them away, but Aleksandr notices. He’s hyper-observant about everything, especially when it comes to me. We’ve always been in tune with each other. We fell into sync the second our eyes first met.

He frowns now. “You’re thinking about him.”

“It’s not like that,” I whisper.

But the damage is already done. He pulls out.

I think he’ll walk away, but he grinds his jaw and flips me back over again. And I learn that he’s been holding back this whole time.

Every thrust is punishing, bottoming out before slamming back into me. He’s angry with me, but the red-hot energy between us remains a constant. He presses my face to the ground and lifts my ass higher into the air. His hands bind my wrists together, making sure I can’t move as he ruts into me.

He comes with a loud groan, spilling his seed inside me like he promised.

“Take every drop of my come, little girl,” he says, spanking my ass.

When his fingers return to my clit, he forces me to focus. Jets of come are hitting my walls as he rubs me furiously, shoving me over the edge with him. My entire body tenses before I levitate for him.

He spans me again. The pain only adds to the pleasure. I clamp down on his big cock as I come.

“That’s right,” he says. “Milk me dry, you little come slut.”

Waves of pleasure pass through my body. Time stands still as I ride the waves, letting them consume me. My heart burns brighter than ever as Aleksandr’s expert hands coax the orgasm out of me.

I’m panting on the ground, thoroughly spent and thoroughly fucked.

Aleksandr gets to his feet, leaving me on the blanket as he walks away. It’s dark now. I see the flame of his lighter in the dark. A cigarette dangles from between his fingers.

I didn’t say a word, but he knew. He knew I was thinking about another man while he was buried inside me.

Tears spring to my eyes as I watch him leave.

It wasn’t like I asked for this life.

I didn’t ask to be haunted by someone I once loved. I would rather have a fresh slate. I would rather not have these feelings brewing up a storm inside me every now and then.

I get to my feet. I’m sore everywhere, like I’ve been running for days.

Men don’t understand what it means to be a girl.

We don’t have a choice. We love too hard, even when we don’t want to. We give everything to that love, even when they don’t want it.

Even if they don't return it.

ALEKSANDR

The drive back to the cabin is quiet.

Neither of us says a word to each other.

She turns toward me. It's dark, but I can still make out her every feature through my peripheral vision.

The attraction between us is a fire-breathing dragon. I've had her already, but I want more. Even if she thinks about someone else while I'm fucking her.

"There's something I want to say to you," she whispers quietly. "I needed that. Thank you for today. All of it."

I glance over at her.

Her eyes are earnest. I know it's not fair for me to hold it against her. It's not something she has any control over.

He was in her life first.

She let him into her heart first. And because of how things ended, a part of him might always stay there.

But still, this is the last thing I want to discuss right now.

There's something I've been keeping from her today. She's bound to find out one way or the other.

I clear my throat.

"I need to ask you something," I say.

"Aleksandr, what you saw out there was *relief*," she says. "Those were tears of relief that I was living my life for myself again. That I was feeling *happy* again."

I grit my teeth. She's trying to spare my feelings.

"It's not about that," I say.

"Oh," she says. "What did you want to ask me?"

"Earlier this morning, you mentioned a woman's name," I say. "Bianca."

"Crazy Bianca?" she says, drawing her eyebrows together. "What about her?"

"Crazy Bianca?" I ask.

"I know that's offensive, but that's what everyone called her."

"She's mentally ill?" I ask.

"To put it mildly," Julie answers. "She's a compulsive killer and a psychopath. Why are you asking about her?"

"Just curious," I say. "Tell me more about her."

Julie narrows her eyes at me but relents. "She's allegedly guilty of murdering dozens of women. She has a type—young women, often in their twenties. She was also diagnosed as a bipolar woman with antisocial personality disorder. Technically, she's supposed to be in a psychiatric facility, but after a few unfortunate alleged incidents of violence involving nurses and other patients, they deemed that she was safer to herself and others in prison."

"You said that she's *allegedly* guilty?" I ask.

"Why are you so curious about her?" she asks again, cocking her head.

"Answer my question, Julie."

She huffs out a breath. "The bodies of the young women she murdered were never found. But the murders had a pattern. And with her last victim, Bianca's DNA was found at the crime scene."

"And this is reliable information?" I ask.

"Answer my question first. Why are you asking?" Julie asks, raising her eyebrows.

I guess she's bound to find out about this eventually. "When I designed your escape plan, I might have overlooked some flaws."

"What flaws, Aleksandr?" For the first time, she sounds like an FBI agent.

"The other night wasn't just optimal for your escape," I say. "It was easy for *anyone* to escape."

She takes a deep breath. "I had a feeling you were hiding something."

She turns to fetch the newspaper I hid in the back compartment. Her hands shake as she holds it up in front of her. She doesn't need to open it because her face is plastered over the front page. Right next to the woman she calls "Crazy Bianca."

"*The FBI Agent and the Serial Killer,*" she reads. "You knew this the whole time?"

"I was going to tell you," I say. "Eventually."

"Why wait until now?" she asks.

"You deserved a few hours of peace."

She goes back to the newspaper, reading everything I already know by heart. Bianca escaped too. She's a fugitive on the run, just like Julie. But that's not the worst of it. The girl left a message on her prison wall.

See you soon, Julie. You've always been my favorite.

"And that actress you hired?" Julie asks, turning to face me.

"She's being questioned," I say. "But they won't keep her for long. Her story checks out."

And even if they have doubts, they won't press any charges against the girl. I have an FBI contact to manage things on the inside.

"This changes everything, Aleksandr," Julie says, shaking her head. "And it was all my fault. Bianca is a dangerous

woman, and I'm responsible for letting her back out in the real world."

"We'll find her," I promise. "My brothers are already working on it."

She puts the newspaper away. I take the curve in the road that leads to the cabin.

I glance at Julie. Her eyebrows are furrowed in worry now.

Today wasn't supposed to end like this. After I devoured her, I wanted to leave her satiated and happy. But right now, she's consumed by the same anxiety again.

I can't stand it.

I park the car by the side of the road.

She glances at the road in alarm. "What are you doing?"

I get out of the car and slam the door shut.

I can feel her eyes tracking me as I walk around the car. I open her door, reaching around her to remove her seat belt.

"Aleksandr, don't even think about it," she warns. Her green eyes are wide, and it only makes me want to fuck her until those eyes glaze over.

I *know* I can make her forget about every thing that's bothering her.

I can take away her heaviness.

"Get out, *tigrenok*," I say, brushing her lower lip with my thumb. When she doesn't move, I pluck her from her seat and close the door behind her.

I hoist her up and pin her to the car with my hips.

"You can't just throw me around like I'm some doll," she snaps.

I growl against her shoulder. "Stop saying things like that if you don't want to be tied down and fucked until you can't walk for a week."

She frowns, but her body tells me everything I need to know. Her thighs widen for me, wrapping around my body.

She trusts me. It's an intoxicating feeling.

"I need you to know that I'm going to take care of everything from now on," I say, pressing a chaste kiss against her mouth. "Let Daddy take care of you."

Her eyes glimmer as she watches me.

Her beauty and innocence are a dart aimed straight at my heart. With me, she doesn't pretend. With me, she can just admit that sometimes, she's too soft for it all.

"You've been a good girl today," I say. "You opened your thighs for me and showed me your wet little pussy. And you let me put my big cock inside your tiny hole even though it barely fit inside you."

She throws her head back, giving me access to her delicate neck.

I press a kiss on her throat before nipping it. She grinds her hips against my body, seeking friction.

She likes being kissed. On her lips, on her breasts, on her neck, between her shoulder blades.

"You're with Daddy now, little girl," I say. "I'm going to look out for you. I'll be there to take care of your every need."

"It hurts," she says.

"I know," I say. "I hurt too. It's not right, but we can't help ourselves anymore. We've already sinned, so it just makes sense to keep sinning. Keep these thighs open, pretty girl. Let me touch what belongs to me."

I ravage her mouth, igniting the flames of desire between us again.

Her body fits against mine like we're two pieces of a puzzle.

I grind my cock against her belly, making her whimper with desire.

"Good girl," I growl. "Are you wet between your thighs again?"

She sucks in a breath when I cup her breasts, molding them against my palm. Her nipples graze against my hands as I drag them down her belly, stopping at her mound.

“That tickles,” she says.

“I can’t help it, princess,” I say, dragging my hand against her slick folds again. “I can’t stop this even if I wanted to.”

She clings tighter to me, her smaller body molding against mine.

“If anybody were to walk by, they’d think I was taking advantage of you,” I say. “You’re so small against me. And I have you trapped against my car with my hand inside your panties. It might look like I’m taking you against your will.”

A flood of moisture hits my palm.

She likes that I use her body for my pleasure. She likes how rough I am with her even though a girl like her is made to be laid down on rose petals and silk sheets.

“Even though I have to shove my cock inside your body, you like how I stretch you out, don’t you?” I capture her lip between my teeth. “You’ve been waiting for a strong man to come along and impale you on his cock. You’ve been waiting for a man you can call your daddy.”

I know she’s sore, so I rub slow circles over her clit. I wrap my hand around her neck before I devour her soft lips.

She gasps when I take her over the edge.

Her body clings to mine, her arms wrapped around my neck as the release takes her under.

I’m enraptured.

She has me wrapped around her little finger. She rules over my entire world. She doesn’t even know the half of it.

But there’s a darker side to this obsession.

I’m never letting her go. And I don’t care what she has to say.

JULIE

The cabin is eerily quiet when we return.

All of Aleksandr's family sits right where we left them. Except for Oksana, who's not among them.

"You guys found something, didn't you?" Aleksandr asks, stealing the words from my mouth.

Everybody glances at each other.

"Out with it," Aleksandr says, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"I brought some pastries," I say, placing the boxes on the coffee table. Nobody reaches for them.

"Inessa?" Aleksandr says, turning to Andrei's wife.

She glances at the floor before answering. "It's not exactly good news."

"Yeah, I figured," Aleksandr says.

"The man who Oksana, uh, interviewed this morning," Inessa says with a wince. "He's a traitor."

I don't know why, but it feels like everyone is watching me with more suspicion than usual. The delectable rush I felt from the day fades away, replaced by growing dread.

"Which family?" Aleksandr asks.

"I think she meant that he's a traitor to the Bureau," I say.

"Is there a reason you jumped to that conclusion so easily?" Ruslan questions me.

“Keep her out of this,” Aleksandr snarls, stepping in front of me.

“Aleksandr, can I have a word with you in private?” I ask, touching his broad back with my fingertips.

But he doesn’t want to hear it. He’s glaring at his family, his fists clenched at his sides.

“I’m disappointed in each and every one of you,” he says. “You should be ashamed of yourselves.”

“The girl said that she wanted to speak in private,” Ruslan says, standing. “Maybe you should hear her out.”

“*You* need to stay out of this,” Aleksandr says. “You pulled this same shit with Inessa, and now, you’re doing it with Julie.”

I know I need to intervene before this escalates into a fight. The last thing I want to do is be the source of conflict between the brothers.

“Aleksandr,” I say, touching his shoulder again. But unlike all the times before, he doesn’t respond to my touch.

Andrei stands too.

“We can’t trust her just because you tell us to,” he says. And then he turns to me. “No offense.”

“None taken, I guess?” I say, biting down on my bottom lip.

Ruslan pulls something out of his jacket. It’s a syringe and a glass vial. I shrink, hiding behind Aleksandr. They can’t possibly be considering injecting that into me, whatever it is.

“It’s the only way,” Ruslan says.

“Put that away,” Inessa says. “Oh my God, Julie is a *friend*. If you must interrogate her, there are other ways to go about it.”

“The truth serum is the most effective method, but Inessa is right,” Andrei says grudgingly.

“The truth serum?” I ask, walking toward Ruslan and holding my hand out.

He gives me the vial.

It’s a drug, but I don’t think it’s the kind that doctors prescribe. I’ve never heard of anything like it. I turn the glass vial in my hand. The label that’s supposed to list the ingredients is scratched out. I raise my eyebrows.

“What does it do?” I ask curiously.

“It alters the consciousness once injected into the body and makes it impossible for the person to lie,” Andrei says. “Don’t shake it too much. It messes up the composition.”

I hand it back to Ruslan, careful not to shake it.

“Aleksandr, you look like you’re about to combust,” Inessa says.

And sure enough, Aleksandr’s right eye has a twitch.

He doesn’t like this proposition one bit.

“Can I have a word with you?” I ask, tugging him away from the group.

This time, he actually listens and follows me.

We head toward the edge of the hill overlooking the sleepy small town. Most of the lights in the homes are off. Plumes of smoke rise from the chimneys.

Aleksandr stands so close to me that I can feel his body heat.

“I want to apologize on their behalf, Julie,” he says quietly.

I glance back at the cabin. A curtain drops. Of course they were snooping.

“You don’t have to,” I say, reaching for his arm and rubbing it gently. He glances down at my hand.

I think it catches us both off guard.

It’s a sweet gesture, different from the raw heat we usually have for each other. I’m not supposed to be catching feelings for anybody, especially not a man like Aleksandr.

I start to pull away, but he wraps an arm around my waist to keep me right where I am.

“This wasn’t how I wanted to end the day,” he says. “I wanted to have a nice dinner with you and then have you for dessert.”

His gaze lands on my lips like he’s being tugged toward me by an invisible force. He closes the distance between us. My nipples pucker into tight points.

“Aleksandr, I didn’t call you here because I wanted to make out,” I say against his lips.

He groans against me. His voice is so powerful and masculine. I feel it vibrate deep in my core, making me realize how much I still want him.

“This is so much more fun, though,” he says. “And you can’t blame me for *starving* after waiting two years for you to come around.”

I place my hand over his chest, pushing myself away from his seductive aura.

I’m pretty sure he meant two years of waiting for me, not two years of abstinence.

The intensity in his gaze becomes too much.

I glance at my feet, suddenly shy.

“You shouldn’t resent your family,” I say. “They’re suspicious of me because they have a right to be. The fact that they’re so adamant about it only shows that they care about you, Aleksandr. *Deeply.*”

His eye twitches again. I smother a smile.

He looks toward the cabin. “They don’t respect me.”

“Is that what you think this is?” I ask.

“That’s exactly what this is,” he says. “They think I’m not capable of handling my own affairs.”

“What gave you that impression?” I ask.

“Andrei and Ruslan were in the gulag prison for longer than I was,” he says. “They’ve known each other longer, and they’re a few years older than I am. They’ve always treated me as the little brother who needs to be looked after.”

“I hate to break it to you, but that’s kind of what family does,” I say. “They look out for you even if you don’t want them to.”

“Not all family,” he says, gritting his teeth.

I don’t have anything to say to that.

My childhood was far from ideal, but I could always count on my sisters.

But Aleksandr never had that. The family he was born to never wanted him. All he had was the family he made along the way.

Inessa once told me that Aleksandr was heavily malnourished as a kid. He was nothing but skin and bone for the majority of his childhood. Being in a gulag prison where they were fed watered-down cabbage soup every day didn’t help matters either. He didn’t regain his strength until a few years ago.

He’s in a much better place now, but old scars never fade entirely.

“All I’m saying is, they wouldn’t be protesting if they didn’t care about you,” I say. “It’s not something you need to get upset over.”

“It’s humiliating,” he says, looking at me.

It occurs to me that this isn’t about him. He’s worried about how it would make *me* feel.

“If anything, it would be odd if they *weren’t* suspicious of me,” I promise him. “I really don’t mind, Aleksandr.”

He searches my eyes for the truth.

“If you walk back in there, they’re going to ask you to sit through a polygraph test,” he says. “Are you okay with that?”

He looks so worried right now. It reminds me of the man I met two years ago. He's changed in so many ways, but his big heart has remained the same.

I get on my tiptoes.

It's not enough. He has to lower his head to meet me halfway. I part my lips for him, letting his tongue dance with mine. He always leads. I always follow, relaxing in his authority. He holds me tighter.

Thunder rumbles above us.

Dark clouds obscure the moon, and rain pours down on us a second later.

He holds me tighter, like the rain will try to take me away from him. Our bodies mold together, joining in all these different ways. And it scares me.

Unsaid words remain on my tongue. They're the reason I brought him out here, but I can't get them out now.

He groans against my lips.

The heat from his body makes me forget about every single worry in my head.

I'll leave it up to destiny.

Only fate will reveal if we're destined to blossom or wither.

ALEKSANDR

*W*e checked into a motel, as we needed electricity to conduct the polygraph test.

Julie is hooked up to wires and sensors now.

It's just Ruslan, Julie, and me.

Andrei and Inessa disappeared soon after the storm started. Rain patters hard against the windows now, making the dingy motel room feel like a warm cocoon.

"Make this quick," I tell Ruslan.

As far as the motel owner knows, Ruslan is the only person staying inside this room. I sneaked in with Julie through the kitchen in the back. I can't risk anybody recognizing her face.

The first order of business was to check the room for hidden cameras. We didn't find anything suspicious. The room is equipped with a bed, a table, a chair, and a broken refrigerator. There's a bottle of warm wine inside the fridge. There's an electric water kettle on the table with packets of cream, sugar, and instant coffee.

"Coffee, anyone?" I ask.

Ruslan ignores me. Julie shakes her head and gives me a soft smile.

I start pacing. It only takes a couple of my long strides to cross the room.

"*Sasha*," Ruslan growls, using my Russian nickname.

“What?” I say.

“Stop moving,” he says. “It’s distracting.”

“Give me something to do then,” I ask. “Do you want coffee?”

Julie looks at me. She looks so small and helpless in that old wooden chair. I want to scoop her up in my arms and take her away from his mess.

I don’t because I know she’s right.

I need my family to trust Julie. We’ll work closely together for the next few weeks, so I need them to trust each other.

“Fine,” Ruslan says. “Sit across from her.”

I do as I’m told. Ruslan looks between the two of us, his stoic face giving nothing away.

All of my restlessness leaves me as soon as I’m in Julie’s orbit. She balances me out in ways I didn’t know was possible. Everything inside me shifts—my pulse, respiration, blood pressure, all of it. Or at least that’s what it feels like.

Ruslan makes some notes on a piece of paper before he gets started.

In another life, the man could be a CIA agent. He has all the skills for it.

“Let’s start from the beginning,” he says. “Are you okay with that, Julie?”

“Yeah,” she answers.

“Tell me your full name.”

“Julie Carpenter.”

“How many siblings do you have?” he asks.

“Two sisters,” she answers.

“Are you close with your parents?”

“I didn’t really know my mother.”

“And your father?”

I can see the monitor from where I'm sitting. Her heartbeat goes up significantly. She doesn't like talking about her father. All her physiological responses to the questions being asked are monitored on the computer.

"There's no love lost between my father and me," she says finally.

"Why is that?"

"He betrayed my family," she says.

"Is betrayal something you feel strongly about?" Ruslan asks, looking directly at her as he asks the question.

"Isn't it something everyone feels strongly about?" she replies.

"Answer my question, Julie," he says.

"I do not tolerate it on any level," she says.

"Two years ago, you entered our lives. But you weren't Julie back then. You went by the name Jasmine, correct?"

Pink tinges her cheeks. "Yes."

"You lived with us in our home, pretended to be our maid, and the whole time, you were getting close to us so you could investigate us. Is that correct?"

"Partly," she says.

"Explain," Ruslan says.

Julie looks at me as she answers. "It's true that I was pretending to be someone else, but the friendships I made were never a lie."

"I would still call that a betrayal," Ruslan says. "Would you not?"

"I was just doing my job," she answers.

"That's a lie," Ruslan says, looking at the monitor.

I swallow.

He's right.

It *wasn't* a part of her job. After a grueling case, Julie was forced to take a few weeks off from her FBI job two years ago. She acted alone when she decided to go undercover and investigate us.

But I always know a con artist when I see one.

I knew something was off about our pretty maid. And when I did further digging, I learned of her true identity.

I knew her secret the whole time.

“You didn't ask a question,” Julie says.

“Excuse me?” Ruslan says.

“You're supposed to ask me a question,” she says.

“Fine,” he says, glancing at me like he's making a point. “What made you want to investigate us without your boss's orders?”

“The FBI is aware of many things going on in this country,” she says. “But we pick our battles. When I first heard about you, I was interested in your history. So it's the first case I followed after being put on mandatory leave.”

“If the FBI knew we were Russian fugitives, why didn't they pursue it right away?” Ruslan asks.

“You're good for the economy,” she says. “You were bringing in hundreds of dollars in tax money every year. And if you were doing something shady, it didn't show on paper.”

Our main business then was the chain of casinos we had along the US-Canada border. Apart from the slot machines and poker tables, we also had underground fight clubs and smaller collaborations with other families.

“Would you say you have a personal vendetta against crime families?” Ruslan asks.

“That's irrelevant,” she answers, her eyes flicking to mine.

Ruslan slams his hand on the table, making her jump.

“Answer the question I asked you, Julie,” he says. “Do you or do you not hate crime families?”

“I do,” she says, inhaling sharply.

“Good,” Ruslan says. His eyes cut to mine. “And you mentioned that you were on mandatory leave. What was the reason?”

“There was a particularly grueling case,” she says.

“Involving?”

“A serial killer who worked in health care,” she answers.

Ruslan watches the monitor for a moment, tapping his index finger on the table.

“What made you want to be an FBI agent in the first place?” he asks, switching directions.

Julie remains quiet for a moment. I know what she’s about to say. And suddenly, I don’t want to be in the same room. I don’t want to hear her talk about how she’ll never stop loving another man, even if he’s not of this world anymore.

“I always wanted to be in law enforcement,” she says. “I always believed in the concept of justice. It started when I realized that my sister, Belle, was assaulted and bullied in high school. It filled me with more rage than I knew what to do with. And when my best friend, Derek, went to New York City to follow his dreams, he was murdered by the Italian mafia. I wanted to get back at them for what they did to him. I wanted to make sure that justice was served.”

Ruslan glances back at me, subtly raising an eyebrow.

“Did you hear that?” He doesn’t speak Russian or English. Instead, he speaks in ancient Greek, the dead language we all learned in the gulag prison to communicate.

“Of course I heard it. I’m sitting right here,” I snap, replying in the same language. Even though it’s been a while since we’ve had to use it, it flows off my tongue with ease. We used it extensively for many years to make fun of the prison guards and drive them crazy.

“She can’t be trusted,” he says. “And this is proof.”

“This proves nothing,” I say. “She’s allowed to have values slightly different from ours.”

“Yeah, they’re only *slightly* different,” Ruslan says, rolling his eyes.

Julie gnaws on her lower lip as she watches us. Ruslan turns back to her.

“Have you gotten your vengeance yet?” Ruslan asks her, switching back to English.

“*Justice*,” I correct.

“Justice,” Julie says at the same time. She looks at me. “Things changed. While staying with you at the casino, I realized that vengeance doesn’t heal a broken heart. I saw how Andrei’s quest for revenge ruled him. But in the end, none of that mattered.”

“Tell us about the events that led to your imprisonment,” Ruslan says.

“Someone hacked into my FBI accounts,” Julie says. “They used my login credentials to access top secret data.”

“What did they do with it?” Ruslan asks.

“They used it to provide sensitive information to a terrorist group,” Julie says.

“But there was camera footage of you meeting with that terrorist group,” Ruslan says.

“It was a grainy feed of someone who looked like me,” Julie says. “Because I had nothing to do with it.”

Ruslan looks at the monitor once again. His mouth is set in a grim line. He’s upset that all of her information checks out.

“Who do you think set you up?” he asks.

“It had to have been an FBI agent,” she says. “Definitely someone from the inside, considering how they pulled it off so flawlessly.”

“Do you have any suspicions on who it could have been?” Ruslan asks.

“I don’t,” she answers.

Ruslan checks the graph, scrutinizing it once more.

“Who is your handler?” he asks.

“I’m no longer an FBI agent,” she replies.

“Fine,” she says. “Who *was* your handler?”

“Jessica Sharpe,” she replies.

“Who did she report to?”

“The Assistant Director,” she says.

“How did they learn about your involvement with the terrorist group?” Ruslan asks.

“Again. I was never involved with a terrorist group,” she says. “And I don’t know because I was set up. However, I heard about my arrest warrant through a friend in New York City.”

“Which friend?” he asks.

“Chloe,” she says, smiling fondly. “She’s my best friend. We live together in New York City.”

“Was she a part of the Bureau, too?” he asks even though we already know the answer.

“No, she’s a journalist,” Julie says. “And don’t ask me how she found out before I did. She has her ways.”

Ruslan scribbles something down on his notepad.

“Do you know why I’m interrogating you right now, Julie?” Ruslan asks.

“Because you never liked me?” she guesses.

“Yes, but also because we have reason to believe that the man who tried to kill Aleksandr and you last night was hired by another FBI agent,” Ruslan says.

Julie’s face turns pale.

She takes a deep breath. “Since they went to great lengths to set me up, I shouldn’t be surprised they’d want me dead before the truth comes out.”

Rage burns in my blood, making me see nothing but red. The rain is pouring even harder now, filling the small room with crackling tension.

“I have only a few questions left for you,” Ruslan informs. “Are you someone Alexandr can trust?”

“Yes.” It comes without a pause.

“Are you using him for ulterior motives?”

“I’m not.”

“Are you being completely honest with him right now?”

“Yes.”

“Final question. Are you still in love with Derek?”

“You don’t have to answer that,” I tell Julie. And then I turn to Ruslan. “What does that man have to do with anything?”

He doesn’t give me an answer. Instead, his eyes bore into Julie’s face.

“Are you in love with Derek?”

“I don’t know,” Julie replies, taking a deep breath. Her eyes fill with tears as she looks at me.

I want to take her into my arms. I don’t care who she still loves. Of course I want her all to myself, but I’ll also accept her for who she is.

“Okay, thank you,” Ruslan says, standing and collecting his things.

I walk over to Julie, wordlessly removing all the wires and cuffs from her body. I need her. *Now*.

She takes a sharp inhale, watching me with those big green eyes. A storm rages outside, but it’s nothing compared to the avalanche of emotions inside me.

“Ruslan, leave us,” I say.

He nods, gathering the last of his things before stepping out the door. It clicks shut behind him.

“Aleksandr, I’m sorry,” she says.

“There’s not a thing in this world you need to apologize for,” I say, tracing the soft skin of her cheek with my knuckles. My hand travels down the side of her neck, moving down her breasts and the indent of her waist.

I don’t have any energy left in me for words.

I cup her hips possessively, relishing the feel of holding her like I own her.

If I were to check, I know she’d be wet between her thighs. Her nipples are already sharp peaks begging to be sucked.

I walk her back until her knees hit the bed.

She gasps and presses her palms against my chest.

I lift her by her waist and throw her on the bed. She scrambles back as I advance on her. She looks like a delicate flower about to be corrupted by a beast. I pry her thighs open and grind my cock against her wet heat as I take her mouth.

“*Mine*,” I say. “You’re all fucking mine. I don’t care who came before me, but you’re mine now, and I’m never letting you go.”

“Okay,” she says, her back arching as I bite her lower lip.

She wraps her arms around me, holding me for support as I thrust my hips against her. She’s so soft and perfect underneath me.

I have to be careful not to put all my weight on her.

I kiss a trail down from her mouth, sucking on her neck and taking a nipple into my mouth. My stubble grazes against her stomach before I spread her wide open. Her pussy is pink and perfect and dripping wet. It’s all mine to feast on.

I drag my tongue up her pussy, looking at how she wiggles and gasps.

“You look so fucking good when you’re spread out like this,” I say, latching onto her clit and sucking on it. She sighs softly. “It feels a lot like destiny, Julie. And there’s no running from destiny.”

She's still sensitive from the pounding she took earlier this evening, but I need her.

I need to be wrapped inside her wet heat. I need to hear her screaming my name as the headboard bangs against the wall.

"Look what you made me do," I say, pushing a finger inside her. "I had to bring you to a motel in the middle of nowhere just so I could have this pussy."

"*Aleksandr.*" Her small hands fist my hair, twisting it as I continue eating her like she'll be my last meal.

"Not right now, little girl," I say. "Call me by my name. When I'm pushing into this tight little cunt, I'm your daddy. I'm the one who takes care of you. And now that you're old enough, you can take care of me too."

She moans as I press my mouth harder against her little pussy.

I cup her pretty cunt as I rise up her body.

"Who owns this?" I ask, squeezing her in my palm. Honey gushes out of her opening. She's ready for my cock now.

"You do," she says. Her eyes lock on my face.

"Good girl," I say, folding her knees so they're on either side of her body. "I knew you'd be a good girl. And all of those gymnastic classes I paid for, it was all to make sure that you'd take my cock just like this."

I push the tip of my cock against her entrance. I love how big it looks against her little hole.

"Look at us, baby girl," I say, my hands trembling as I fight off the need to pummel into her. When I'm with her, I become less man and more beast. The only thing I'm concerned about is coming as deep inside her as possible.

I sink another inch. Both of us watch the way my big cock disappears inside her.

Her head hits the pillow. She squeezes her eyes shut. I freeze.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

She opens her eyes, nodding at me. She reaches up to cup my cheek. The gesture catches me off guard.

I thrust my cock in the rest of the way.

I've already had her underneath me, but it feels different every time I touch her. Something is growing and expanding between us at a blinding speed. The emotion grips my heart in a tight fist.

I bottom out inside her, making her pretty tits jiggle with every crude thrust into her body.

Her cheeks turn rosy as I grab one of her breasts, pinching the nipple as I fuck her. I have to stifle her screams with my hand because these motel walls are paper thin. But I can't stop the headboard from thumping against the wall.

When she comes undone for me, she bites down on the palm of my hand.

I flip her around and raise her hips, slapping her bratty ass before unleashing my beast. I hold her waist for support as I pummel into her with brutal thrusts. She takes every single thrust like a good girl.

I fill her up with my come. And then I kiss the skin between her shoulder blades.

She sighs softly.

When she falls asleep, I gather her in my arms. I hold her tight the entire night, watching the soft rise and fall of her shoulders until it lulls me into a dreamless sleep.

JULIE

I feel like I'm living in paradise.

I wake up every morning with Aleksandr's head between my thighs. He makes me scream every morning, wringing orgasms out of me while he whispers filthy things against my skin.

We're so wrapped up in each other that we forget everything else happening in the world.

His friends come for dinner every night, but Aleksandr has forbidden any talk about my case. Instead, we talk about mundane, everyday things. Andrei tells us about the fishing village he grew up in. Aleksandr regales us with tales about his party days. And Ruslan spends the whole time stealing glances at Oksana.

Andrei's blind sister is an intimidating presence in the house.

I can feel her quietly judging me and everything I do.

But the entire cabin belongs to Alexandr and me when everybody leaves at the end of the night. He prowls after me, pinning me to the wall and kissing my neck.

He makes me lose track of time.

He makes me lose track of everything else in my head.

All I know is the sweetest high.

But still, that voice at the back of my mind remains. It warns me that everything that goes up must come down.

It's the end of yet another perfect day when that voice sneaks up on me again.

"Come back to me, *tigrenok*," he whispers, pressing a soft kiss on my lips.

I blink, refocusing my gaze on him.

It's a little after midnight. Both of us are lying down on the bed facing each other. In these quiet hours of the night, I delude myself into thinking that this will all work out.

I bury my face against his neck.

He draws patterns on my bare back.

"Look at me," he says, tipping my chin up. "What's on your mind?"

"I was thinking about the after," I say.

"After what?"

"Aleksandr, we can't stay in this cabin forever," I say.

"Sure we can," he says.

"We can't stay hidden forever," I say. "I'm still a wanted fugitive, and you still have clubs to run."

His hand lightly wraps around my throat. He rolls over toward me, resting a fraction of his body weight on me. I can't help it. I rub my hips against his, spreading my thighs wider for him.

"I love the way your pulse quickens under my touch," he growls, pressing his fingertips into my neck.

"Aleksandr," I moan. "I know what you're trying to do."

He reaches between my thighs, feeling the liquid heat awaiting him. He swirls the nub of my clit, making me arch my back for more. He closes his mouth over my tank top, finding my hardened nipple against the fabric.

His devious tongue drives me insane.

"You're trying to distract me," I huff. "I'm not going to forget about—"

Every coherent thought in my head leaves me when he slaps my pussy.

“Daddy wants to play, little girl.” He growls the words against my ear. My core clenches, getting ready for his big cock to own me.

He leans down to brush his mouth against mine.

“You taste like the lollipop you were sucking on earlier this evening,” he says, slipping his tongue into my mouth. “Why does everything taste so much better on your lips?”

I sigh, letting him dominate me in that way I need.

“I’m the luckiest man in the world,” he growls, pawing at my breasts. “I love how you try so hard to take my cock. It barely fits inside your snug little pussy, but you try your absolute best, don’t you? That’s all that matters, princess.”

He pushes the tip of his cock against my entrance. I’m so wet that his cock slips, landing at my puckered hole.

A deviant smirk spreads on his face.

I gasp, pushing at his chest. It only excites him because I feel him grow even larger against my bottom.

“Tell me what I want to hear,” he growls, lowering my tank top so my tits bounce out for him.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“You know exactly what it is,” he says. “Say it to me.”

“I’m yours,” I tell him. “I’m yours, Daddy.”

He growls from deep inside his chest and thrusts all the way inside my pussy, bottoming out inside me.

“That’s my good girl,” he says, rearing back only to thrust into me again and again. “That’s my perfect little princess. Now, hold on for a minute. Daddy needs some alone time with this pussy. Let me have my way with it.”

He folds my body in half, exposing my entire sex before thrusting into me again. The room fills with the crude sound of

his flesh slapping against mine. He lowers his head to suck on one of my nipples.

He feels so good inside me. His big cock stretches the limits of my body.

His hips move with pure power.

A rubber band stretches inside me, so taut I'm worried it'll break. But he's right there to hold me as it snaps, throwing me over the edge.

“Right here with you, baby girl,” he says. “You milk that cock so good. This is why I keep coming back to you. This is why I'm a sinner.”

His release floods my walls. Nothing compares to watching him through half-shut eyes as he comes undone. Every muscle of his body strains as he keeps pumping into me, trying to get his come as deep inside me as possible.

Everything has a golden haze to it.

In these quiet moments, I let myself believe that the whole world is ours.

But in the back of my mind, I hear voices. A male voice that doesn't belong to Aleksandr.

I look away from Aleksandr. Pink tinges my cheeks as I try to hide the fact that I'm thinking about the man who came before him.

“You're not going to give it up, are you?” he asks, grazing his knuckles down my cheek. “Fine, let's hear whatever is troubling your mind.”

He mistakes my melancholy for stubbornness. I let him believe it because it'll break his heart if he knew the truth.

As I watch Aleksandr, a rush of affection pours from my heart. I can't deny the magnetic attraction between us. I can't deny that we sync together in ways that's rare to find. But I also can't deny that there are demons in my mind, haunting me for what almost was.

I take a deep breath.

I don't understand why I feel so broken in these moments. My body is satiated and relaxed, but my mind keeps churning out dark thoughts.

"Is your family still working on the investigation?" I ask. "And before you tell me not to worry about it, I want you to know that it's in my nature to solve my own problems. I appreciate everything you're doing for me, but this isn't what you promised me. You said that you'd let me solve my own case."

"I said whatever I had to say to convince you to get out of there," he says, pressing his nose against my neck and inhaling deeply. "And it worked, didn't it?"

"What are you trying to protect me from, Aleksandr?" I ask, pulling away. "Do you think I can't handle it?"

"Do you want my honest answer?" he asks.

I nod, biting down on my lip as I wonder what he's going to say next.

"I think you deserve better," he says. "The FBI turned its back on you. Your father never treated you the way you deserve to be treated. Your sisters were caught up in their own lives."

"Don't bring my sisters into this," I warn, raising my eyebrows. "They have children and their own little families to take care of."

"And what do you have, *tigrenok*?" he whispers. "You put your heart and soul into your career. But they vilified you without giving you the benefit of the doubt. Believe what you want to believe, but they never had your best interest at heart."

"What do you have against the FBI?" I ask. "They're not after you, and you have nothing to hide."

"All of us have something to hide," he says, looking at the ceiling.

At this moment, I realize two years is a long time. In my mind, he's still the charismatic businessman who was working

with his brothers to build a life in America. But they have more power now. People know who they are. And they may no longer be dealing with just casinos and real estate.

“Are you involved in human trafficking?” I blurt out.

“What makes you think we are?” he asks, looking at me.

A wall of ice falls between us. Everything warm and pleasant hardens until those jagged edges threaten to cut.

My heart beats so hard that it feels like it’s trying to leap out of my chest.

“I asked you if you had something to hide, and you gave me the weirdest response,” I say. “What else am I supposed to think?”

“I don’t make people do anything against their will, Julie,” he says, narrowing his eyes at me.

He told me before that he was in charge of some clubs, but I never asked him about them.

“Tell me about your clubs,” I say, playing with the soft hair over his chest.

A smile falls over his lips. “They’re just clubs.”

“I highly doubt that,” I say.

“They’re like paradise on earth,” he says. “They were inspired by the parties I attended in Russian high society. These oligarchs would pay top dollar just to mingle with the ballerinas. It wasn’t about sex. It was about the feeling of being wanted. Of connecting with another human being, even if just for a short period of time.”

“So it’s very classy?” I ask.

“I wouldn’t say that either,” he says. “In the main lounge, you find the usual stuff—the bar, the dance floor, the champagne towers. It’s open to the public. But there’s a VIP area for our elite clientele.”

“What’s in the VIP area?” I ask.

“It’s where our clients get to pick their own poison,” he says with a twinkle in his eye. “One section of the club is for those seeking relaxation in the form of dinner and conversation. Kind of like the hostess clubs in Japan. But the other section is where the freaks come to play.”

My imagination runs wild.

The world he lives in is vastly different from my own. It’s filled with debauchery and recklessness, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious.

His thumb grazes against my hardened nipple. “You could perform there if you wanted to.”

“Me?” My heart climbs to my throat.

“You like being watched,” he says. “You like being a tease. They can watch, but I’m the only one who gets to touch. I’ll claim your perfect little princess body while you call me your daddy.”

My breath hitches. “What else happens in the freaky part of the club?”

“Other than the shows?” he asks, his fingers trailing over my belly, sending goose bumps racing over my flesh. “We have private rooms for people who want to do more than just watch.”

He’s talking about prostitution. It’s the oldest profession in the world, but it makes my insides knot up. I wonder if any of the girls are there against their will.

“And the government doesn’t know about any of it?” I ask.

“Of course they know,” he says. “But we’ve formed an agreement.”

The FBI looks into organized crime. But I haven’t heard of anyone negotiating with the Russian Bratva. There’s no record of it, which could only mean that at least one FBI agent is working alongside the Bratva.

Aleksandr and his brothers have a contact on the inside.

“How many FBI agents do you have on your payroll?” I ask.

His eyes cut to mine. They glint with something I don't recognize. And then he's rolling on top of me again.

“There are much better things for us to talk about,” he says, sucking on my neck again.

And just like that, the wall between us melts. A river of lava flows through me, lighting up every one of my senses and setting me on fire. I want to ask a thousand more questions, but for now, being in his arms is enough.

I let him consume me.

I let myself be reckless with my heart. Even if I know he might break it.

ALEKSANDR

She's not on her side of the bed when I wake up.

I pad to the living room, where I find her on the floor with papers sprawled around her. Her blonde hair is in a loose bun held together by a pen, and her slight figure is hunched over a notebook.

"Good morning," I say.

She startles. After years of sneaking into the prison kitchen for cookies, I learned the art of moving quietly.

"Hey," she says, glancing back at the papers.

"What do you have here?" I ask.

"I decided to take matters into my own hands," she says. "Since you refuse to tell me anything."

It's probably about the case.

She's a stubborn little thing.

I know that nothing I say will persuade her to give up something she's already set her mind to. So instead of trying to convince her otherwise, I crouch beside her.

"This isn't about your case," I notice, picking up one of the newspaper clippings.

I didn't realize she's been getting the newspapers every day. It's our only source of information here in Silver Falls. Without television or the internet in this cabin, we have to do it the old-fashioned way. There's a radio that works when it

feels like it, but otherwise, all we have are the daily newspapers.

But this isn't information about Julie's case. It's about Bianca—the other woman who escaped that night.

Julie mentioned that Bianca might come after her, but I never considered it a serious threat. The probability of that happening is just highly unlikely.

In a closed environment, it's usual for conflicts to arise between inmates. But everything changes after they're out in the real world.

And I doubt that Bianca, however crazy she might be, will come after Julie.

“Do you really think she's a threat to you?” I ask.

Julie takes a deep breath. “Would you be asking me the same if Bianca were a man?”

“What?”

“You're underestimating her because she's a woman, right?”

“This is where you want to take a stand?” I ask, smirking. “That women can be murdering maniacs too?”

“That's not the point,” Julie says, glancing back at her papers.

“For what it's worth, I'm not judging her because she's a woman,” I say. “I'm making the assumption because I've been in her position before. And I know from firsthand experience that priorities shift after a prisoner is given freedom.”

“She's mentally ill, Aleksandr,” Julie says. “You don't know what she's capable of.”

Her face turns darker with frustration.

“You really think she's a threat to you?” I ask.

“She's a threat to everyone,” Julie says.

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay?”

“I’ll put more detectives on the case,” I say. “We’ll make it a priority to find out about Bianca’s whereabouts.”

“Really?” she asks.

“Yeah, I was going to talk to the lawyers and detectives today anyway,” I say. “You can join and tell them any relevant information you may have about her.”

As a rule of thumb, we never work in the cabin, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have access to the outside world.

When we first arrived, my brothers set up a private VPN so we could catch up on emails and set up video calls. I don’t involve Julie in this because it’s frustrating business, but I know she doesn’t like being kept in the dark either.

She smiles up at me, gratitude shining in her eyes. “Thank you, Aleksandr.”

A lump forms in my throat at the sight of her smile. She looks ethereal, like an angel who doesn’t belong in this world. It tugs at something deep inside me.

“I’ll go make some coffee,” I say, kissing the top of her head.

I feel her eyes trailing me as I walk toward the small kitchen. We’ve been playing house for the past couple of days. We’re living in our own little haven, and I wanted to hold on to that for a little longer.

When I’m alone, I clutch the kitchen counter until my knuckles turn white.

A wave of emotions swells inside me.

I saw it again last night.

That pain in her eyes.

Only one thing in this world causes her so much torment. She was thinking about Derek again.

I didn’t ask her about it because I didn’t want to hear her say it out loud.

“Aleksandr?” Julie stands at the kitchen entrance. “Are you okay?”

I turn toward her as she closes the gap between us. Her small head rests against my chest. I wrap my arms around her. My chin comes to rest on top of her head.

“I think I’ll always worry about you,” I say.

She takes a deep breath. “I’m scared, Aleksandr.”

“What of?” I ask.

“I’m scared that all of this will be for nothing,” she says. “I’m scared that no matter how hard I look, I won’t find anything.”

“I believe in you,” I say, inhaling the scent of her hair. She smells so sweet.

She wouldn’t be involved in any of this if it were up to me. But it’s what she wants to do.

“I’m sorry,” she says. Our chests rise and fall at the same time. “I’m sorry I left you after that dance.”

The last time we met was at Inessa and Andrei’s wedding reception. She was sitting alone at a table, folding paper swans as everybody else was having the time of their lives. That was when I crossed the boundaries of our friendship. I knew her heart wasn’t available, but I asked her for a dance anyway.

We danced until the music stopped playing.

But when she left that night, I never heard from her again.

“You’re with me now,” I growl. “And you’re all fucking mine.”

She lets me hold her.

But I can’t get the image of her misty eyes out of my head.

Even though I grew up reading Russian literature, I always thought that when love came, it would be beautiful and bright.

But love hurts. It’s dark, all-consuming, and jagged at the edges. It’s raw, and it’s killing me softly.

I don't really care, though.

I can pretend as long as she pretends.

ALEKSANDR

*I*t's a beautiful autumn morning.

I'm in the farmers' market, weaving through the vendor stalls when I feel someone's eyes on me. I stop near the baked goods.

"Would you like a sample of our salted caramel brownies?" a lady with a blonde bob asks.

"Don't mind if I do," I say, taking the generous sample and chewing on it thoughtfully. "This is delicious. I'll have all of them."

For a second there, I forget all about the feeling of being watched.

But then, it's back. Stronger than ever. I turn around. I catch a hint of bright red, but I don't see anything else.

"Where are you from?" the vendor asks as she packs the brownies.

"Chicago," I tell her.

Her eyes widen.

"Enjoy your stay," she mumbles.

The people in Silver Falls know about the mobsters from Chicago who frequent this town. I let her assume I'm one of them just to make sure she won't ask me any more questions.

Other desserts are arranged in her stall—chocolate chunk cookies, sweet potato cupcakes, pecan pie, and pear galettes, to name a few.

I want to try them all, but I can't feed Julie sugar for every meal. She needs nutrition and shit.

As I walk around the farmers' market, I throw in a head of broccoli. So far, I have enough brownies to feed a small nation and a head of broccoli.

They're never going to send me to get the groceries ever again.

I throw in another head of broccoli for good measure. That should do it.

The prickling sensation at the back of my neck intensifies. If this were the city, I would have my gun drawn already. But these small-town people have grown on me. I don't want to ruin their day by walking around armed.

The only person watching me is an older lady with flaming red hair. I scrutinize her for a moment. There's a shrewdness in her eyes. A smile dances on her face like she knows something I don't.

She's either the town lunatic or the most wholesome-looking assassin.

Either way, I should probably stay away from her.

But now that I've noticed her, I find that I can't look away. She's holding me captive with nothing but her eyes.

Like a spider's web trapping its prey.

I shake my head, knowing I'm just reading too much into it. I take one of the brownies from my bag and shove it into my mouth, turning away from her.

I nearly choke on the brownie when I see the woman standing directly in front of me. I glance back at where she was a moment ago. This little woman moves like a ninja. She must have great knees for her age.

I narrow my eyes at her as I chew as fast as possible.

"Take your time," she says, smiling at me playfully.

I take a cup of iced tea from the stand near me and take a big gulp. The brownie now sits like a rock in my stomach.

I don't know what it is about this woman.

She's less than half my height. But for whatever reason, I'm terrified of her.

"Walk with me," she says.

I pay the iced tea guy and hesitate for a moment. I don't need to do anything she tells me to. But I feel compelled to do it anyway. She leads the way, and I follow her.

"Who sent you?" I hiss.

"I go where I'm needed," she replies, looking back at me.

Her eyes are a milky green, and wrinkles line her face, but she's so vibrant with energy. This woman is *alive* in ways normal people will never be.

Her quiet power knocks the breath from my lungs.

She takes me to the apple orchard behind the farmers' market. We stand underneath an apple tree. There are a few apples on the ground being eaten by insects.

I fold my arms in front of my chest and fight the urge to reach for my gun.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Excuse me?" I ask.

"Your history," she says. "It's tragic."

I stand straighter. Tiny pinpricks puncture my heart, bleeding me from the inside out at the mention of the past. My mind whirls as I try to figure out who this woman really is and who could have sent her.

"Like I said, nobody sent me," she says.

"You keep saying that, but I'm not so sure," I say.

I quiet when I realize she answered a question I didn't say out loud. It must be a coincidence. But it's insulting because I like to think I have a poker face.

"I can read you like an open book, actually," she says.

I secretly pinch myself.

Nope. Not a dream.

“*Oh*, I know,” I say, figuring it out. “Are you part of some Ponzi scheme? Are you trying to recruit me? I’m sorry, but I don’t need any Tupperware right now.”

Instead of launching into a sales pitch, she simply studies me.

It’s the way I imagine an artist would study their subject, trying to learn them from every facet to capture their essence.

“You saw me buying those brownies. Are you here because you’re mad I took all of them? If so, I don’t blame you, but I won’t share any with you.”

“You’re stingy with food,” she says.

“Correct,” I say, lifting my chin.

“Your mother never cared for you. Your father never wanted you. You had to teach yourself how to survive. It started with the little things. Stealing bread from the bakery and apples from the corner store. You were good at it. You got better. And one day, you decided this is what you wanted to do with your life, but on a much larger scale. You went on to *excel* at your chosen craft. But the very nature of glamour is to fade. And when it did, you were left with nothing again.”

My eyes burn. My fists clench.

I want to argue with her. I want to tell her she’s wrong.

But every word is true. From the hunger that was my constant companion in my childhood to the people I conned when I was only a teenager.

I was with the socialites and the politicians. I partied with the oligarchs and the ballerinas.

But that’s a part of my past not many people know about.

This red-haired woman just spoke about me like she knows me personally.

“You’re from Russia, aren’t you?” I ask. “You must be the mother of some oligarch whose life I ruined. I’m sorry I was

such an asshole back then. I'll have my assistant write you a check."

She steps closer.

Being in her orbit is intoxicating.

I clutch my bag of brownies tighter.

"I'm not here for a check, Aleksandr."

I haven't told her my name. I should be interrogating her by now, but I don't get the feeling she's here to hurt me.

I frown at my bag of brownies.

They can't just be any regular old brownies.

"I'm sorry," I say, the apology tasting foreign in my mouth. "I don't know who you are, but you seem to know who I am. It just threw me off."

"Apology accepted," she says, staring at a point right above my head. I watch her eyes as they get unfocused. It looks like she's in some sort of trance. "There was a time when trust came to you easily. The world stole that part of you, but it's important for you to hold on to it. Especially when things get dark. Don't read people's words; read their hearts. It's where you'll find the truth."

And then she blinks a few times.

Okay, seriously, I need to send these brownies to the lab. This woman can't be for real.

She just spoke to me like she was reading a fortune cookie. I swear I've never seen her before today, but she knows things about me I haven't told a soul. She seems to know my biggest flaws and my greatest strengths.

"Who are you?" I ask her again.

She smiles at me like that's a secret she won't ever give away.

"As for your payment," she says with a twinkle in her eye. She glances up, looking at the apples that are too far for her to reach. I pluck one and hand it over to her.

Our fingers brush.

I pull away like I've been singed.

That simple act of giving something to this woman breaks a wall inside me. Everything I've shoved behind that wall comes tumbling out. I feel everything, all at once.

She seems to read my mind because her eyes turn misty.

"Thank you, son," she says.

I take a deep breath and look up at the sky. I want to give her every apple in this orchard.

When I glance back down at her, she's not there. She slipped away without a goodbye. A stone sits inside my chest, the weight of it so overwhelming that I need a moment to compose myself.

With Julie, it was love at first sight.

With this red-haired woman, it felt like a different kind of bond was formed in the course of a simple interaction.

It's something I searched for my entire life. It's human nature to crave the things we never had. And for me, that was a mother's love. I never got that from my birth mother, but the motherly affection I felt when this stranger called me 'son' was more than I had received in my entire lifetime.

I glance toward the farmers' market.

I can see the whole market from where I'm standing. I scan the stalls until I find the woman who sold me the brownies. I narrow my eyes at her suspiciously.

Seriously. *What* did she put in these brownies?

JULIE

I go through the grocery bag and lift a single head of broccoli.

“Is this all you brought back home?” I ask, turning toward Aleksandr.

He seems lost in thought. I’ve never seen him like this.

“Don’t be silly,” he says, glancing at me. “There’s another one of those.”

“I was going to make dinner tonight,” I say, slapping his arm with the spatula.

“I’m sorry,” he says, rubbing his arm. “But the weirdest thing happened today.”

I push the bag aside. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, more than okay,” he says. For the first time, he seems lost for words. “I, uh, met this older lady. It was the strangest encounter. She seemed to know everything about me.”

I frown. “You spoke with one of the locals?”

“She approached me,” he says.

“What did she want?”

He shrugs.

A suspicion sneaks up on me.

“Where exactly was this?” I ask.

“The farmers’ market,” he says. “Before she left, she asked me for an apple. And...she looked at me with so much love. Like how a mother would look at her child. I guess what I’m trying to say is...I’m pretty sure these brownies are laced.”

I take a sharp breath. “What color was her hair, Aleksandr?”

“What?”

“Her hair,” I say. “What color was it?”

“Red,” he answers. “Why?”

I heard my sisters talking about a red-haired woman who gave them prophecies about their future. They said that she had this powerful aura about her and that her words changed the course of the rest of their lives.

“No reason,” I say, moving closer toward Aleksandr. I look into his dark eyes before wrapping my arms around him.

He holds me tight, like I’ll slip out of his arms if he doesn’t.

Aleksandr and I might be from different worlds, but we want the same things. The people who were supposed to take care of us let us down. I understand his pain because I’ve lived through it too.

I understand that certain things in life leave you scarred, even if you don’t want to acknowledge it.

But his jagged edges and mine, they fit together perfectly.

We fit together perfectly.

I love you.

It’s right there on the tip of my tongue, but I don’t say it out loud. I’m afraid of what it will entail. I’m afraid of how it will all end.

Because even though I’m pretty sure I’m in love with Aleksandr, I know it will have to end eventually.

All good things do.

I look up at him. He's like a drug that's already in my system.

"I can see every thought in your head, *tigrenok*," he says, wrapping my long hair around his fist and tugging my head back.

His lips ghost over my mouth, sending shivers down my spine. My core clenches as he presses his lips harder over mine. My urgency skyrockets, and before I know it, he lifts me onto the kitchen counter and settles between my thighs.

My hands thread into his soft hair. I grin against his mouth.

"What are you thinking now?" he asks.

"I was thinking that we suck at this," I reply.

He tightens his hold on my hair.

That familiar, soothing darkness floods his eyes again, taking my breath away.

"What do I suck at?" he growls, his lips latching onto my neck. I sigh as my head drops all the way back, giving him better access.

Not at this.

His palms cup my breasts, squeezing me so hard that my heart thumps against my rib cage. I'll never get enough of his touch. Every time he's inside me, I can feel him soothing the parts of me that have been hurting. But it's not just his body.

It's his heart.

It's the little things he does for me.

It's the way he says my name and the way he holds me at night.

It's his *love*.

He hasn't said it yet, but he doesn't need to. He loves me. And I love him.

I gasp when his hand slides down my panties. He growls when he finds me wet and needy.

“You were saying I’m not good at something?” he asks.

“You suck at grocery shopping,” I say, biting down on my lower lip. “And I suck at cooking. Not to mention how horrified your family would be if they knew that you were planning on fucking me on the kitchen counter. You know, where we make all of our meals.”

“You’re absolutely right,” he says, hooking his arms under my knees and lifting me.

I squeal as he carries me to the living room and slams me against the wall.

Every single nerve ending in my body sings his name, waiting for him to take me.

His lips are hot and feverish as they resume kissing me. He kisses me like it’s both our first and last kiss.

It’s one of the things I love most about Aleksandr.

Everything he does is with so much passion. It’s exactly the energy I need.

His phone starts ringing in the kitchen.

“Someone’s calling,” I say.

“It can wait,” he replies, rocking his hips against my parted thighs.

“What if it’s important?”

“There’s nothing more important than this right here,” he replies, bouncing me on his cock again.

My nipples drag against his chest. Usually, he takes his time making sure I’m wet and ready for him, but he’s impatient today. He positions his cock over my entrance and slams home. A scream dislodges from my throat.

“Quiet, little girl,” he says, pistoning his hips inside me, pushing me near the brink already. “We can’t have people knowing I’m balls deep inside this princess cunt. I’m supposed to protect it from other men, but I’m the man you should’ve been protected *from*. And now, look at what I’ve turned you into. You’re my little slut. Spreading these lush thighs for me

at my command, ready to take my big cock and milk the come from my balls.”

He slams into me with forceful thrusts.

When I try to grab his shoulders, he pins my wrists above my head. I’m trapped between his body and the wall. I have no choice but to let him unleash his brutality on me.

I have no choice but to take it.

“Don’t try to fight it, princess,” he says. “Although I kind of like it when you do. It’s cute that you think you can escape me.”

His words are always my undoing.

“It’s okay, princess.” He presses his mouth against my ear. His stubble scratches my soft skin, and the timbre of his voice makes my toes curl. “Come all over Daddy’s big cock. You’re allowed to like it.”

His grip on my wrists turns bruising as he chases his own release. The sound of his grunts and the slam of his flesh against mine fills the air. His ass flexes as he comes deep inside me.

I’m right there with him.

I can feel his heart beating against my skin. We’re breathing the same air, our bodies and souls entangled around each other’s.

I never thought I’d connect with someone like this.

It’s stronger than anything I’ve ever experienced.

I love you.

I know that now is the right time to tell him. I need to confess everything. Even if I don’t have the courage to say the words out loud, it’ll show in everything I do, from how I take pride in cooking dinner for him to how I play with his hair in the early morning hours. I can’t hide it forever.

There’s a knock on the front door.

Both of us get dressed in a hurry.

“Fuck, do you think they’re here already?” I ask, glancing at the clock. Aleksandr’s family is usually never early.

Aleksandr moves toward the door. I catch him pulling his gun out of his holster.

“Why does violence have to be your first response to everything?” I ask.

“Grab the bag, Julie,” he instructs. “It’s not my family. They messaged me half an hour ago telling me they were chasing a lead and might be late. There’s a bulletproof vest in the closet. Please wear it.”

I take a deep breath.

I was trained to get through challenging situations. I was trained to survive and be efficient. But the very thought of something happening to Aleksandr puts me on edge.

I rush into the bedroom and come back with a duffel bag packed in advance. I retrieve my own handgun.

“Please don’t shoot first and ask questions later,” I say.

“Check the kitchen curtains discreetly,” he instructs. “There could be more than one of them.”

I gently lift the curtain. All I see are rolling hills and peaceful scenery for miles. I can hear birds chirping and see the sun’s soft glow as it prepares to descend.

“All clear,” I tell him, returning to the living room.

He opens the front door. I brace myself. My palms turn sweaty as I hold the gun.

“What the *fuck* is going on here?” A woman pushes past Aleksandr and storms into the cabin.

“*Hazel*,” I say, putting my gun away and running toward her.

Aleksandr slips out the door and checks the perimeter, making sure that my eldest sister came alone. I catch a glimpse of a mint-green Vespa in the corner. It’s the scooter we used when the three of us used to live in Silver Falls.

I hug Hazel, squeezing her tight. She hesitates for a moment, but then she squeezes me back.

“Julie, you have a lot of explaining to do,” she says.

I wipe the tears from my cheeks. “How did you find me?”

“You came to the Blackwood Estate a few weeks ago, didn’t you?” she asks.

“How’d you know?” I ask.

“I thought I saw your silhouette through Leo’s office window,” she says. “I didn’t think much of it, but then I read the article in the newspaper about your escape. Leo and Kylie were the only ones in the house, but Leo didn’t give me anything.”

“Kylie cracked?” I guess.

“She’s a good liar,” Hazel says. “But she gave me this smug little smile when she thought I wasn’t looking. I thought you were just passing by Silver Falls, but I heard a rumor today about someone from Chicago visiting the farmers’ market. It couldn’t have been my husband’s men, so that’s how I knew you were still here.”

“How’d you find this cabin?” I ask her. “I didn’t think you knew about it.”

“There wasn’t a single thing that happened in our old cottage that I didn’t know about,” Hazel says. “I always knew where you were and who you were with.”

Aleksandr comes to stand by my side.

“Nice to meet you, Hazel,” he says, holding out his hand.

My sister’s eyes are burning embers, the gold in them blazing as she takes his hand. Instead of shaking it, she tugs on his hand, pulling him closer and making him lean down to her height.

“If you so much as make a single teardrop fall from Julie’s eyes, it will be the end of you,” she hisses. “Do you understand?”

He nods solemnly.

I would be concerned, but I kind of knew this would happen. Hazel has always been protective of Belle and me. She was only a few years older than us, but she raised us like a parent.

It wasn't until I was older that I realized how much she sacrificed to make us happy.

She's still staring daggers at Aleksandr. He looks like a schoolboy who's been called to the principal's office.

"And you," Hazel says, turning back to me. The fire in her eyes turns down a notch, but it's still simmering. "I need to have a word with you in private."

Aleksandr is about to leave the cabin, but Hazel stops him.

"Stay here," she tells him. "We're going outside."

"Yes, ma'am," he says, retreating into the kitchen and emerging with a brownie and a glass of lemonade. I kind of love that he's treating my sister with respect. I wouldn't have been able to stand it if he had been rude to her.

She takes it from him, but she eyes everything suspiciously.

"It's not poisoned," I assure her.

I glance over at Aleksandr and place a hand over his chest. Like I guessed, his heart is racing out of control. He thinks that my sister is here to take me away.

"It's okay," I tell him. "We'll just be talking."

Hazel and I step outside into the evening. It's the golden hour. Everything is sun-kissed and beautiful.

"What are you doing here, Julie?" she asks. "Why didn't you come to us?"

I see a black figure moving on the hill. It's one of Aleksandr's men. They're guarding the mountain, watching for any potential threats.

"I didn't want to involve you," I say.

“Don’t lie to me,” she says. “You’re hiding something. If you were truly in trouble, you would have come home to your family. Instead, you’re shacking up with a man you barely know and letting him rail you against the wall.”

I open my mouth to speak, but I can’t form any words.

“I knocked after it was over,” my sister says, looking away.

She heard the entire thing. Mortification makes my cheeks burn red. I really hope she didn’t catch the filthy words he said while we were at it. We tend to get a little carried away sometimes.

“I just want the truth, Julie,” she says. “Is that too much to ask for?”

“I *am* telling the truth,” I say.

She looks into my eyes. “You’re still lying. I don’t understand why.”

“Hazel, I know this whole situation has been frustrating for everyone involved, but Aleksandr and his brothers are helping me out,” I say.

“That’s just the thing,” she says. “You chose them over your own family. Why would you do that, Julie? You barely know this guy.”

“He’s not just any stranger,” I say. “He means a lot to me.”

“Is that why you’re lying to him too?” she asks, taking an angry bite of the brownie.

I look out at the green hills and the flowing river. I can’t even remember what it feels like not to have this responsibility on my shoulders.

“I’m not lying to him,” I say.

“You’re not being honest with him either,” she says. “Does he know about Derek?”

A lump grows in my throat when I hear his name being said out loud. Derek usually only lives in my mind. But Hazel knew my best friend too.

“He knows,” I whisper. “And Aleksandr is good to me. Why can’t I have one good thing in my life without feeling bad about it?”

“Because the man you’re fooling around with is no ordinary man,” she says. “In case you’ve forgotten, let me remind you that Aleksandr is part of the fucking Bratva. And you’re still an FBI agent and a fugitive. Not to mention that this will *not* look good on your case. Do you want me to go on?”

“I *know*.” I run my fingers through my hair.

“Maybe you don’t know Aleksandr as well as you think you do,” Hazel says, stepping closer. “Did you know they’re one of the only criminal organizations directly working alongside the FBI?”

I take a deep breath. Aleksandr insinuated something of that sort, but hearing Hazel talk about it is something else altogether.

Maybe this is why I didn’t want to see my sisters. Not just because I didn’t want to involve them, but because doing so would mean I would get slapped by reality.

Delusion is so much more comforting.

“You already knew this information,” Hazel says, cocking her head.

“He might have mentioned it,” I say.

“Julie, you can’t mess around with a man like him,” she says. “If he finds out that you don’t love him, it’s only a matter of time before you see his dark side.”

I glance back at the cabin. He’s watching us like a hawk. And he’s not even trying to hide it.

“Who said that I didn’t love him, Hazel?” I ask.

A deluge of emotions floods my heart, resting there because they have nowhere else to go. It’s hard to admit this to myself, but I do love him. The way I feel about him is pure and true. The world hasn’t yet corrupted it, and I want it to stay that way.

“You love him?” Hazel asks, blinking.

“I didn’t plan for it to happen like this,” I say, hanging my head.

“Oh my God. *Julie*,” Hazel says.

I look up to find her eyes glimmering with unshed tears.

She was there. She was there when I cried every night after Derek left. God knows she was dealing with her own shit back then, but she still sat at the dinner table until I finished eating every night.

And because she was there, she knows why this is such a big deal for me.

“You’re really over Derek?” she asks.

“A heart can love more than one person, Hazel,” I say slowly. “All I know is that this is stronger and more potent than anything I ever felt. I trust Aleksandr.”

Against all odds, the two of us have bonded.

There’s a kinship between us that’s as natural as the moon revolving around the earth. Our bodies remember each other in ways I can’t explain with words.

Even though the way it started wasn’t ideal, I know that no matter where I go and what I do, I’ll always remain bonded to Aleksandr.

“Join us for dinner, Hazel,” I say. “We have a lot more of those brownies. And broccoli.”

“You’re not going to change your mind?” she asks.

I take an unsteady breath before I shake my head. I don’t know why, but I feel like I’m letting my sister down. My eyes turn glassy because this feels like a goodbye, and I don’t know when I’ll see Hazel again.

“No matter what, I’ll always love you,” Hazel says, melting when she sees my tears. She crushes me in a big hug.

I squeeze her back. “I love you too, Hazel. So much.”

“And did you actually bake these brownies?” she asks. “They’re delicious.”

“Farmers’ market,” I say.

“I should have known,” she says. “They would have been charred and unrecognizable if you made them.”

I shove her arm and narrow my eyes at her.

“Take that back,” I say.

“I won’t,” she says. “You’re the worst cook in history, and that’s just a fact.”

“I hate you,” I say, grinning from ear to ear.

I see movement behind me. Aleksandr is on the phone with someone, but his dark eyes are fixed on me. It elicits a pang deep inside my core. No matter how many times he claims me, I’m left wanting more.

“There’s something else I wanted to tell you,” I say. “Aleksandr said that he met a certain red-haired woman today.”

Hazel’s teasing smile drops instantly.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, he was acting all strange when he came back,” I say. “He said that she was all motherly and loving. Could it be the same red-haired woman you and Belle met?”

Hazel takes a deep breath. She looks like she’s suspended in time.

“Maybe,” she says. “But that’s odd.”

“Why is it odd?” I ask her.

“No reason,” Hazel says, finishing her lemonade. “I have to go. I promised Kylie I’d take her to the stables today.”

“She’s learning how to ride horses?” I ask.

Hazel smiles. “Yeah, you should see how cute she looks in her little riding boots.”

“She’s growing up so fast.” I sigh.

“I wish you’d visit more often, Julie,” Hazel says. “We miss having you around.”

“I know,” I say. “And I will, once this is all over.”

She hugs me again before walking to her Vespa. I follow her.

“I’ll come see you tomorrow,” she says. “We have a lot to catch up on. And I want to hear what Aleksandr has to say about the case.”

There’s a heaviness in my chest as I watch Hazel put on her helmet. I didn’t want to see my sisters. But now that I have, I don’t want her to go.

“Give all the kids kisses from me,” I say, taking a deep breath.

“I will.” She smiles at me, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

I know what she’s thinking.

For whatever reason, she thinks that I’m still hiding things from her. The scooter kicks up a cloud of dust behind her as she leaves. Rust-colored leaves rise and fall.

“Are you okay?” Aleksandr sneaks up from behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist.

I lean my head against his sturdy chest. Everything that’s been plaguing me releases from me like a helium balloon. He doesn’t even have to try. He can comfort me with a single touch.

“I miss her even more after seeing her,” I say.

“Soon,” he promises. “It will all be over soon.”

I turn around and wrap my arms around his middle. He’s such a good man. I’m aware he has another side to him, but all I know is that he’s good to me.

But even as he holds me, dread snakes around my heart like a vise.

It constricts.

I’m running out of time.

JULIE

*W*e're swimming under a waterfall.

The water is cool and refreshing against my skin. With Aleksandr next to me, I feel like there's not a single thing I need to be worried about. It feels like everything will sort itself out.

He presses a kiss to my lips.

Fire ignites on my skin.

His big shoulders ripple as he pulls me closer. My hands travel down his back, exploring his exquisite male form. He's all sinewy frame and soft skin. His thick length pushes against my belly, making every thought scatter from my mind.

"Are you going to call me Daddy again?" he whispers, squeezing my ass under the water surface.

"Only if you call me your little princess," I say, sucking in a breath as his cock grows even thicker against me.

Blood rushes faster through my veins as he kisses that spot underneath my earlobe.

My eyes close softly.

He kisses a trail of fire down my neck. I tilt my head to give him better access.

My eyes fly open when he nips that spot where my neck meets my shoulder. Only to see that we have company.

A man stands in the shadows. He's watching us from the dark. When he catches me staring back at him, he doesn't walk

away like I expect him to.

He steps forward.

Sunlight falls on his pale face.

Even in the light, he looks like he's made of midnight and stardust. I recognize him instantly.

"Derek?" I whisper.

He sneers at me. "You traitor."

Aleksandr pushes my panties aside and slides his fingers against my slick pussy. A moan escapes my lips.

"I thought you'd be more loyal," Derek says.

"I never meant to hurt anybody," I say. Tears spring to my eyes. They always come so easily. The wound over my heart keeps reopening, flooding me with unwanted emotions.

I try to get Aleksandr to stop, but he's not paying attention to me. Instead, he thrusts his fingers inside me, fucking me with his thick digits.

My core clenches. A sob forms in my lungs.

Derek turns to walk away.

All I know is that he'll never return if I let him leave now. It will be the last time I'll ever see him.

But there are so many things I need to say to him.

Alexandr curls his fingers inside me and starts fucking me harder.

I squeeze my eyes shut, letting the release infiltrate every one of my senses.

I open my eyes.

The waterfall fades away. With a sharp pang, I realize that Derek was never there.

It was only a dream.

We're in our bedroom. It's the early hours of the morning.

Aleksandr kisses me below my belly button. I look at him. Everything that was hurting hurts a little less.

This man is the sunshine that breaks through the darkest of clouds. He makes everything all right.

“Are you okay?” he asks, kissing the inside of my thigh now. “You were thrashing around in your sleep. It looked like you were dreaming.”

“We were by the waterfall,” I say absently, reaching for his soft hair.

“Oh yeah?” he asks, moving to my slit. He drags his tongue up my sex and sucks my clit into his mouth. I squirm as his big hands pin me down. “You were calling me Daddy in your sleep while rubbing your soft tits against me. And now, I’m greedy for something I’m not supposed to be touching in the first place.”

And just like that, we’re in our own world again.

He bites down on my clit, making sparks fly behind my closed eyelids.

“All you need to do now is keep these pretty thighs open for me and let Daddy take what’s his. I’ll reward you by filling you up with my hot come. I know you like it.”

He looks like a god between my thighs. The muscles of his back coil as he gets to work. His expert tongue hypnotizes me.

And when I can’t take it anymore, he flips me over on the bed and lifts my ass into the air.

His fingers thread into my hair.

“This is how I like you, little girl,” he growls. “Face down, ass up, all mine.”

I reach between my thighs, desperate for release. But he grabs my wrists and pins them above my head.

“*Princess,*” he growls. “What did I tell you about trying to make yourself come?”

“Good girls wait for their daddy’s permission,” I say.

“That’s right,” he says, pushing the tip of his cock against my opening and slapping my ass. “I taught you well.”

He spanks me harder, making my skin smart. I bite down on my lower lip as the sting reaches the deepest parts of me. He’s relentless, keeping my wrists bound as he abuses my flesh. When he’s satisfied, he grabs my throbbing ass and massages it with his rough palms.

I sigh.

This is exactly what I needed.

We’re the only two people who exist in this world.

There’s no past. There’s no future.

There’s just this one moment in time right here, forever made immortal in my memory.

“Pretty baby,” he says, massaging the insides of my thighs before pushing the tip of his cock inside me. “I love leaving my handprints on your ass cheeks. Now take my cock like a good little girl.”

He leans over my body, kissing the side of my neck. My stomach flutters.

The intensity of this moment with him replaces every aspect of my dream.

A part of me is nostalgic. It doesn’t want to let go. But I know that I have to. What’s waiting for me on the other side is far better than anything that’s long gone.

“You’re so unbelievably tight around my cock,” he growls, his teeth sinking into my neck. “It’s like you’re *trying* to make me nut inside that fertile little pussy.”

I turn my head to look at him.

Sweat trickles down his forehead as he focuses on shoving his cock inside me over and over again. His fingertips dig into my ass as he unleashes the full brutality of his body. His heavy balls slap against my flesh as he bottoms out inside me.

“*Fuck*, princess,” he says. “I don’t care who walks in on us now. I’m not leaving until I see my come dripping down your

creamy thighs.”

I moan against the soft pillow, bucking my hips against his, trying to meet his thrusts.

“*Daddy*,” I moan.

“That’s right,” he says. “I’m the only one you open these princess thighs for. I’m the only one who gets to fuck this bratty cocktease mouth. And I’m the only one who gets to come inside every perfect hole.”

In this moment, he’s less man and more animal.

I watch our reflection in the floor-length mirror beside our bed.

He’s so much bigger than I am. So much stronger.

His knees dig into the mattress as his hips snap with pure power. I look like a doll in his hands, one that he bought for his own pleasure.

“You’re squeezing me so tight, little girl,” he says, smacking my ass. “You drove me to madness. That’s why I keep coming back for more. That’s why I have to keep taking this sweet little pussy whenever we’re home alone, filling it up with as much cock as it can handle.”

His words become my undoing.

He bites down on my shoulder and groans against my skin. His release hits the deepest parts of me.

I become boneless as simmering-hot pleasure splashes into my veins, saturating every part of me. He grips my ass cheeks tighter, pulling them apart to see the way his come overflows down my thighs.

When I close my eyes, I see colors again.

Vibrant hues of turquoise and orange. Burgundy and forest green. Lilac and blush pink.

Aleksandr flips me around and presses a kiss on my forehead.

“What do you want for breakfast?” he asks.

I can't form any words.

Energy surges through me. Purpose buzzes through my fingertips.

"I was thinking scrambled eggs and fruit," he says. "We also have some of that good cheese left."

"Alexandr?" I say.

"Yeah, baby?"

"I think...I think I'm ready to paint again," I confess.

He grins like he's been waiting for this moment.

A rush of affection hits me straight in my gut. I never planned for this to happen, but I know I'm heading toward a place of no return.

"I knew you'd say that," he says, pressing another kiss to my neck before rolling off me.

I watch his glorious naked form as he walks to the closet and pulls out a large tote bag. I recognize the shape of a canvas peeking through. There's the telltale crinkle of new supplies.

I can smell it in the air.

The anticipation before something is brought to life.

"Get dressed," he says. "I know just the place."

"Just the place for what?" I ask.

"For you to paint," he says. "I know you like the outdoors."

"You think you know Silver Falls better than me?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"Maybe," he says, reaching for my hand and kissing the inside of my wrist. "I'll pack some sandwiches for the road."

A few minutes later, we're stepping out of the cabin. It's a bright day. There's a chill in the air, but next to Aleksandr, all I feel is heat.

Instead of taking the main road, he goes into the forest.

"Is it somewhere we've been to before?" I ask him.

“Nope,” he says.

“Is it the ribbon waterfall?” I ask him.

“Nope.”

“The river?”

“Nope.”

“The caves?”

“Patience isn’t exactly your strongest virtue, is it?” he replies.

“*Tell me,*” I say, trying to pinch his arm. But he’s so jacked that his body is all hard muscle.

“Are the paints and brushes to your liking?” he asks, diverting my attention.

“I love everything,” I say. “When did you get them?”

“A long time ago,” he says. “I had a feeling that my cock might reignite long-forgotten passions in you.”

“You have a lot of faith in your bedroom skills,” I say, biting the inside of my cheek.

“Is that a challenge?” he asks. “Because I can stop the car and make you come in the next thirty seconds.”

My cheeks warm under his focused gaze.

I believe him.

“Stop blushing like that, Julie,” he growls. “It makes me want to do bad things to you.”

I force myself to breathe as molten lava pools between my thighs.

One of his hands remains on the steering wheel. The other traces patterns on my bare thighs. It’s illegal for a man to look so attractive while doing something as mundane as driving a car.

He stops the car in the middle of the forest.

“Is this the place?” I ask.

I don't recognize this particular area.

"Yep," he says, taking the tote bag from me. "Come on, *tigrenok*."

My heart beats a little harder as panic flares inside me. I haven't painted in more than a decade. I don't know if I still have it in me.

"Don't overthink it, my anxious bird," he says, squeezing my thigh. "Okay?"

His dark eyes soothe my building agitation.

"Okay," I whisper.

He walks around the car, his eyes stalking me like a predator. He opens the passenger door and unbuckles my seat belt. And then he scoops me into his arms before setting me on my feet.

I catch a glimpse of the gun tucked inside his jacket. I know he has one strapped to his calf as well. And another in his shoulder holster.

He's a walking armory, and I...adore him.

I adore the little things he does.

Like the way he holds my hand when we're walking. The way he pushes the branches out of the way for me. The way he vigilantly scans every area, even when we're in the middle of nowhere.

Dry leaves crunch beneath my feet as I walk. Small animals scurry back to their hiding places. Birds chirp their little hearts out, and the insects join for the chorus.

The vegetation here is so thick that I can't see more than a few feet in front of me. Everything is a shade of orange, gold, and brown. The sky above is an azure blue.

Every time I think I've seen everything there is to see in Silver Falls, I come across a place like this.

The people in town believe that Silver Falls picks you, not the other way around. Hidden places reveal themselves when the time is right.

My hometown has somehow managed to stay frozen in time. While the rest of the world moved forward at a rapid pace, Silver Falls is a haven where things always remain the same, for better or for worse.

The trees get sparser, leading to a circular clearing in the forest.

It's absolutely breathtaking.

Golden sunlight falls on my skin as I walk on a soft carpet of dew-kissed grass.

Dark shapes move in my peripheral vision, drawing my attention. It's a herd of deer. They lift their heads in unison before bounding off into the belly of the forest.

"It's like something out of a dream," I say.

"I knew you'd appreciate it," Aleksandr replies.

He helps me set up my canvas.

"Do your thing, *tigrenok*," he says, winking at me before walking away.

I pull my hair into a bun and look at the blank canvas.

Even when everything around me is a mess, I know I can count on Aleksandr. He makes me feel centered, like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

I run my fingers through the soft bristles of the paintbrush.

Usually, I look outside for inspiration. I paint things like sunsets and bird's nests.

But today, everything I need is within me.

Everything I've been so desperately searching for has been inside me all along.

I get to work.

I lose myself in the painting as it unfolds in front of me.

It's nearly twilight by the time I finish.

I look up from the canvas, feeling unfocused as I take in the rest of the world. Aleksandr is still there, waiting for me to

finish. He hasn't seen the painting yet.

"Are you done?" he asks.

A flush rises up my cheeks. "Yeah."

He closes the distance between us, and it does crazy things to my heart. "You're blushing. Did you paint something naughty, Julie?"

He stops on the other side of the canvas, waiting for my permission.

I nod and glance down at my feet.

He walks around the canvas, seeing it in the fading light of the evening.

"It's not what I usually make," I say.

Aleksandr is quiet as he studies it.

I painted us.

We're tangled in each other's embrace as colors burst from between us, tendrils reaching toward the edges of the canvas.

"It's...extraordinary," he says. "I want to buy it."

"It's not up for sale," I say, toying with him. I made this for him. I want him to have it as a gift.

"In my experience, everything has a price," he says, reaching for a curl and twirling it around his finger. He doesn't try to tuck it away. Instead, he lets it fall around my face.

He doesn't try to change a thing about me.

"Everything has a price, huh?" I ask, licking my lips.

He tracks the movement of my tongue. "Everything."

I glance back at the painting. Being with Aleksandr, both the little and the big moments, have come to mean so much more than what I was prepared for. I wouldn't put a price on any of it.

"Ten million dollars," I joke, smirking up at him.

He doesn't miss a beat. "You have yourself a deal."

My smile drops.

“I was joking,” I say.

“I wasn’t.” He cups my face with his large hand.

Electricity replaces the blood in my veins. He brushes my bottom lip with his thumb, making my eyes flutter shut. My body ceases to feel gravity as his lips press against mine.

Heat explodes inside me.

But it’s different from all the times before.

So much emotion bursts from the seams. Our bodies speak it, even if our mouths don’t. This connection between us feels more ancient than the stars in the sky.

It feels like it’ll last forever.

But I know it won’t.

That’s why I wanted to immortalize it in the painting.

JULIE

*I*t's the quiet before the storm.

Something dark and dangerous brews just under the surface, but Alexandr and I are saturated in sunshine.

Pure bliss floods my veins, fooling me into thinking it will always be this way.

And I let myself believe it because I've fallen in love with the possibility of what could be.

It's just him and me in the cabin for the next couple of days.

We make love everywhere—in the shower, on the floor, against the wall. He fucks me until I can feel his imprint on my soul. He brings me breakfast in the morning. We talk for hours.

It's hard not to fall for a man like him.

I become entangled in his dark web, and I know there won't be any escape.

It feels like something inevitable.

Like something I was made to do.

Tonight is just like any other night. But it's different in all the ways that matter.

Moonlight filters in through the curtains. Aleksandr is fast asleep—his breathing slow and steady. I'm wide awake.

There's something that needs to be done.

And it calls to me.

I slip out of the bed and turn around to look at him. I wish we could stay like this forever. But we have too many secrets between us.

I close the bedroom door behind me and pad over to the fireplace.

Three bricks to the right, twelve bricks up. I wiggle the loose brick when I reach it. It comes off, revealing the alcove underneath. I reach into the alcove. My fingers close around the cold metal of the key. I let it dig into the meat of my palm.

My heart thrashes against my rib cage.

I listen for the noise of creaking floorboards or approaching footsteps.

There's nothing but the roar of the wind outside.

I take a deep breath and walk toward that one locked room. I told him that it had always been locked, but that was a lie. I just wanted to keep it a secret.

My secret.

I push the key into the lock and twist. It opens with a soft click.

I glance behind me before pushing the door open all the way.

Dust and cobwebs cling to every surface. The air in this room feels a couple of degrees colder than the rest of the cabin.

I take in the familiar space.

A large white sheet covers the entire right side of the room. I know that behind it are shelves filled with color-coded paint tubes and other mediums. The easels are pushed to one corner, sitting unused along with the plastic sheeting.

To the left is a large window. It's covered by white curtains, hiding the sweeping view of the mountains.

I head toward the window and throw the curtains open.

A cloud of dust enters my nostrils, throwing me into a fit of sneezing. Every muscle in my body locks up as I wait for Aleksandr to walk into the room. It'll be any minute now.

Seconds tick by, but there's nothing.

I exhale slowly and glance at the open night sky—silver moonlight falling on scattered white clouds. I say a prayer for courage before turning away from the window.

The glint of a full-length mirror catches my attention. My own reflection stares back at me.

I'm covered in love bites and bruises—a whole trail of them from my neck to my breasts. It feels wrong to wear them in this room.

This is where Derek and I existed.

This is where I lost myself in another person.

“I'm risking it all for you,” I whisper into the empty room. “But it doesn't feel right.”

I thought that coming here would remind me of why I'm doing this.

When I first came to this cabin, Derek still haunted my mind. Every single thing in Silver Falls reminded me of him. Even the walls of this cabin seemed to be saturated with laughter from a long time ago.

But now, old memories have been replaced by new ones.

All I can hear now is the sound of my giggles when Aleksandr complains about me eating all of his purple chocolates. All I can smell is the aroma of the fluffy Russian pancakes we have for breakfast. All I can feel is Alexander cupping my cheek like I'm the most precious thing in the world.

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I TAKE Aleksandr's car and drive into town. I need to make a phone call, and it's not one I can make from my cell phone. Aleksandr's family bugged that thing on my very first day here.

I stop in front of a payphone booth.

I turn the engine off and get out of the car before I can talk myself out of this.

I dial the number I memorized by heart.

The phone rings in my ear. My hands are clammy as I wait for her to pick up.

"Hello?"

"Agent Sharpe, it's me. Julie."

"What's wrong?" she asks immediately.

"Nothing's wrong. I just wanted to talk to you."

Jessica Sharpe is my handler. I've been with her since I started working in the FBI.

"Are you in danger?" she asks.

"No, but—"

"Is there an emergency?" she asks.

"No." I sigh.

"You're not supposed to contact me unless there's an emergency," she says. There's no warmth in her voice anymore.

"I know that. It's just...I don't want to do this anymore," I say. "I don't know if I can."

"Does he suspect that you're undercover?" she asks.

I clutch the phone tighter. "No. He doesn't. But I can't do this anymore."

"It's too late for you to have second thoughts, Agent Carpenter," she says. "And need I remind you, this was all your idea to begin with. Get the information you need and get out. It's as simple as that."

“I think I may have feelings for the target,” I say.

She’s quiet for a moment.

“Do you think or do you know?” she asks finally.

“I’m in love with him. And—” I trail off when I see a dark figure approaching the phone booth. The person is walking leisurely, their gait unhurried and headed straight toward me.

“And what?” Agent Sharpe asks.

“I’ll have to call you back later,” I say. “Please delete all traces of this conversation from your phone.”

I hang up and stare at the figure. A slice of moonlight falls through parted clouds—revealing one dark eye.

*Aleksandr.*



JULIE

## 1 YEAR AGO

*M*y fingers tremble as I rake my hands through my hair. I might have had one too many cups of coffee today.

I'm sitting on the bedroom floor with papers scattered around me. My day job is stressful enough, but the frustration only compounds when I come home and try to work on my personal mission—finding justice for my best friend's murder.

The FBI isn't the least bit concerned about the New York mafia.

I used to think that the world was black and white.

But after joining the Bureau, I realized there's a whole lot of gray too.

Derek, my best friend and the first man I loved, came to New York City with nothing but a suitcase and a dream.

He made one mistake.

One.

And his life was forever altered.

There were no witnesses to the crime. There was no dead body found. And even if someone saw or heard something, they wouldn't dare speak out.

After the whole mafia debacle in the '80s, crime organizations found ways to adapt to the new world. They regrouped, and they came back stronger than ever.

Now, they are legitimate businessmen by day and criminals by night. They still do everything they used to but are just more careful about it.

They're wolves in sheep's clothing, and I want to show the world who these families truly are.

I want to expose them.

There's a knock on my bedroom door.

My best friend, Chloe, pops her head in. "*Hi.*"

Her smile is bright, and her blue eyes sparkle. She has that golden retriever energy that instantly makes me feel better. She reminds me of the girl I used to be.

"Hey, how was your day?" I ask.

Chloe works as an investigative journalist for one of the biggest media publications in the country.

"Same old, same old," she says, slipping into my room.

She's tall, and her sky-high heels accentuate her height even more. Her makeup is perfectly in place even though it's the end of the day.

"I bet yours was way more interesting," she says. "Want to talk about it?"

"Nice try," I say, collecting the papers into a neat pile.

She crosses the room in four long strides and peers over my shoulder.

"Who's that cutie?" she asks.

I realize I'm holding a photo of Derek. It feels like he's looking right at me. For a second, I can't breathe.

"I'm sorry," Chloe says. "I didn't mean to pry."

I don't know what comes over me, but the flood of sudden pain inside me forces me to speak. "This is Derek. He was my best friend."

I end up telling her the entire story.

The words rush out of me like a swarm of bees. When I'm done speaking, it feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

"And you can't do anything about it even though you're an FBI agent?" Chloe asks.

"Not until another decade, at least," I say. "Currently, I'm still an underling. I don't get to pick my cases."

"What about the police reports you filed?" she asks.

"It's become a cold case now because of the lack of evidence," I say.

Chloe watches me, her lips pursed into a flat line as she thinks.

"This is important to you, isn't it?" she asks finally.

"It's the whole reason I got into law enforcement," I say. "But sometimes, it just feels like trying to find a needle in the haystack."

"But there *is* a needle in the haystack," she says. "Right?"

Her blue eyes hold a sparkle of mischief. I know this look. It's the same look she gets when she's about to convince me to go clubbing with her.

"You know what this means," she says.

I shake my head. "Nope. Whatever you're thinking, I don't like it."

"But you haven't even heard what I have to say," she protests.

"I don't have to hear it," I say. "You have that demonic look in your eyes. It can't be any good."

"Aleksandr," she says.

Hearing that name out loud makes my heart skip a beat. My skin tingles, and a rush of endorphins flood my brain.

I never told Chloe about Derek, but I told her all about the Russian fugitive I met a year ago.

"What about Aleksandr?" I ask.



“You should ask him for help,” she says.

“He’s dangerous,” I reply, instantly shutting down that idea.

“Don’t give me that bullshit. You work with criminals every day. The only difference with Aleksandr is you’re scared of catching feelings.”

My blood hums through my veins, filling me with a strange excitement as I think about meeting Aleksandr again.

The man is different from anyone else I’ve ever known.

But I stayed away from him because I didn’t want to make the same mistake twice. I didn’t want to get close to someone I could never be with.

“That’s not true,” I say. “I’m not scared of catching anything.”

“Please, it’s written all over your face,” Chloe says. “You know what you need to do, Jules.”

“It’s not that simple,” I say, shaking my head.

“If you’re waiting for a perfect time, there will never be one,” she says.

I realize she’s...right.

An idea formulates in my mind. I know I can make this work if I really want to. I’m trying to crack down on the New York mafia from the outside, but maybe I should look at it differently.

Maybe I should try looking at it from the *inside*.



# ALEKSANDR

She's trembling from head to toe.  
As she should be.

"What are you doing here, *tigrenok*?" I call out.

Instead of responding, she reaches for something in her jacket. A gun.

Seeing the glint of silver hurts more than the betrayal itself. My brothers were right all along.

She's a goddamn traitor.

"Open the door, Rapunzel," I say, stopping in front of the payphone booth.

She studies my face. She sees the fury etched into my features. She knows I heard every word.

Crocodile tears cascade down her face. Her cheeks turn the prettiest shade of pink.

"It's not what it looks like," she says, shaking her head.

"It's exactly what it looks like," I correct.

"How did you—" Her sentence is broken off by a sob.

"My brothers tried to warn me, but I didn't believe them," I say. "They didn't just bug your cell phone, they bugged the entire telephone network in this town. We had our software set up to detect your voice right away, so when you called your handler, every word was recorded."

She falls to the floor, burying her face between her knees.

And despite everything that happened, despite everything she did, my first instinct is to comfort her.

“Open the door, Julie,” I say. I can easily kick it down, but I don’t want her to get hurt.

She shakes her head. Her shoulders heave as she sobs.

*Traitor.*

There’s nothing I despise more than a traitor.

I retrieve my diamond blade cutter and draw a circle over the glass. It gives way effortlessly. I reach through the hole and open the door from the inside.

She yelps and backs away from me, curling into a tighter ball. I’ve never seen her like this.

She’s scared.

She knows my reputation better than anyone.

I’m known to be *ruthless* when it comes to those who betray me.

“Pull yourself together,” I say. “If there’s one thing I hate more than a liar, it’s a coward.”

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Alexandr. I’m so sorry. It was never supposed to be like this. I never meant to hurt you.”

“Stand up, Julie.” My voice is unaffected. Serene. “You look like a fool right now.”

She blinks and looks up at me through wet eyelashes. Tears still flow down her face, but instead of tugging at my heartstrings like they did only a moment ago, I find it repulsive now.

“Let me explain,” she begs.

I sigh, reaching into my pocket for the syringe I brought with me. “I was hoping it wouldn’t have to come to this.”

Her eyes widen when she sees the needle. She crawls toward me and hugs my legs, trying to seek comfort in me even though I’m about to make her wish she never met me.

“Please don’t,” she says. “Please don’t drug me.”

“You should have thought of the consequences before you tried to make a fool of me,” I say.

She’s crying so hard that my words are barely audible. My shattered heart wants to hear what she has to say. But then I remember that this is all a game to her.

For all I know, she’s still acting.

“Remember that you brought this on yourself,” I say, reaching down and gripping her jaw in my hands. “I was ready to give you the world. But *you*? You were just sharpening your knife the whole time, looking for the perfect moment to stab me in the back.”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “Aleksandr, you mean so much more—”

I stick the needle into her neck.

Traitors don’t deserve sympathy or second chances.



# JULIE

*I*t's a beautiful Parisian day.

There's a skip in my step as I walk. I don't remember a time when I was happier.

Hazel used to tell me about how our mother was from Paris. She was a prima ballerina at the Paris Opera Ballet. Ballet was her entire life.

I never knew my mother, but I always thought coming to her city would make me feel closer to her.

I glance behind me. The Eiffel Tower stands tall among puffy marshmallow clouds.

A woman's shoulder brushes against mine as she passes by me. She's wearing a silk scarf and dark sunglasses. I can feel her glare before she turns away, leaving a cloud of expensive-smelling perfume in her wake.

I have the whole day ahead of me, but there's only one thing I have planned.

The Louvre.

I'll finally see the work of some of the greatest artists of all time. I'll be reliving history through their eyes.

My stomach growls, interrupting my musings. I should probably get something to eat first.

I see a group of teenagers gathered by the sidewalk around a café's outdoor table. They have their heads pressed together like they're discussing something juicy.

I sit at one of the empty tables and peruse the menu even though I know exactly what I want—a buttery chocolate croissant and a coffee.

As soon as I put the menu down, the sky darkens.

All conversation comes to a halt.

A strong wind blows, whipping my hair across my face. I hear whispers in the wind, words thrown all over the place. I try to catch some of these words, but they're all jumbled.

A server comes to my table.

“Are you ready to order, *mademoiselle*?” he asks. There’s something about his toothy grin that I don’t trust.

People in the café stand up and leave. The roads that were busy only moments ago are empty now. Not a pedestrian is in sight.

Thunder cracks overhead. A smatter of raindrops falls on the ground.

“I should probably sit inside first,” I say, standing.

The server blocks my path. “The indoor seating is not available, I’m afraid.”

I glance over his shoulder. I could have sworn that it was empty just a moment ago. But it’s bustling with people now.

“*D’accord*,” I say, distracted as I sit down and place my order.

My food arrives in a few seconds. There’s a chill in the air now that makes my bones rattle. Lightning parts the sky in half, making me jump in my seat.

“*Merci*,” I say, focusing on the giant croissant. It looks like it’s fresh out of the oven, and it smells heavenly.

“*Bon appétit*,” the server says. But he doesn’t leave. He just stands there, giving me that unnatural smile again.

I can’t put my finger on what it is, but something about this situation feels off.

It’s probably all in my head.



I break off a piece of the croissant. Warm chocolate drips down my thumb, making me smile. I'm about to take a bite when a kid runs up to me.

"Auntie Julie, Auntie Julie," she says, jumping into my lap.

"Kylie?" I say. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to Paris for you," she says, kissing my cheek. "Aren't you happy to see me?"

"Of course I'm happy, sweetheart," I say, grinning at her.

But some piece of information wiggles around at the back of my mind. Something's not right.

A sudden gust of wind tugs at the umbrella over our table. I reach for it, but it rips away and topples to the ground before I can catch it.

Kylie giggles. "Funny ella."

She can't say the word "umbrella," so she shortens it to "ella."

"We should probably go somewhere else, Kylie. It looks like it's about to rain," I say, standing up to retrieve the broken umbrella.

The sky groans once more before giant raindrops patter to the ground. I frown, thinking about my uneaten croissant getting all wet and soggy. There's also my precious little niece. She could catch a cold.

I turn around to see a man in a black hoodie standing behind Kylie. She grins up at him, but she doesn't see the gun dangling from his right hand.

"Hello, Rapunzel," he says, throwing his hoodie back.

I know this man.

My body buzzes with familiarity as he stands in front of me. And every single thing I've been trying not to think about comes rushing back.

My coffee cup overflows as the rainwater mixes with the coffee. The white tablecloth is now stained brown. Ruined.

“Aleksandr,” I say, my voice breathless.

He grits his teeth. “Drop the act.”

The barrel of his gun presses against the back of Kylie’s head. Kylie’s only a kid, but she feels the tension in the air. I want to believe that Aleksandr wouldn’t hurt a child, but I don’t want to take any chances.

“What do you want?” I ask him.

“Start from the beginning,” he says.

I take a deep breath, but it’s getting harder to breathe. The world darkens. Paris fades away, but I can still see Aleksandr. He’s glowing like the moon in the middle of the night.

“I went to prison knowing you’d come to my rescue,” I whisper. “I knew there wasn’t a place in the world you wouldn’t go to hunt me down. But...this was not how I intended to do it, believe me.”

“Explain,” he says.

“We learned that there was a mole in the FBI working with crime organizations. A couple of us were trying to find out who the traitor was. In my research, I came across a certain Bratva with exponential growth in the past few months—yours. I had no choice but to go undercover.”

“But that wasn’t your only motive, was it?”

“No,” I say. “I wanted to hit two birds with one stone. At the time, I was also seeking justice for Derek’s murder. I thought being with you would help me dig up dirt on the people responsible for killing him.”

He shakes his head in disappointment.

He’s so bright that it feels like I’m looking directly at the sun.

“I should have known it was too good to be true,” he says.

Kylie is starting to cry now.

“Let her go, please,” I say. “She has nothing to do with this.”

He doesn't pull the gun away. Her wails pierce my heart. I can feel her pain as my own.

“What about the charges against you?” he asks.

“It was made to look like a real crime,” I say, keeping my gaze on Kylie because I'm too ashamed to look at Aleksandr. “They knew that you would only trust me implicitly if I let *you* come to *me*. Only my handler knew that I was going to prison undercover. We kept everyone else in the dark as a precaution.”

“So basically, the entire thing was a setup,” he says.

I nod. “The news of my crime was leaked to the media just so you'd hear about it. Just so you'd come find me.”

My heart squeezes in my chest.

I don't know why I did it.

I knew it'd break him, but I did it anyway. I thought I was doing the right thing, even if it meant hurting the one man who cared about me.

I was in a dark place then. I thought that finding the FBI mole and avenging Derek's death would bring me some semblance of peace.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

“I don't expect you to forgive me,” I whisper.

“You must have been laughing the whole time,” he says.

“It wasn't supposed to be like this,” I say. Tears streak down my face now. I struggle to speak over the lump in my throat. “Initially, I was going to just ask you for some information about the New York mafia. But then I heard about the FBI mole, and it became my duty to do whatever it took to find the corrupt agent.”

“I was ready to give you the entire world,” he says, clenching his jaw. “But you knew that, didn't you?”

There's a film of tears in his eyes, and it becomes my undoing. I can see every piece of his broken heart in his dark eyes, and it guts me.

It twists my insides and makes me want to throw up.

The reality of what I've done settles in. I hate it. I want to claw this feeling out of my body. I don't want to suffer the heaviness of this guilt.

"I forgot," I say. "In the year we were apart, I forgot just how much you meant to me. I forgot how much I cared about you. I made a mistake, Aleksandr. I'm sorry."

"You're only sorry that you got caught," he says.

I shake my head.

More tears come, but I know no amount of tears can absolve me of my guilt.

It was never my intention to hurt him.

He would lose his FBI contact, but his businesses would survive just fine. His family wouldn't get into trouble for any of it. That was the deal I made with my handler.

But the second I saw his face in prison, I knew I screwed up.

Yet by then, it was already too late.

"You heard my conversation on the phone, Aleksandr," I say. "I love—"

"*No.*" The word shoots out like a whip. "There was a time when I used to dream of this moment. I dreamed of the day you would finally come around and call yourself mine. But now, the very sight of you makes bile rise up my throat. You haven't met the Bratva in me yet, Julie. But trust me, you *will.*"

The wind whispers to him.

He pauses to listen to it.

And in this moment, I feel like the whole world is against me. And it's all my fault.

Aleksandr tugs at Kylie's hair, exposing her throat. His gun is gone, but a knife replaces it. He places the sharp edge over the child's neck.

"*Stop,*" I scream.

I try to lunge toward them, but I find that my whole body is paralyzed. I can't move a single muscle below my neck.

Aleksandr watches me and then speaks to the wind. "Adjust her dosage."

My neck stings. I glance down to find a needle sinking into my neck. I try to grab it, but my arms are still frozen. The syringe disappears into thin air.

"Aleksandr?" I ask. "What's happening?"

"You don't get to ask me any more questions, *tigrenok.*" He spits the nickname like it's an insult. "Tell me about how you fooled us on the polygraph test."

It takes a few seconds for me to compose myself.

"The polygraph isn't reliable," I say finally. "I had training on breath work. I learned how to lie without any physiological changes occurring inside my body."

"So you're a professional liar," he says. "I have to admit, your list of talents is pretty impressive."

"Aleksandr, I..." The words are stuck in my throat. *I love you.*

I never meant for it to happen, but it happened anyway.

He healed and protected me even though I didn't deserve any of it. His darkness was a beacon every time I was lost. It doesn't get more pure than this.

But I ruined it all.

"Our relationship wasn't a lie," I say.

"Sure," he says. "It was only built on top of a mountain of them."

"I never wanted to hurt you."

“You used me, Julie. You can try to sugarcoat it all you want, but that’s all it is at the end of the day.”

The hand holding a knife to my niece’s neck shakes. I want to scream at him to be careful with the knife.

Rain pours down between us.

The wind is howling now, screaming at him to do something. I feel something cold against my neck. I glance down to find blood trickling down my breasts.

“You disgust me,” Aleksandr says.

He puts the knife away. Relief makes me bowl over. But the menace in his eyes doesn’t soften. He grabs Kylie’s arm and takes her with him.

“Give her back,” I scream after him. “She’s innocent.”

But he walks away, leaving me alone in the middle of a gray Paris.



# ALEKSANDR

She's stuck in my mind like a tattoo that refuses to fade.

Every single moment I spent with her plays in my head like a movie that never ends.

It's been nearly twenty-four hours since I learned of Julie's betrayal.

I turn the knife over in my hand. I was holding it against her skin just a moment ago. I pulled away the second I accidentally drew blood. She was screaming at me to save Kylie, her niece.

The truth serum is a powerful drug.

It brings forth hallucinations that often involve the person's worst fear. In Julie's case, it's that her undercover work will hurt her family. There's not a thing she wouldn't do to protect those she loves.

I was an idiot.

I thought I could be one of those important people in her life. But to her, I was just someone convenient.

Andrei and I step out of the cellar. The door closes behind us, muting Julie's whimpers.

"Don't beat yourself up over it," Andrei says, slapping my shoulder.

"Are you glad it happened?" I ask, turning to face him.

"What are you talking about?" he asks.



“You warned me about her,” I say. “But I didn’t listen to you. You must be so happy that you were right all along.”

“You’re lashing out,” he says, studying my face.

I glance down at my clenched fists. He knows me too well. I want a fight. I want someone to rage against because I can’t bring myself to rage against her.

“You’ll have to kill her,” Andrei says. “Don’t delay the inevitable.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” I hiss.

“You should have done it while she was still high,” he says.

He’s right.

She wouldn’t have felt any pain if I got it over with while she was doped up on the truth serum. It would have been an easy death. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

I glare at him, silently telling him to fuck off.

He sighs and shakes his head.

The second we step out of the basement together, the low thump of bass filters into my ears. I can feel it vibrating beneath my feet. We’re at Midnights—my New York City club. We spent the past two hours getting answers from Julie in the underground interrogation room.

I open the door to my private office and step inside. Andrei closes the door behind him.

I head straight toward the liquor cabinet, pouring myself a generous shot of Beluga vodka. But I leave the drink untouched on the shelf.

I need to feel the pain and rage tonight.

It’s what I deserve.

“Look, you don’t need to figure everything out right away,” Andrei says, squeezing my shoulder again. “We were there for you before, and we’ll be here for you now.”

“It feels like the end of an era,” I say.

It feels like the end of the world, really, but Andrei doesn't like it when I get too dramatic.

"She didn't deserve you," Andrei says. "And for what it's worth, she fooled all of us. We had dinner with that woman every night. *All* of us let our guards down, not just you."

"Yeah, but *I* was the one who brought her into our lives," I say.

"These kinds of things happen, Sasha," he says, showing me grace even though it's the last thing I expected from him. "And it's better that we learned the truth before it was too late. Who knows what else that crazy woman had planned?"

Ruslan pops his head into my office. "I had a feeling I'd find you here. I have a gift for you."

"A gift?" I ask, raising my eyebrows.

"Yes, come," he says.

Ruslan has never been a man of many words, so I don't wait for him to explain what the fuck he's talking about. Andrei and I follow him.

"I should probably warn you, though. There's not a single thing in this world that can cheer me up right now," I tell Ruslan.

He grunts and leads me down a corridor.

It's the one with the best suites in my club. They cost five figures per night, and everything inside the suites is complimentary—including the booze, the drugs, the food, and the women.

He stops at one of these shiny, lacquered black doors. A gold lion head knocker adorns it.

Ruslan pushes the door open to reveal a harem of beautiful women.

"Nope," I say, turning away.

But Ruslan and Andrei block my path.

"It's not going to work," I tell them.

“Nonsense,” Ruslan says. “There’s no harm in trying it out.”

“This is really not what I’m looking—” Ruslan doesn’t let me finish my sentence. He shoves me into the room and locks the door behind me.

I sigh and turn around to face the women.

“Girls, don’t mind me,” I tell them. “I’m having a bad day.”

One of them smiles at me coyly, taking it as a challenge. She’s wearing a long skirt with slits on either side of her thighs. Her torso doesn’t have a stitch of clothing on it.

This suite is supposed to be a man’s dream. I should know. I’m the one who designed it.

But even after the betrayal, I’m still loyal to Julie.

A part of me has always been loyal to her, even when she made it clear that her heart belonged to another.

The girls approach me from all sides—like vultures circling a fresh carcass. I know it’s only a matter of time before they start picking at me.

There’s only one way I can get them off me.

“Get on the bed,” I tell them. “I want to see you pleasuring each other before I join you.”

They giggle and follow my orders straight away.

I head toward the balcony and shut the balcony doors behind me.

The night air is invigorating. It’s nice to finally be alone for a moment.

I light a cigarette and stare at the city skyline. So many people. So many dreams and ambitions. And all of it for what? All that awaits us all is disappointment, anyway.

I put out the cigarette and grab the balustrade.

I hoist myself over the railing and peer down at the ground below.

It's a steep drop. A guaranteed death. A promise that it will all be over.

I force myself to think about all the purple chocolates that need to be eaten. If I don't eat them, someone else will.

I make a leap for it, landing inside the balcony to my right. It opens into another suite.

I enter it to find a fat man tied to the bed. He has a blindfold covering his eyes, but he lifts his head when he hears the sound of the balcony door sliding open.

"What was that?" he barks.

I press my index finger to my mouth.

The girls know me. They smile and nod, distracting the man with some light-hearted torture. It's exactly what he ordered.

I open the main door gently and slip back out into the corridor.

My brothers honestly thought that a night with a bunch of girls would ease the pain in my heart. They don't know how bad I have it.

I thought it couldn't get worse than eating cabbage soup for months on end in a Russian gulag, but this is so much worse.

Blood.

I need blood.

I head toward the club's secret exit, hoping I won't run into anybody I know.

But as luck would have it, a girl sits on the couch right near the exit.

It's Oksana, Andrei's sister.

She has her black sunglasses hanging from her mouth. She's wearing headphones, probably listening to an audiobook. I'm glad her ears are occupied at the moment because she has freakishly good hearing.

I hold my breath as I walk by her.

“I can smell you, Aleksandr,” she says, removing her headphones.

I weigh my options. I can pretend I didn’t hear her, but I know she’ll rip me a new one the next time she sees me. It’s better to deal with her now.

“Oh yeah?” I ask. “What do I smell like?”

“Like trash that has been sitting in the sun for too long,” she says. “When was the last time you took a shower?”

I sigh, leaning against the couch.

You can leave it up to Oksana to bust a gangster’s balls.

“*Ew*, don’t get closer,” she says, scooting away.

“Gee, you know just how to make a man feel better,” I say.

“Why would I try to make you feel better?” she says. “I warned you about her, and you ignored me. You said she could be trusted because she was a *friend*. You went and did the very thing I told you not to.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Oksana,” I say, walking away from her.

“Sasha, wait,” she calls.

I turn around to look at her. She’s staring in my direction even though I know she can’t see me.

“Be careful,” she says.

And then she snaps her headphones over her head again, like she never said the words out loud.

The words of concern are a lot coming from her. She’s never been one to show emotion.

I make sure all of my guns are in place before stepping out into the night.

I may have forgotten about the city, but the city hasn’t forgotten me. I have enemies on every corner, waiting to get their hands on me.

For the past few weeks, I've been so wrapped up in Julie's charm that I became oblivious to everything else.

Tensions have been rising in the city.

Power shifts are common in my world, but the unrest has been worse than usual lately.

For obvious reasons, the existing crime families have never liked sharing. When my brothers and I first stepped into the city, all the New York families tried to push us back out.

I had to reach out to every influential family in the city personally. I had to explain what we would bring to the table. They were hesitant at first, but then I told them about the FBI agent on my payroll.

It intrigued them. I told them I could share my resources if they shared theirs.

And before I knew it, everyone wanted to be my friend.

Mutually beneficial alliances were made.

Contracts were forged in blood.

Out of all the families, only two of them had never come around—the Greeks and the Italians.

The Greeks, in particular, have been making us feel unwelcome here for months now, and it's about time I do something about it.

I head straight to the docks.

I planted a bomb inside one of the Greek's warehouses a long time ago. And now is a good time as any to blow something up.

I reach the docks and wait for the fireworks.

The explosion is glorious against the black velvet night. There's something sacred about the startled faces of the guards and the orange mushroom cloud that kisses the sky.

It's soothing.

The destruction outside matches the destruction inside me.

When the men scatter from the crime scene, I move toward it. Flames singe my skin as I step into the heart of the chaos. I remove the spray can from my jacket and give it a good shake.

And then, I leave my signature on the sooty remains of the warehouse in neon pink.

XO.

The Greeks will know that I've sent my love.





# JULIE

*I*t's an effort to pull myself out of the dreamlike state.

I feel like I'm wide awake, but my eyes are too heavy to open. But behind my closed eyelids, I'm completely and utterly freaking out.

I force myself to remember that Kylie was just a part of the dream.

It wasn't real. None of it was.

My mind understands this, but my heart continues to race. And it's infecting my entire body with more paranoia.

I reach for a memory in my mind.

On our first day at Quantico, they made us meditate for an hour in the morning. It was a struggle to get through at first, but it got just a little bit easier each day.

I pretend I'm back in Quantico.

This is just another exercise.

I focus on breathing and let all the other thoughts in my head fade.

I still can't open my eyes, but at least I can now separate myself from the hallucination.

I learn two things. One, I'm bound to a chair. And two, I can move my fingers and toes.

I feel the knot around with my fingers. It appears to be a square knot.

There's no wiggle room for me to move my wrists. This was no accident. They know I've had training to free myself from zip ties and binds.

What they *don't* know is that I'm double-jointed. I have an increased range of motion because of my flexible joints.

As I work to free myself, I try not to think about what awaits me. I still can't open my eyes. For all I know, a circle of armed guards could be standing around me.

Flickers of light enter my vision as I work.

My eyes start to open. The truth serum they injected into my body has begun to wear off. One of the apparent side effects is that my movements are sluggish. And my head feels so damn heavy.

After what feels like an eternity, I manage to free my wrists. The binds fall to the floor. I kneel and untie the ones at my feet.

It's easy.

Easier than it should have been.

I stand slowly and try to open my eyes.

But I'm thrust into another hallucination.

Golden eyes shine back at me. Black sunglasses are perched on her head, and a wicked smile graces her lips.

I know it's just a vision, but she looks so real.

"I'm not going to lie, that was pretty impressive, Julie," Oksana says, her smile growing.

Her eyes hold an uncanny intensity. I know she can't see, but she has a way of looking at you like she can see right down to your soul.

This doesn't feel like a hallucination anymore.

"Wasn't that impressive, Yegor?" she asks, glancing behind her.

An armed guard grunts from behind her. He's a tall, beefy guy with thick veins covering his folded arms.

Oksana gives me a sweet smile. “You don’t seem too thrilled about my presence, sweet Julie. Are you feeling okay?”

This is real.

I’m trapped in a cellar somewhere, and this woman is going to kill me. She’s been waiting for the right moment to pounce, and this is it. Her perfect opportunity.

She looks so damn pleased with herself. But then her smile drops. A chill travels down my spine.

“Did you honestly think you could get away with it?” she hisses.

I purse my lips, remaining quiet. I don’t think I have the energy to stand for much longer. My legs feel as sturdy as spaghetti noodles.

“In case you were wondering, *I* was the reason you got caught,” she says. “It was my idea to bug every single telephone in that godforsaken town. I knew you were up to something shady again. All I had to do was sit back and wait for you to fall into my trap.”

“I wasn’t going to hurt him,” I say.

“Lies,” she says. “You knew that he had a soft spot for you, and you exploited his trust.”

I want to deny it. I want to tell her that I’m a good person. That I had noble intentions.

But none of that erases the fact that I hurt Aleksandr.

“You knew you were going to have to break his heart,” she says. “You just wanted to snuff the light from his eyes and make him as miserable as you are.”

“No,” I say.

“Admit it, Julie,” she says. “Aleksandr was going to be the collateral in your little game, and you knew it from the start.”

Hearing Aleksandr’s name out loud makes the air whoosh out of my lungs.

“Where is he?” I ask, blinking back tears.

She scowls. “You seriously think you still have him wrapped around your finger? He should have killed you when he had the chance.”

My fingers automatically go to my neck. And sure enough, there’s a thin scab there that wasn’t there before.

He held a knife to my throat.

“There’s something important he needs to know,” I say, pleading with Oksana even though I know it’ll fall on deaf ears.

“Oh yeah?” she says, placing her hands on her hips.

“I want him to know that it wasn’t a lie,” I say. “It was real to me.”

And I love him. I want him to know it even if he doesn’t want to see my face right now.

“Be my guest,” she says, stepping aside. “Go find him and tell him yourself.”

“Really?” I ask.

“Yeah, who am I to stand in the way of true love?” she says.

It seems like another trap, but I seize the chance anyway. When I move toward the door, the burly guard steps forward.

“Let her go, Yegor,” Oksana says in Russian. “I would like to have some fun with her.”

I slip out of the room and walk faster.

I don’t know where I’m headed. All I know is that I need to find Aleksandr.

I hear Oksana laughing after me. I try to run, but my movements are still sluggish. She gives me a few seconds of head start before I hear her white cane clicking behind me.

The sound echoes in the dark.

She starts humming a tune that I recognize. Hazel used to sing it to me when I was little.

*“Rock-a-bye baby, in the treetop,”* she sings. Her melodious and soft voice cuts through the obsidian night like plant roots growing through rock.

But I know her nature. I know that, unlike Aleksandr, this woman has no qualms about killing me.

*“When the wind blows, the cradle will rock.”*

I come across multiple doors, but every single one of them is locked. The windows are sealed shut. Rows of shelves filled with wooden crates line the vast space.

I need to get away.

Now.

*“When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall.”*

She’s closer than she was a moment ago. She can’t see me, but she’s good at relying on her other senses. Like her hearing. Maybe she won’t find me if I stop panicking and making so much noise.

I plaster myself against the wall and hold my breath. The clicking of her cane sounds louder than ever.

*“And down will come baby, cradle and all.”*

The night has a green tint to it. I can see her approaching me, closing the distance between us. She moves like a panther, all fluid grace and raw power.

Her steps don’t slow. She hasn’t noticed that I stopped walking.

She passes right by me.

As I press myself harder against the brick wall, something brushes by my feet. I glance down and see a pink tail.

I have to slap my hand over my mouth to keep myself from screaming out loud.

When I glance back up, I find that Oksana has paused. Pure fear courses through my veins. I want to run, but I can’t bring myself to move a muscle.

She turns around.

An evil smile tugs up her cheeks. She has round, rosy cheeks like a porcelain doll.

“Found you,” she sing-songs. “I thought I smelled something sour over here. I should have recognized the scent of your betrayal.”

She walks toward me, stopping directly in front of me.

She lifts her white cane and presses the end of it over my rib cage. It hurts like a bitch. It feels like something heavy sits on my chest, keeping me from breathing.

“Let me go,” I hiss.

I know I should push her off me.

The only way to survive is to fight back. But my limbs feel too heavy. The drug continues to course through my system, messing with my mind and body.

Oksana’s golden eyes glitter with malice.

“Give me one good reason I should let you go,” she says.

I’m so glad she asked.

I’ve been trained for this.

I learned how to negotiate with terrorists and criminals. Most of the time, it’s not about trying to reason with them. It’s about stalling them until you can figure out an escape plan. That’s exactly what I need to do with Oksana.

I need to distract her.

“Aleksandr will never forgive you if you hurt me,” I blurt out.

She blinks. That was something she hadn’t considered. But a moment later, frost spreads over her face. And I know I’m doomed.

“He’ll understand that it had to be done,” she says, moving the cane up my body. She flicks something near the handle, and something much sharper replaces the blunt edge of the cane.

A knife.

She positions it over my throat.

“He didn’t have the guts to do it,” she says. “But I do.”

The knife digs into my neck now. Pearls of blood roll down my neck again, staining my shirt red. I swallow. The slight movement makes the knife dig deeper into my skin.

“Do it, then,” I say. “Get it over with.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “I don’t like being told what to do, Julie.”

*I know.*

“And besides, I like playing with my prey before putting it out of its misery,” she adds.

“I had a chance to expose your family to the world two years ago,” I tell her. “Do you want to know why I never did?”

I try to wiggle my fingers, but I’m frozen to the wall again. I think it’s the fear. All of the cortisol and adrenaline in my body are making the effect of the drug more potent.

I need to calm down.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” she says. “And it’s not going to work. I’ll never sympathize with a lying whore like you.”

“I didn’t expose you when I had the chance because I started to care,” I say. “Not just for Aleksandr. I cared about *all* of you. Especially Andrei.”

“What about Andrei?” she asks, lifting the knife higher. I tilt my head back to prevent the blade from digging deeper.

“He was so motivated by revenge back then,” I say. “He thought it would solve all of his problems. But revenge is a temporary pleasure. It doesn’t change anything in the long run.”

“Revenge is a worthy cause,” Oksana says.

“That’s what I thought, too,” I say. “But instead of calling it revenge, I called it justice. The New York mafia killed my

best friend, and I wanted to see them suffer for their crimes. That's *all* I wanted to accomplish."

Oksana can't see me, but I can see her.

I can see the shift in her eyes. As much as she likes to pretend otherwise, she has a beating heart. And the two of us are more similar than she realizes.

Like me, she never knew her mother. Like me, her soul is scarred from everything she's endured.

I lost a person who I thought was my soul mate. She lost her vision.

We both believed that righting past wrongs would finally make us happy again.

"Aleksandr showed me that it didn't have to be that way," I say. "He showed me that despite everything, life could still be beautiful. When we were in that cabin together, he became my whole world, Oksana. I didn't know my heart could fall for someone like that. I thought I knew love before, but it was nothing compared to what I felt for Aleksandr."

"What a touching story," she mocks. "I almost shed a tear."

I try to move my fingers again. They curl into fists, but I can't do much more.

"And even if you and Sasha had something before, you have nothing now," she says. "You were the worst thing that ever happened to him."

Her words cut deeper than she knows.

I stop trying to fight my paralyzed body.

I let go.

"You don't mess with my family and live to see another day," she says. "It might have worked with Sasha, but you don't get to fill my head with stories. You messed with the wrong fucking family, bitch."

It's the end.



I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting for the pain to come.

But the cold metal of the knife leaves my skin, replaced by something warm.

The scent of spray paint and male musk fills my nostrils.

My eyes fly open.

Alexandr stands behind Oksana. He grabbed the sharp end of the walking cane with his bare hands. Dark blood drips down his wrists.

There's murder written in his eyes.

And it's directed at me.



## ALEKSANDR

“*Y*ou had *no* right,” I say to Oksana, ripping my gaze away from Julie’s hypnotic eyes.

“It’s not my fault you were too pussy to do it,” Oksana says, wrenching her cane from my palm. “You forced me to take matters into my own hands.”

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. *Stay. Out. Of. My. Fucking. Business,*” I say. “And that includes the girl.”

“Are you seriously considering forgiving her for what she did?” Oksana asks, her face livid.

I grit my teeth and step toward her.

I know Oksana. I know she’s going to try this again. So I need to make one thing very clear to her.

“Julie is my property,” I growl. “*Nobody* touches my property. She was a mistake that *I* made. So *I’ll* deal with the consequences, and *I’ll* dole out the punishments. Am I fucking clear?”

Oksana shakes her head and spits near my feet. “She fooled you twice now, Sasha. You can’t possibly be this stupid.”

“Good night, Oksana.”

She storms away.

I turn my attention back to Julie.

The worst part of it all is that she still looks the same—all angelic and pure. I wish she’d grow horns so I could keep

reminding myself that she's a little devil.

Her lower lip wobbles. "You didn't have to drug me. I would have told you everything."

My jaw hardens as I seal the distance between us. Her pupils dilate, and she starts exhaling in short puffs. She's scared of me now. I like that.

"Did I tell you that you could speak, *tigrenok*?" I ask.

"What?" she whispers.

"You only speak when I let you."

Her wide eyes flick over my face like she's searching for the man I used to be.

"You heard what I said to Oksana," I say. "You're my property now. You're mine to do with as I please. I control you now, Julie."

Tears roll down her cheeks. But I know that it's all a ruse.

"*Do. You. Understand?*" I ask, thumping my fist over the wall near her head.

"Oh, am I allowed to speak now?" she says, shooting daggers at me with her eyes.

Pinching her chin, I lift her head to inspect her neck. She sucks in a breath when she sees me examining the wound Oksana left behind. It's barely a graze, but I don't like it.

"When I woke up in the cellar, the first thing I wanted was to come find you," she whispers softly.

"Stop talking," I say.

She ignores me.

"I called my handler because I was going to call off the investigation, Aleksandr," she says. "God knows I didn't mean to, but I started to care for you. *So fucking much that it hurts.*"

Lies. More lies.

I gather her wrists and lift them over her head.

It's cruel how our bodies still line up so perfectly. We mold together like we're two halves made to be one.

"You don't know me," I say, leaning down and pressing my mouth against her hair. "You don't know how cruel I can be. I have zero tolerance for traitors, *tigrenok*. And that's exactly what you are. A pretty little traitor who spread her thighs for me."

She sucks in a breath, burying her face against my chest.

Having her body against mine feels so familiar. My fingers itch to cup the curve of her hips and draw her even closer. My cock is hard for her, and I let her feel every inch of it.

"I thought I would be the one who would protect you from other monsters," I say, fisting her silky blonde hair. I tug on it, making sure her eyes are on me. "But you ended up turning me into one. And soon, you will wish you never even met me."

Despite everything, her eyes are defiant. She doesn't like being spoken to in this manner unless I'm buried inside her.

She thinks she's so strong.

It'll be all the more pleasurable when I finally break her.



I LOCK her in the penthouse bedroom and post guards outside the door. When I reach my office, I find Andrei and Ruslan waiting for me.

And they're positively *fuming*.

"Whatever you have to say, I really don't want to hear it," I say.

"How could you—" Andrei starts.

"Give me a break, Andrei," I say. "It's been a long fucking day."

"You blew up the Greek's warehouse without consulting us," Andrei says, crossing his biceps in front of his chest.

“You should’ve been there. It was fun,” I reply.

“You made an emotional decision because of some bitch who wronged you.”

“Don’t call her that,” I grit out, clenching my fists.

I’m filled with the need to destroy something again. I need chaos.

“You’re losing your fucking mind, Sasha,” Andrei says. “And we feel partially responsible for letting this happen.”

Ruslan watches me with pity in his eyes.

I don’t *want* their fucking pity.

“You forget that I’m in charge of our relationships with the Greek and Irish mafia,” I say. “I can do with them as I see fit.”

My brothers have also forgotten that if it weren’t for me, we wouldn’t have any allies in this city in the first place.

“You *are* in charge,” Andrei says. “But that doesn’t mean you should use them as a punching bag just to blow off some steam.”

“It was long overdue, anyway,” I say. “The Greek fuckers needed to be put in their place.”

“They’re going to retaliate,” Ruslan grunts.

Andrei and Ruslan exchange glances. Something about it is odd.

“What do you know that I don’t?” I ask.

“Strange things have been happening in the city, Sasha,” Andrei says. “The Greeks lost everything a few years ago, but they’re back now and stronger than ever.”

“Do they have more territory?” I ask.

“Not exactly,” Andrei says.

“More businesses?” I ask.

“Not that we know of.”

Andrei and Ruslan look at each other again. I hate it when they do this. I’m always the last one to find out about things.

“So?” I snap. “How are they stronger?”

“They have an ally in the dark,” Andrei says finally.

“Who is it?”

“I wouldn’t have said ‘ally in the dark’ if I knew who it was,” Andrei says. “All we know for certain is that they have someone helping them out.”

“How long?” I ask.

“A while,” he says.

I take a deep breath.

I’ve been with Julie in my little love cave for the past few weeks. While I played house with her, my brothers were taking care of the businesses, both theirs and mine.

Thinking about Julie makes my heart squeeze again. I didn’t know it was possible for a man to hurt like this.

“I wish you would have told me,” I say.

“I wish a lot of things had gone differently,” Andrei says. “Julie had all of us fooled, Sasha. Don’t forget that.”

I don’t want to talk about Julie.

I want to dive into business again. I want to do something I’m good at.

“Tell me everything you know about this new opposition,” I say.

We strategize for hours in the office. We devise a game plan to determine who funds the Greek mafia and why. I sink into the familiarity of doing something I’ve done hundreds of times before.

In the early hours of the morning, my brothers crash on the sofas.

But I’m wide awake.

I walk to the balcony to watch the sun rise over the city.

I don’t think I’ll ever sleep again.





# JULIE

*J*t's been a week since I've seen Aleksandr.

And honestly, it feels like I'm going through withdrawal. After weeks of breathing in the scent of his skin and running my fingers through his hair every morning, the days seem longer without him.

There's a rattle of keys from outside the door.

I run toward it, hoping against hope that it's him.

It's Polina again. She's the sweet woman who brings me three meals a day. She has kind eyes and streaks of gray in her hair.

"Hi, Polina."

She nods at me before looking at the untouched meal on the dining table.

"You didn't eat lunch either," she says.

"I ate the banana," I say.

"You ate half a banana," she scolds. "In many cultures, it's rude for the guest to deny food."

"I'm no guest," I tell her. *I'm a prisoner.*

She replaces the old tray with the new one. It's not that the food isn't good. It's made with expert care by Michelin-star chefs. The problem is that when I get anxious like this, food is the last thing on my mind.

I sit down at my usual spot by the window.

“You’re wasting away,” Polina says. “Not that there was much on you to begin with. The master will be displeased.”

“Is he home?” I ask her.

She purses her lips again. No matter how much I beg, she refuses to give me a single detail about Aleksandr.

I’m afraid.

Not for myself, but for others. I’ve unleashed a ruthless monster on the world.

An invisible knife twists in my heart.

Not only did I fail my mission but I also lost someone I loved dearly.

Again.

Only this time, it’s all my fault.

Polina places a book down next to the food. She brings me books and magazines every day. I flip through them, but I can’t absorb a single word. My thoughts revolve around Aleksandr.

She clears her throat. “You should eat the dessert tonight. I had it made especially for you.”

I look at her.

A hidden meaning shines in her eyes. She’s trying to tell me something.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

She nods and takes her leave. The second the door closes behind her, I rush toward the dining table. I lift the silver plate cover to reveal chicken kiev, traditional Russian dumplings, roasted vegetables, and rye bread.

But there’s no dessert. Instead of the usual slice of cake or pastry, a burner phone sits on the dessert plate.

A few weeks ago, I would have been overjoyed at the opportunity. But now, I’m afraid to touch it.

It could be a trap for all I know.

It could be a test of loyalty.

I look around the opulent room, biting my lower lip as I wonder if I'm about to make the biggest mistake of my life.

But I'm going stir-crazy in here.

I need to talk to someone. I need to hear a familiar voice.

I pick up the phone.

I should contact my FBI handler. She'll be expecting my call. She promised she'd find a way to reach me if I ever got caught. This burner phone is probably her doing.

But instead of calling Agent Sharpe, I dial my best friend's number.

"Hello?" Chloe's bright voice is like sunshine after a week of rain. She lives in New York City too.

"Chloe, it's me," I whisper.

"Julie? Oh my *God*. How are you? *Where* are you? I've been so worried. I thought you'd call me sooner."

She's one of the few people who knew I was going to prison undercover. The only reason I told her is because she's too good of a journalist. I knew she wouldn't rest until she got to the bottom of it.

"It was too risky," I say.

She's quiet for a moment. "Are you okay, Jules? You don't sound like yourself."

I haven't been eating. I know that it's making my body weak.

"I'm fine," I say.

"Where are you now?" she asks.

I glance out at the city skyline. It's a gorgeous day, but I feel like a caged bird in this bedroom.

"New York City," I say. "I came here last week."

"Are you serious?" she asks. "Why didn't you tell me sooner? Is he with you?"

“Things aren’t ideal right now,” I say, glancing at the locked door. I wonder if the guards posted outside can hear my voice right now.

“Are you in trouble?” she asks.

“I just...I fucked up, Chloe. I never should have done this. I fell in love with him.”

Chloe doesn’t say anything.

“And I hurt him,” I continue. “Bad.”

“Wait, back up. Are we talking about Aleksandr, the Bratva guy you were going to investigate?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I say.

“That’s so messed up. I love it,” she squeals. “I was rooting for you guys the whole time.”

I smile for the first time in weeks. “It *really* didn’t go how I thought it would.”

“Yeah, well, you know what the French say. *C’est la vie*,” she says. *That’s life*. “But I’m glad you’re finally done with the whole thing. When can I see you?”

Oh. She thinks I escaped from Aleksandr after he learned of my betrayal.

“Julie?” she says slowly. “You *did* escape, right?”

“I haven’t finished the job yet,” I tell her. “I still need to find the mole.”

*I still need to avenge Derek’s death.*

“No offense, but that ship has sunk, honey,” she says. “You need to haul ass the first chance you get. What can I do to help?”

“I need to figure this out on my own,” I say.

“Is he keeping you as a prisoner?” she asks.

“He’s treating me more like a guest,” I say, glancing around the beautiful penthouse bedroom. *A guest who can never leave.*

“What if he hurts you?” she asks.

“He won’t,” I assure her.

One thing I know for certain is that Aleksandr would never harm me. He doesn’t have it in him.

“Enough about me,” I say. “Tell me about you. How is work?”

“Terrible,” she groans. “There’s so much happening in the city, and each day feels worse than the last.”

“What do you mean?” I ask her.

“Kids are going missing, Jules,” she says. “In broad daylight. Everyone has been looking into it, but we still have nothing.”

Chloe is an investigative journalist for one of the biggest publications in New York City. It’s one of the things we bonded over. Both of us enjoy investigating and looking into things other people don’t care about. We also love watching true crime documentaries in our free time.

“That’s horrible,” I say, sucking in a breath. I wonder if the NYC crime organizations have something to do with the missing kids.

“I know,” she says. “And everything feels so much more stressful without you. I miss having you around, babe.”

“I miss you, too,” I say.

But I didn’t call Chloe just to catch up with her. I need her help with something.

“Chloe, I need you to investigate someone,” I say. “Her name is Bianca Davis.”

“That name rings a bell,” she replies. “Wait, it’s that woman who escaped from prison the same night as you, right?”

“Yeah,” I say. “She’s dangerous, Chloe. I don’t like the idea of her roaming the streets.”

“Of course, I’ll look into her whereabouts,” she says.

“Thank you, Chloe,” I say. “I should go now. I’ll try to call you tomorrow.”

“I love you. Bye,” she says.

“Take care.”

After we hang up, I stare up at the night sky.

I miss Silver Falls.

I spent my entire adult life avoiding the town that raised me, but I would do anything to go back there now. Aleksandr made it feel like paradise on earth. He showed me beauty when my heart was hurting.

All he wanted was to be there for me.

And I let him down.

I stare at the burner phone.

I should call my handler and give her a report of all that I learned so far. But I don’t have it in me. Not tonight.

I stash the phone away and turn the lights off.

Sleep is more merciful than reality.

In my dreams, I’m not the person who plunged a knife in my lover’s back.



# ALEKSANDR

She still has the face of an angel.

Her long blonde hair is splayed out on the pillow, wayward curls framing her heart-shaped face. Her lips are parted in sleep. I watch the gentle rise and fall of her chest as she breathes.

A few hours ago, I ran into Polina, our housekeeper. She seemed to be on edge. When I asked her why, she confessed everything.

She revealed that Julie hadn't touched her food all week.

I didn't like hearing that.

I don't know why, but I still can't seem to stop caring for this girl. My dumb heart still beats for her.

I brush a curl away from Julie's face. She stirs in her sleep, pressing her face into my palm.

I've been visiting her in the quiet hours of the night.

I usually never wake her, but today has been a rough day.

Rougher than usual, that is.

As my brothers predicted, the Greeks retaliated.

They attacked five jewelry stores, two restaurants, and one warehouse at the same time. They weren't supposed to have the ammo, manpower, or guts to pull off something like that. Needless to say, it was a major blow.



There's definitely a third party who's helping the Greeks, and we're not any closer to figuring out who it is.

I stroke Julie's soft cheek.

I need her.

She's a comforting presence in the middle of the storm. She's the only peace I've ever known.

Before I register what I'm doing, I push her blanket aside.

She's in a lacy white nightgown. The peaks of her nipples taunt me. I need to know if she's wearing panties underneath. I grip the hem of her nightgown and tug it up her lithe thighs.

These same thighs used to wrap around me as I thrust inside her.

She exhales softly when I reach the juncture of her sex.

Her body always knew who it belonged to.

My pretty little slut.

It's not right to be touching her right now, but she's *mine*.

I dig my knuckles into her puffy slit, pushing against her bud. She's *dripping* for my cock.

I pull the hem even higher. She looks like a buffet, ready to be devoured.

But something's not right.

In the pale moonlight, I see that her body has changed. There are hollows and dips that weren't there before. I push the nightgown even higher and see that I can count every one of her ribs.

She's unwell.

I'm making her sick.

I've imprisoned her all over again. I tug the nightgown back down over her body and cover her with the blanket.

I shouldn't be here.

I shouldn't be coming to her for solace.



# JULIE

There's a gift on the bedside table when I wake up—  
paint and a canvas.

It takes me back to that day in the meadow. Everything seemed like it would last forever then.

There's a knock on the door.

My heart thrashes against my ribs. I keep hoping it's Aleksandr. I don't care how much he hates me. He could spit insults at me the whole time, but I wouldn't mind as long as I got to see him again.

Instead, it's Polina again.

She enters with the breakfast tray. She sighs dramatically when she sees I haven't touched yesterday's dinner.

But she's not alone this time. Inessa, Andrei's wife, strolls in behind her. She's wearing a Chanel dress and stilettos with big sheer bows near the ankles.

"Hi, Inessa," I say, giving her a small smile.

I haven't spoken to her after the whole fiasco.

"Aleksandr sent me here to babysit you," she says. "Eat."

"What?"

"I need to stay until you finish your breakfast."

Heat rushes to my cheeks. "You don't have to do that."

"I'm not doing it for you," she says, her blue-gray eyes cutting to mine. There's a storm brewing inside them. "I'm

doing it for him.”

“Inessa, I—”

“Do you have any idea how insanely lucky you are?” she says through gritted teeth. “People have been beheaded for much less. You don’t come from a crime family, so you have no idea what betrayal really means. It’s the ultimate sin. There’s a special place in hell for those who betray their own friends and family.”

I blink back tears.

Inessa was a friend. She stood up for me. I didn’t just betray Aleksandr, I betrayed her too.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

Inessa doesn’t even look at me. She snaps her fingers in the direction of the food.

“Make it quick. I don’t want to stand here all day,” she says.

I take a seat in front of the food.

Next to the breakfast is a bouquet of roses. I pick them up, noticing that the thorns have been removed. I bring them to my nose and inhale.

“I have other things to do,” Inessa snaps.

I turn my attention back to the food—fragrant tea, waffles, artisanal cheeses, and a bunch of fresh grapes.

I still don’t have much of an appetite, but there’s something different about today. I don’t know if it’s Inessa’s company or the paint supplies waiting by my bed, but my heart feels lighter than it did a week ago.

I butter the fluffy waffles and drizzle maple syrup over them. I shovel some into my mouth.

It’s so good that I immediately take a few more bites.

Inessa watches me as I eat. She’s a girl who wears her heart on her sleeve. For a fraction of a second, I can see how heartbroken she really is.

The food in my mouth immediately turns to ash.

“I still find it hard to believe,” she says. “How were you so good at faking it? You had *everyone* fooled.”

Defending myself in this moment doesn't feel right. So I don't.

“Whatever. I don't want to hear your bullshit excuses anyway,” she says.

“I'm sorry,” I say again.

“Your sisters keep calling. I bet they're in on this whole thing, too,” she muses.

I take a sip of water and try to blink back the tears. “They called?”

“I didn't pick up, of course,” she says. “But they decided to stop by at the club yesterday. They're about to declare a war to get you back.”

Tears burn the backs of my eyelids.

“I—”

Inessa doesn't let me finish. “Just finish your breakfast. I don't want to look at your face for another second.”

I shovel the rest of the waffles into my mouth, barely tasting them. I wash it down with coffee that scalds my tongue.

There's a rock sitting in the pit of my stomach again.

I still don't know who the FBI mole is.

I went through all this trouble, and it will all be for nothing if I don't learn the truth.

I'm torn between my love for Aleksandr and my need for justice. But when the time comes, I know I'll have to choose. I can't have both.

Inessa storms out the second I finish eating.

Instead of spending the rest of the day overthinking everything, I pick up the paintbrush.

I lose myself in the colors.

Inessa returns for lunch and dinner. She glares at me until I finish my food.

Her presence here means one thing—Aleksandr still cares.

Which means that it's not too late.

I just hope that I have it in me to make the right choice when the time comes.



# ALEKSANDR

*W*e're back in the cellar again.

We caught another one of the Greek scum. He's tied to a chair with blood dripping down his nose. His teeth are already painted red.

I've had him for twenty-four hours, but he still refuses to speak.

"Who are you working with?" I ask, inching my knife closer toward his right eyeball.

His eyes fill with tears, but that's just a physiological reaction, not one he has any control over.

"I don't know," he says. "And you're never going to find out, either."

"Where the fuck is your Boss hiding?" I ask.

Jason Drakos is the boss of the New York Greek mafia. He's a despicable man who needs to be executed, but he's been keeping a low profile. Nobody has seen or heard from him in years. All I know for certain is that he's working alongside someone much stronger than him.

In a quick motion, I cut off my captive's last finger.

He howls in pain, cursing my ancestors and my future progeny.

"This can go one of two ways," I inform him, my voice cutting through the noise. "You're going to die either way, but



I'm generous enough to present you with options. You can either choose a quick death or a slow, agonizing one."

"Do whatever you want. I ain't no snitch." He spits at my feet.

"I had a feeling you'd say that."

I nod at one of my guards. He steps out to drag someone else into the room. The first captive's eyes grow wide when he sees our new guest.

"Look how generous I am," I say, binding the second man to a chair. "I'm allowing a little family reunion before I kill you. You guys are like Thing 1 and Thing 2."

Both of the men are nearly identical even though I know they're a few years apart in age.

*"Leave him out of this,"* Thing 1 screams.

I look into the eyes of Thing 2, letting myself bathe in the fear I find there. I place my knife over his index finger, ready to saw through flesh and bone.

Thing 1 speaks up immediately. "My brother is new to the family. He doesn't know anything."

"That's not the answer I wanted to hear," I say, lifting the knife and bringing it down at lightning speed. Instead of one, two fingers separate from the young man's body.

His howl of pain is music to my ears.

"I'll tell you whatever you want," Thing 1 screams. "Just let my brother go."

"Again. Not what I wanted to hear," I say, raising my arm again, ready to collect more fingers.

As I expected, the older brother speaks again.

"Nobody knows where the Boss is," he says. "And we really don't know who the other party is. We're just soldiers. They don't tell us shit."

He's telling the truth.

But I see a flicker of something else in his eyes. He's also hiding something.

"Don't tell me you're completely useless," I say, cocking my head as I observe him. "Kids are being plucked from the streets like flowers. The government is cracking down on the rest of us, and it's all because you wanted to make an extra buck. Now tell me what you know."

My brothers and I firmly believe that children should be kept out of this. There's a reason we never recruit a soldier unless they're at least twenty-five years old.

But the Greek mafia is not just recruiting children, they're *selling* them.

There's nothing more vile on this planet than the flesh trade.

"I swear to you, I don't know anything else," he says, glancing at his little brother. "They're being very covert with the whole operation."

"Who is in charge of the child prostitution ring?" I ask.

He arranges his face into a blank mask. "I don't know anything about that."

"Lies," I say, turning back around and cleanly slicing through two more of his brother's fingers. I place them in a mini ice box.

"What the fuck is your problem?" Thing 1 screams. "If I knew anything else, I would have told you by now."

I watch as something hardens in his eyes.

He's made a decision.

"You keep saying that, but I know you're lying," I say. "Give me something useful, and I'll spare your brother's life. I'll even give his fingers back as a parting gift."

There's so much conflict swimming in his eyes.

I'm making him choose between his duty and his family.

His head drops low in shame. His shoulders start to shake. It's normal for men to rage and cry before their final moments. But the noise coming from his mouth is laughter.

He lifts his head and laughs up at the ceiling.

I frown at him.

It usually takes a few days of isolation before they start losing their minds.

"You have no idea what's coming for you. For all of you," he says between fits of laughter. "Your whole world as you know it is about to come to an end."

There's something in his mouth. It's a yellow capsule that looks like a nutritional supplement, but I recognize it immediately.

It's a suicide pill.

He must have had it behind the cross pendant around his neck. He bites the capsule, letting the toxin coat the inside of his mouth.

I lunge toward him and grip his jaw. "Give me answers before I break every bone in your brother's body."

His pupils dilate, and his head rolls forward.

Instant death.

I exhale slowly and turn toward the remaining brother. He's crying, but the sound is muffled.

"Now, what am I going to do with you?" I ask, stalking toward him.

I rip the tape from over his mouth. The kid's little mustache is waxed right off.

"How old are you?" I ask him.

His sobs pierce my eardrums. I place my knife under his chin, forcing him to look at me.

"I asked you a question, kid," I say.

"I'm twenty-one," he says.

“How long have you been working for the Greek mafia?” I ask.

“Five years,” he says.

His heart is broken into a million pieces, but there’s fear in his eyes. He’s afraid he will meet the same fate as his brother.

“What do you know about your family’s recent collaboration?” I ask him.

His eyes well with tears as he looks away from his dead brother. He fixes his attention on his bleeding right hand. He needs medical attention, but there’s no way I can let him go.

Vengeance has a way of creating the worst villains the world has ever seen.

“I was an artist,” he says. “I thought about escaping this life so many times. I should have.”

“But you didn’t,” I say. “Now tell me what you know.”

A flash of fear appears in his eyes again. I have a sneaking suspicion it’s not because of me. He’s afraid of what the other guy will do to him.

“I’m just a soldier,” he says. “They just tell me what to do.”

“And what do you do?” I ask.

“I’m in charge of inventory,” he says.

He glances down at his hands again. I follow his gaze. He said that he was an artist. He won’t be able to hold a paintbrush again, let alone a gun.

I’ve ruined both of his potential careers in the span of a single minute.

When I look back at the kid, I see Julie’s face. She’s staring up at me with tears in her big green eyes.

I take a sharp inhale.

The kid is back.

I really need to get some sleep. Staying up all night isn’t going to make me any more productive.

I don't have it in me to torture this kid. I turn to one of my guards.

"Give him the truth serum," I say to the guard. "And then get rid of him while he's still under."

My men look at each other.

"*Now*," I bark.

"Yes, Boss."

We don't typically use the truth serum for interrogations. Since it's a custom-made drug, it's ridiculously expensive to buy. But these are extenuating circumstances.

He reminds me too much of Julie.

The thought of torturing him for answers makes me feel uneasy.

I wash my hands and step out of the cellar.

Oksana is waiting for me outside, holding a brown cardboard box.

"A delivery came for you," she says, handing it to me.

"Since when do you hand-deliver my packages?" I ask.

"Since you became a walking zombie," she says, pursing her lips.

I open the package to find that it's purple chocolates from Switzerland. Seeing them used to make me giddy with joy, but I don't feel anything anymore. I've become jaded and numb to everything.

"You can have them," I say, returning the box to her.

"You can't be serious."

"You always wanted them."

"Not like *this*."

She seems at a loss for what to say. Before she asks me if I'm doing okay, I walk past her.

"I have to go," I mumble.

Her hand shoots out and wraps around my bicep like a vise.

“Wait,” she says.

“What?” The word comes out harsher than I mean it.

She sighs. “You tortured them without me this time.”

“I have enough rage inside me to torture on your behalf now.”

“But it’s *our* thing.” She pouts. “You play the good guy, and I’m the bad guy.”

“You enjoy this way too much,” I say. “You should seriously consider some therapy.”

“It *is* my therapy,” she says. “So what do you have planned for them? Are you going to splay their skin inch by inch and give it time to heal before doing it all over again? Or are you going to pour flesh-eating bacteria on their face?”

Oksana’s golden eyes gleam with pure excitement.

“You need help,” I say.

“You’re no fun anymore,” she says.

To understand Oksana, you have to understand where she’s coming from. She was dragged into this world from the minute she was born. Her mother had been murdered when Oksana was still in her womb. People have wanted her dead since she was a child.

Death and destruction is all she understands.

It’s all she knows.

“One of the captives killed himself, and we’re injecting the truth serum into the other one,” I say.

“Rookie mistake,” she says. “That would *never* have happened on my watch. And why are you using the truth serum?”

“He’s a kid,” I say.

“So?”

“So,” I say. “It seemed like the right thing to do.”

“You’re getting too soft, Aleksandr,” she says, shaking her head in disappointment. “Did you find anything, at least?”

“I’ll have a report by the end of the day,” I say. “But I don’t think the kid knows anything that will be of use to us.”

“Fuck,” she says.

“Yeah.” I sigh. “Whoever the other family is, they’re powerful. They’re using the Greek mafia to do their bidding.”

I can’t shake the feeling that we’re running out of time.

Whenever one crime family becomes reckless, it has a ripple effect on the rest of us. It draws unnecessary attention. If we’re not careful, it could very well be the downfall of every other family in the city.

“And what are you going to do about Julie?” Oksana asks.

I’ve been avoiding my family for this very reason. They keep asking me what I plan to do with Julie.

“I should go,” I say. “Enjoy the chocolates.”

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I SLIP into a black hoodie before stepping out of the club.

These late-night walks are dangerous, but they’re the only thing keeping me sane.

I’m armed from head to toe, but I still have enemies everywhere.

For a second, I entertain the idea of one of them getting to me.

I wonder if I’ll find peace after death. The shame that hangs over me like a cloak will fade away. My love will become obsolete. My mistakes will be forgotten.

The scent of greasy pizza dissolves the dark thoughts in my mind.

I stop for a slice.

I check my phone as I eat. I've been getting updates on Julie. She ate all of her meals today.

I'm supposed to hate her, but I can't bring myself to do it.

This love is a sickness. It's taken over me, and now, I can barely remember the man I used to be.

At least I have pizza for comfort.

It's one of the things I love about New York City. When everything else fails you, you can always count on late-night pizza.

But of course, my temporary peace of mind doesn't last for long.

I get the crawling sensation of being watched.

I scan the surroundings as I finish eating. Nothing seems out of the ordinary, but I can still feel a pair of eyes on me.

I had planned to head to the underground fight club on the other side of the river, but that's probably not the best idea.

I walk back toward the club instead.

My fingers tingle with excitement. I know I shouldn't, but I disappear into a dark alley.

And then I hide.

As I expected, a shadow appears at the alley entrance. It's a man wearing a long gray cloak.

Something metallic glints in the night. He's holding a long knife.

But he doesn't fall for my trap.

Instead of walking deeper into the alley, he walks away. A truck with bright headlights passes by on the road. The person turns around once more, and this time, I see their face.

It's a woman.

Not just any woman.

This is Bianca Davis, the other prisoner who escaped that night.

JULIE

Everything feels better today, and I don't know why.

I'm still Aleksandr's prisoner. I'm still confined to the bedroom. I'm still alone.

Yet it feels like everything has changed.

I toss and turn on the bed because sleep eludes me. For the first time since Aleksandr learned the truth, embers of hope burn in my heart.

I lay on my side and watch the flickering city lights through the gaps in the curtains.

I drift into a light sleep, only to be awoken when I feel a heavy weight settle on the other side of the bed.

My heart pounds. I know without turning around that it's him.

My body recognizes his.

My heart can feel his presence.

Until now, all I wanted was to see him. But now that he's actually here, I can't bring myself to open my eyes. It's too much.

Hands reach for me. Big, calloused hands that have doled out violence and shamelessly touched every part of my body in the past. He gently brushes the hair from my face. I notice that his fingers are trembling.

The roses.

The paint.

Inessa.

All of it suddenly makes sense.

I don't think this is the first time he's been here. He might have been watching over me every night as I slept. He must have seen that I was unhappy, so he did something to make my day a little better.

My heart twists in shame.

I don't deserve this man.

His knuckles linger on my cheeks. They're textured. The skin over them is rougher than usual, like he's recently been in a fight. He sighs softly and pulls his hand away.

I immediately miss his touch.

He shifts on the bed.

His body heat blazes against my back. His hands are back on my body.

His palm slides down my neck before cupping my breasts. And this time, I can't help the way my heartbeat quickens under his touch.

"Even in your sleep, you're so responsive," he says in Russian.

He thinks I'm still asleep.

His fingers brush against my nipples. They pebble for him, and he growls from deep inside his chest.

Without warning, his other hand plunges into my cotton shorts.

"No panties," he hisses. "It's like you *want* me to come visit you in the middle of the night."

His coarse words make wings flutter in my chest.

I want to open my eyes. I want to wrap my arms around him and forget about real life. I want his weight on me as he pushes his cock inside me.

But he can't know that I'm awake.

He'll leave if he finds out.

His middle finger pushes against my slit, parting my lips. It's obscene how big his finger is against my pussy. He pushes it inside me. I pretend to stir in my sleep and press my mouth against the pillow.

He pulls out of me.

His hand rests on the curve of my hip.

"I can never understand how something so perfect could be so tainted," he says. I don't know if he's talking about me or our relationship.

He stands.

I know he's about to leave.

And it makes me reckless. I try to fight it, but this feeling is more powerful than me.

"Stay," I whisper into the dark.

I turn around to look at him. I can see the outline of his broad shoulders as they rise and fall.

When he turns to look at me, everything happens in slow motion.

My core clenches when his heated eyes find mine.

My heart can't take another second of this.

"How long have you been pretending to be asleep?" he asks slowly.

"Have you been coming to me every night?" I ask.

"Yeah, I was curious about how you could sleep at night," he says.

"It's the only escape from the pain," I whisper.

Fire blazes in his eyes.

"Pain?" he whispers. "You have no idea what that word even means."

“Aleksandr—”

“No,” he hisses. “Not again.”

I swallow.

I’ve never seen him like this. There’s so much anger in him that he looks like he’s vibrating from it. I see the side of him I’ve never seen before—the stone-hearted killer.

“Take your shirt off,” he commands.

“Alexandr—”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll do as you’re told,” he says, stalking toward me.

I take my shirt off.

His nostrils flare when he sees my body in the moonlight.

“Perfection,” he whispers. “You still haven’t answered my question, by the way. How long have you been awake?”

“I woke up when you started touching me,” I say.

“And you didn’t tell me to stop?” he asks.

My cheeks burn.

“Or maybe you didn’t *want* me to stop,” he says. “You were so wet for me. You always are.”

His dark dominance tugs at my core. I blink up at him innocently.

“Do you ever put it inside me?” I ask.

“I would, but then I’d have to clean up the evidence,” he says. “And you know how much I like seeing my come dripping out of your tight little pussy.”

I sit up in bed, my pulse wild now. He reaches for one of my breasts, massaging it roughly.

“I love how you feel in my hands,” he says. “It’s like you were made to be fondled by me.”

His fingers tug on a nipple. The friction of his rough skin feels delicious. There’s an urgency in his movements, an angry possessiveness that makes my head spin.

“Tell me how much you like it.”

“I like it when you secretly touch me,” I say. “Even though you’re not supposed to.”

He exhales roughly. With a dark gleam in his eyes, he pulls out his cock. He strokes it while watching me shift my hips on the bed. A bead of pre-come forms on the tip.

“Lick,” he commands.

I blink up at him.

He’s been bossy before, but there’s a harshness in his tone now that I’m not used to.

He takes his cock and pushes it against my lips until I open my mouth for him. He groans in satisfaction as he thrusts even deeper into my mouth.

“Open your throat,” he says. His cock pulses in my mouth, growing even larger.

He used to make love to me. Even in those moments when he was rough, he was always considerate. But now, he’s just using my body for pleasure.

“Swallow,” he says, pulling on my hair.

I do what he tells me to.

“Just like that,” he groans. “I knew you could take my cock like a little slut. You have the whole world fooled, but I see you for what you are. You’re a devious little devil who gives one hell of a blow job.”

His hands travel down my body before cupping my ass. They trace the cleft between my ass cheeks until he reaches my forbidden hole.

He pushes his middle finger against it. “This is where pretty little brats like you need to get fucked.”

My eyes widen.

He might split me in half if he tried to fuck my ass.

He pulls his cock out of my mouth. He stares down at me, swiping his thumb over my bottom lip.

“Face of an angel, heart of a devil,” he murmurs in Russian.

Tears spring to my eyes.

I was a fool to think things would return to how they once were.

I’m doomed to love men who will never love me back.

He grips my jaw like he’s about to kiss me.

Instead, he flips me around. I gasp as he presses my face against the pillow and lifts my ass into the air. He pushes the fabric of my shorts aside. Cool air blows against my exposed sex.

And then I feel the heat from his mouth.

His lips latch around my clit. I squeeze my eyes shut.

Supernovas explode inside me as he tugs on my clit.

His hot tongue licks up the length of my sex, dipping into my opening to gather my honey on his tongue. And then I feel his mouth over my forbidden hole.

He’s never shied away from it before, but I never let him go that far.

I try to push his head away, but he doesn’t care about what I want right now.

His tongue snakes out, circling my rim.

My toes curl against the soft sheets. Pleasure shoots down my spine. My blood turns into lava as his tongue continues exploring my forbidden entrance.

“This is where bad girls get fucked,” he says. “Being fucked here is the only way to tame them.”

I turn boneless when I feel the vibration of his voice inside my core. It gets trapped deep inside my body, begging for release.

He pushes his thumb inside me, making me gasp. He starts fucking me with it.

“Aleksandr, I—”

He makes a clicking sound with his tongue. “That’s not what I want to hear.”

Daddy.

He spanks my ass, making me arch my back.

“It’s been a while since you got a good spanking,” he says. “I want you to remember what I did to your body every time you sit down.”

He spanks me again, harder this time.

I see stars.

Fear courses through me as I realize just how much he’s been holding back this whole time. He’s never unleashed his full power on me.

I get the feeling that’s about to change tonight.

“I keep you locked up for a reason, little girl,” he says. “Do you have any idea how corruptible you look with your perky tits and innocent eyes? I had to make sure no other boy tried to take what had always been *mine*. I wanted you all to myself because I’m a selfish motherfucker. And no boy could ever satisfy you. You need a *man*.”

His arm snakes around my hips. His rough fingers connect with my clit, and I instantly relax under his touch.

His mouth lands between my shoulder blades. Instead of kissing me there like he always does, he bites me. I wiggle my hips when I feel his cock pushing against my forbidden hole.

“It won’t fit,” I whine, delirious with pleasure and pain as he stretches me.

“Then I’ll have to cram it inside you,” he replies.

“It will hurt.”

“Only if you keep fighting it.”

His dark, commanding voice sends my heart into a frenzy.

But there’s another emotion inside me that’s stronger than fear.

Trust.

I trust this man with my life.

I melt under his dominance.

He smears cold jelly against me before pushing inside me. I feel him inside every nerve ending of my body. He stretches the limits of my mind and body, consuming me in ways I didn't know was possible.

“*Goddammit,*” he curses. “You’re all but choking my cock.”

He grabs the flesh of my ass, slapping both cheeks before using his hold on me to bottom out inside me.

He’s so deep inside me that he’s all I feel.

And then he slowly thrusts, using me for his pleasure. He seems to be going deeper and deeper with every plunge. By the time I feel his heavy balls slapping against my flesh, he’s fucking me like a brute.

Every violent thrust of his hips makes the rubber band inside me coil tighter.

He plays with my clit, teasing that bundle of nerves until my fingers claw against the bedsheets.

He grabs both of my wrists and traps them against the bed. His powerful body leans over mine as he drives in and out of my body.

“You’re squeezing my cock so good,” he grunts, thrusting into me again. “I knew you’d take it like a good little girl. It almost makes me want to forgive you for what you did.”

Tears fall down my cheeks. They’re hot and unexpected. I want to earn his forgiveness, but I know he won’t ever trust me the same way again.

I can justify my crimes all I want. But at the end of the day, I took advantage of him.

I used him.

But every rough thrust of his cock feels like redemption.

“Come for me, angel,” he says, wrapping his big hand around my throat. “Come all over my big cock.”

His expert fingers strum my clit just the right way.

The way he cuts off the oxygen to my brain makes everything all the more intense.

I climb toward that sweet release.

And when he bottoms out inside me, grinding his pelvis against my ass, the rubber band inside me snaps.

I travel through a portal, entering an alternate dimension. One where he would flip me back around and kiss me until I fell asleep. One where he would wrap his strong arms around me the entire night.

But that was before.

This is after.

Now, he only stays inside me until he gets his release.

He rolls off me now, making all the warmth leave my body.

I’m sore and breathless, like I just finished a triathlon. I flop down on the bed, completely boneless.

“Aleksandr—”

“I don’t want to hear another lie coming out of that mouth,” he says, shutting me down instantly.

He gets dressed in the dark, then walks out of the bedroom.

I watch him leave, knowing there’s not a single thing I can say that will make him want to stay.

Maybe the truth will change his mind, but I’m afraid to go there.

I’m afraid of the implications of declaring my love out loud only to be rejected by him again.

It’s better this way.

It’s better for our love to remain in the dark.

ALEKSANDR

The entire Bratva is gathered here today.

Andrei sits at the head of the table with Ruslan and me on either side of him. Our four brigadiers are at their respective positions around the table, and their most trusted soldiers stand behind them.

When Andrei nods at me, I adjust my cuff links and stand. I walk toward the flat-screen TV mounted on the wall. It's open to a popular news channel, but the video is muted.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet us on such short notice,” I say to all the men present. “Your presence is much appreciated.”

They nod in acknowledgment.

Some of these men flew in from countries all around the world. We don't trust most third-party video conference platforms, so we always prefer to meet in person.

“We're gathered here today because we've found ourselves in the middle of an epidemic,” I say.

I unmute the news channel on the TV.

A reporter stands in front of a middle school, speaking about an event that shook the entire nation—a school bus filled with children went missing earlier this morning. Distraught parents gather behind the reporter, speaking with the authorities.

“Matters are starting to get out of hand,” I say. “The FBI and CIA will be breathing down our necks in a few days, and

we must prepare ourselves for it. Even if it means we incur temporary losses.”

“It’s the Greeks,” Pavel, one of our most trusted brigadiers, grunts out loud. “We should have exterminated them from the city when we had the chance.”

“You’re right,” I say. “The Greeks *are* a nuisance, which brings me to my second point.”

The reporter behind me interviews a crying mother of a thirteen-year-old girl. I mute the TV once more.

“The second thing I wanted to discuss is that the Greeks aren’t acting alone,” I say. “They’re working with a bigger monster. And by the looks of it, it’s a kraken in the ocean. We don’t know who it is yet, but we will. Our top priority now is to find the root of this evil. If we cut off the head, the rest of the monster will fall too.”

Ruslan quietly hands folders to each of the men present here today.

It’s a compilation of all the information we have regarding the missing children and the Greek’s rise to power. It also has information on everyone the Greeks were seen associated with, along with our game plan to defeat our biggest adversary.

“This can’t be right,” one of the brigadiers says, scanning page three of his folder. “You’re shutting down the docks?”

“As I already mentioned, we’ll be scrutinized for the next few weeks or months,” I say. “And we will do whatever is required to stay out of the limelight during that time.”

“But that will cost us—”

“I wasn’t done speaking, Mikhail,” I say, interrupting the older man. “We will lose money, but we will gain time. And we will use that time to find out who the Greeks are working with.”

I turn toward the TV and open the presentation my brothers and I created yesterday. It has slides on how we’ll solve this problem once and for all.

Andrei is the mastermind behind the strategy, so he takes over the rest of the presentation.

As he speaks, my mind drifts back to last night.

It felt like something out of a dream. My cock hardens as I think about how obedient she was for me. She still trusts me with her body.

There was a time when her complete trust was all I wanted.

But now, it only makes me wonder if she's still seducing me for answers.

Andrei goes over the strategies we can use.

One of the options we considered is kidnapping the Greek mafia boss's sister. She can be used as leverage. Hearing the news of her capture will be enough to bring Jason Drakos out of hiding.

But the Greeks aren't my only problem at the moment.

I also have to deal with Bianca Davis, the woman stalking me last night.

She's mentally unstable and has psychopathic tendencies.

And I *really* don't like that she somehow ended up in New York City.

JULIE

*J*nessa is here again to watch me eat.

But instead of shooting dirty looks at me, she inspects the paintings I created yesterday.

I can see by the curiosity in her eyes that she likes them.

I ended up painting Aleksandr again. He's the only thing on my mind right now. His energy still lingers in my body, so it made sense that he showed up with every stroke of my paintbrush.

It's a sunny morning, and I'm having oatmeal for breakfast.

The creamy hints of nutmeg and cinnamon take me back to my childhood. My sisters and I used to have oatmeal all the time. It wasn't topped with blueberries and pecan nuts like it is now, but Hazel still made it flavorful by using the spices we had on hand.

"I don't get it," Inessa says, tossing her shiny black hair over her shoulder.

I take another bite of my oatmeal, waiting for her to explain.

"Why would you hurt someone you obviously care about?" she asks. "Because there's no going back from this. You know that, right?"

Pain rips through me.

I know it. She knows it. Everyone knows it.

But I can't bring myself to even imagine a life without Aleksandr. What I found with him was beautiful and true, and I don't want to accept that I ruined everything.

"Everyone's worried about him," Inessa continues. "He hasn't been sleeping."

I take a deep breath.

I couldn't see him clearly in the moonlight, but I knew something was different about him.

"I made a mistake, Inessa," I say, putting my spoon down.

She glares at the spoon. I pick it back up.

"If you could do something to ease his suffering, would you do it?" she asks.

"In a heartbeat," I reply.

"I was hoping you'd say that," she says, glancing back at the door. Polina, the housekeeper, has gone to get a cappuccino for Inessa.

Inessa turns back toward me and pushes a small key into the palm of my hand.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Your freedom," she says. "Leave, and never come back."

My mouth turns dry as I stare at the key.

"There are guards outside," I say.

"This isn't a key to the door." Her eyes travel to the window overlooking the city.

"You want me to jump out of the window?" I ask.

"Don't be ridiculous," she says. "You're not my favorite person in the world right now, but I don't want you dead. There's no jumping involved. You just need to climb out the window."

"I can't do this to him," I say, shaking my head. "He'll see it as another betrayal."

"You made your bed, now lie in it," she hisses.

“You don’t understand,” I say.

“Actually, I do,” Inessa says. “It’s really not that complicated.”

I get where she’s coming from.

Distancing myself from Aleksandr would mean he’ll eventually start healing from the pain I caused him. I’m good at hiding. If I wanted, he’ll never see me again.

And all wounds heal with time.

I should know.

I thought I’d never get over Derek, my first love. But I did. It took me the better part of a decade, but once Aleksandr came into my life, it felt as natural as the turning of seasons.

And maybe I’ll find love again.

But I know that what Aleksandr and I had is the kind of love that comes once in a hundred lifetimes. Nobody will replace him, and I’ll have to live with that.

“They will connect my escape back to you,” I tell Inessa. “Polina and you were the only two people to visit me.”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take,” Inessa says.

Footsteps approach.

I hide the key before Polina enters the room with the fresh coffee. I shovel down the last of my oatmeal even though it’s the last thing I want to do. I know Inessa won’t leave until I eat it all.

I need her to go because I know she’s right.

The kindest thing I can do to Aleksandr right now is to exit his life.

When I finish eating, Polina clears the table. Inessa stays back until the two of us are alone again.

Before leaving, she whispers, “You have twenty-four hours. I hope you make the right decision.”

And then she’s gone.

I'm alone again.

My feet carry me toward the window, and I open it with the key.

For the first time in days, I fill my lungs with fresh air. It's polluted city air, but I still feel like I'm living in the English countryside.

But I don't enjoy it for long.

Too many thoughts fill my mind.

The eternal pessimist in me tells me nothing can be salvaged between Aleksandr and me.

But the part of me stuck in a beautiful summer tells me this is just another obstacle I have to overcome.

Because these two sides of me are at war, I find the burner phone again and call my best friend.

Chloe picks up on the first ring.

"Chloe?" I say.

"Hey, Jules," she says. "I was really hoping you'd call. You have no idea how much I needed to hear your voice right now."

I was going to vent to her, but her usually cheerful voice has a tremor.

"What's wrong?" I ask immediately.

"Everything." She sighs.

"What do you mean?" I ask. My spine straightens.

"Just give me a second," she says.

I hear muffled noises on the other side as she talks to someone else. She must be on the job right now. After a minute, I hear her voice again.

"Sorry, something just came up," she says to me.

"Do you want me to call back in the evening?" I ask her. Uneasiness grows inside me. I glance behind my shoulder once more, making sure the door is still closed.

“No, it’s fine,” she says. “I just finished with the interviews. I don’t think I have it in me to do any more. Have you heard about the school bus incident?”

“What school bus incident?” I ask.

“For the past few weeks, kids have been going missing from the city,” she says. “And this morning, an entire school bus vanished into thin air. The kids and the bus are still missing. It’s terrifying to think about who could have even done something like this.”

I’m speechless.

An entire *bus*?

“I just interviewed the bus driver who was supposed to be driving the bus,” Chloe continues. “Apparently, he got a basket of baked goods from someone who had just moved into his apartment building. He ate some of the treats last evening and passed out for more than twelve hours, missing work in the morning. I’m guessing the cookies were laced with something.”

“So who was driving the bus?”

“That’s the thing,” she says. “Nobody knows. The school sent a substitute driver when the original driver didn’t report for duty. But none of the kids were there when he reached the pick-up spots. Someone else had already picked them up.”

“The crime was planned in advance,” I say.

“Yeah,” she says. “I really hope we find the kids soon. Hearing this news first thing in the morning made me sick to my stomach.”

“I wish I could do something to help,” I say, glancing down at the key in my hand.

It’s a key to my freedom.

I’ll never have to face the consequences of my actions. I won’t have to be confined to this bedroom anymore.

But everything in me aches at the thought of never seeing Aleksandr again.

At the same time, I know I can't mend his broken trust. Even if he finds it in him to forgive me, it won't be the same. A part of him will always doubt me.

"Jules?" Chloe asks. "Are you still with me?"

I take a deep breath. "I'm here."

"Babe, if you were in trouble, you'd tell me, right?" Chloe asks.

"I'm fine, Chloe," I say. "I have a key. I can escape whenever I want to."

"So why don't you?" she asks.

"Because things aren't black and white," I say. "If I leave now, I'll break his trust forever."

Memories from last night flood my brain.

We transcended time and space.

We created a universe where it was just him and me.

His hands were rough on my body. He was cruel as he left the bedroom without saying goodbye. But I also remember how he was with me when he thought I was sleeping. He was *gentle*.

I don't want to give up on him.

I don't want to give up on us.

"By the way, I did some digging last night," Chloe says. "About Bianca Davis. Have you seen her psychiatric files? They're super disturbing."

"How did you even access those?" I ask.

"You don't want to know," Chloe says. "I also gained access to her list of visitors when she was in prison."

"Again. *How?*" I ask.

"A good journalist never reveals her sources," she says. "And will you stop interrupting me for like five seconds?"

"Fine."

“So in her prison records, it showed that she only had one person who used to visit her—her mother, who’s located in New Jersey.”

“Nice work,” I say.

“Why, thank you.” I can hear the grin in her voice. “I have a college friend who lives in the same town as Bianca’s mother, so I asked her for a favor.”

I hold my breath as I wait for Chloe to continue. I don’t know why, but I brace myself for bad news.

“As expected, the mom wasn’t very welcoming,” Chloe says. “She’s a drug addict who’s barely tethered to reality. But she did reveal one thing—Bianca never went to her mother after escaping from prison.”

I have to give it to her. Bianca is psychotic, but she’s also smart. It’s too easy to get caught if the first thing you do after a prison break is visit your loved ones.

It’s one of the reasons I didn’t visit my sisters after my own escape.

It would compromise the whole mission.

“Thanks for trying, Chloe,” I say. “I really appreciate it.”

“There’s something else,” Chloe says. “After I heard back from my friend, I still had this nagging feeling I was overlooking something.”

My heart starts pumping faster again.

“You found something,” I say.

“Last night, I checked the town’s security cameras to see if Bianca ever passed through her hometown. Facial recognition showed that she was parked in front of her mother’s house, watching her from a distance.”

Just like how I watched my own sisters from a distance.

“And from there, it was easy enough to track the rental car,” she says. “It’s from New York City. I think she might still be here.”

A choked sound escapes my lips.

Goose bumps dot my arms. It's not because of the chilling news I just heard.

It's because I'm pretty sure I just heard the sound of a key turning in the door behind me.

ALEKSANDR

She's sitting by the window.

When she sees me, her eyes widen. A pretty blush hits her cheeks.

She's dressed in a yellow sundress with strings tied over her shoulders. With the sunlight pouring into the room from behind her, she looks like an angel.

"Aleksandr," she says.

"Julie." I close the door behind me.

She swallows. My cock hardens even more at the sight of the fear on her face.

"What are you doing here?" she whispers.

"Am I not allowed to visit my pretty captive in the daytime?" I ask, stalking toward her.

She blushes again. *Hard.*

I have half a mind to rip her pretty dress open just to follow the course of her blush. But that's not what I'm here for today.

Her back is plastered to the wall as I rest my hands on either side of her head. Her pupils widen, and I revel in the power I have over her.

I'm going to miss it.

I'm going to miss the way her nipples graze against my chest. I'm going to miss her soft thighs and her glistening

pussy.

Her back arches as she rubs her tits against me.

“*Aleksandr*,” she rasps.

“Always so eager, always so horny.”

I told myself I wouldn’t, but it’s inevitable. When the two of us are in the same room, the magnetism between us is irresistible. We’re drawn to each other like the planets and the stars.

“Did you wear this pretty little dress for me?” I ask, pawing one of her breasts.

She leans into my touch, filling my palm with her softness. I yank at one of the strings over her shoulder. Half of her dress falls to reveal pristine skin.

I grab her blonde hair and lean down to feast on her nipples.

“Answer my question, Julie,” I hiss, biting her hard nipple in my mouth.

She gasps. “Yes. I wore it for you.”

“I knew it,” I say. “Now what have I told you about not wearing a bra?”

“It’s what bad girls do,” she says.

“That’s right,” I say, lifting the hem of her dress. “Are you a bad girl between your thighs too?”

But she’s wearing cotton panties today.

“I’ve been good,” she says.

“That’s up to me to decide,” I say, cupping her mound from over her panties. She’s soaked all the way through. “We’ve been through this before, little girl. What should you do every time you feel ticklish between your thighs?”

“I’m supposed to come to your office,” she says.

“That’s right,” I say, slipping my hand inside her heavenly warmth. “You’re supposed to sit on my big desk in your pretty

sundress and spread your thighs to show me where it aches. I'll fix it for you. I'll make it feel better."

She gets on her tiptoes, desperate for a kiss.

I want nothing more than to bruise her lips with mine. But this isn't about love. Instead, I twist around until her chest is pressed against the wall.

I push my hard cock against her soft ass.

I press my mouth against her ear. "Did you tell anyone about the dirty things I did to you last night?"

She blinks and shakes her head.

"Good girl," I say. "Are you going to let me put it in your tight little ass again?"

She bites down on her plump lower lip, probably remembering how sore I left her last night.

I grip her ass and growl against her shoulder. "It's cute that you think you have a choice."

She looks up at me with her wide eyes.

The emotion in them is overwhelming. I remember now why I only visit her at night. She can't see me, and I can't see her.

Before I do something stupid like kiss her, I position my cock over her pussy and thrust all the way inside her.

She moans and clamps around me like a vise.

"Fuck, you're so tight that it feels like I'm fucking a virgin every night," I say, driving my cock into her body with brutal thrusts. I fuck her like there's a gun to my head, and I only have a few seconds to take my last release.

But truthfully, I've missed this.

I miss her.

I miss the bond we created over the past few months. I didn't think anything could come between us, but I was wrong.

With every ruthless drive of my hips, I try to forget about everything she did. She arches her back and lets me take her however I please.

I bite down on her long neck as I fill her up with my come one last time.

She's right there with me, pressing her back against my chest as she rides the waves of her orgasm. I watch every emotion that explodes on her face.

It's divine desperation.

It feels fated somehow.

I know I should leave.

But for a single moment, I do what I wanted to do all week.

I wrap my arms around her and rest my chin on top of her head.

She makes everything feel okay.

She means more to me than purple chocolates.

But as much as I wish it were otherwise, my feelings aren't reciprocated.

She doesn't love me, and she never will.

I open my eyes and whisper the words against her ear. "You're no longer my prisoner. You're free to go."

JULIE

That can't be right.

I must have misheard him.

I twist around to face Aleksandr. We're skin to skin now, my breasts pressed up against his sturdy chest. It takes my breath away all over again.

"Did you just say that I'm free?" I ask, searching his eyes.

"I thought you'd be more thrilled to hear it," he says. "It's what you wanted, right? To be able to leave without any consequences."

"But...why?" I ask.

"I don't owe you an explanation, Julie," he says.

But I see a hint of conflict in his eyes. He's not too thrilled about this.

I should go before he changes his mind. I should leave before things get complicated all over again.

"What's the catch?" I ask.

"There is no catch," he says.

"There's always a catch," I reply.

"There's simply nothing left for you to give me," he says, his gaze traveling down my half-naked body. "I've already taken everything I wanted from you."

His words sting. Pain ripples through my bones, sharp and unyielding.

It's made worse by the fact that he means it.

I can see it in his eyes. There's nothing left for me there.

A thousand apologies rest on the tip of my tongue. But my remorse only seems to fuel his anger.

He steps away from me.

"Get dressed," he says. "We're going to meet with my lawyer first."

"Your lawyer?" I ask.

"Yes. I need you to sign an NDA before I let you go," he says.

An NDA. That's what this relationship has come to. And it's all my fault.

I tie the straps of my sundress. "Fine. I'm ready."

"If you step outside wearing this dress, it's only going to make me want to bend you over my knee and spank you until I bruise your ass," he says matter-of-factly.

I suck in a sharp breath.

I still haven't gotten used to the desire he ignites within me. I lose my sanity with every word, every look, every touch. He turns me into a puddle of need.

I head toward the closet and select a more modest outfit.

When I turn back toward him, he makes no move to step outside the room. He doesn't even avert his eyes.

Instead, he watches me like I'm a show he paid for.

I'm hit with a sense of déjà vu.

And it makes me reckless.

I loosen the straps of my dress and tug it down my body, letting it pool around my feet.

His heavy gaze travels over every dip and valley before landing back on my eyes.

A challenge.

I turn around. Heat kisses my cheeks as I bend to peel the ruined panties off my body. I reach for a fresh pair.

He's behind me in a heartbeat.

"Let me," he growls, snatching my white panties.

"I thought you were done with me," I whisper, turning back around.

"I'll never be done with you, *tigrenok*," he says roughly, getting to his knees in front of me.

The sight of him like this, such a powerful man on his knees for me, tugs on my heartstrings.

I want to hold him in my arms for the rest of infinity.

But instead, I become mute as he dresses me.

When he finishes, his eyes are hard once more.

"Close your eyes," he says.

"Why?" I ask.

"Just do it," he growls.

The authority in his voice travels to my core, forming a tight knot that only he can undo. A soft, velvety fabric covers my eyes. A blindfold. He ties it behind my head.

"What's this for?" I ask.

"You've seen too much already," he says.

His hand wraps around my bicep as he drags me out of the penthouse bedroom. I think about the paintings I made here. I think about the burner phone stashed underneath the bed. I wonder if anybody will find it.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask.

"Stairs," he says, slowing down to make sure I don't trip. I trip anyway.

He sighs and scoops me up into his arms. I brace my hand against his chest.

We walk for what feels like an eternity.

I hear the sound of a car door opening. He dumps me in the back seat.

His musky scent floods my nostrils as he scoots in beside me.

Calloused hands remove the blindfold, but everything is still dark. But then my stomach drops as the car is taken on some kind of elevator to the ground floor.

Tiny silver lights flash by as we descend.

And then we hit the open road.

Being in the midst of a chaotic city after weeks of isolation feels overwhelming.

When I feel Aleksandr's eyes on me, I turn to face him.

And once again, unspoken confessions of love make my throat hurt.

I swallow the emotions.

I try to pretend I'm not feeling everything I'm feeling.

I glance back out the window, watching the familiar city go by. We stop at a coffee house a few blocks away.

"Stay here," Aleksandr orders, stepping out of the car. The driver follows him. I watch as the two of them meet with another suited man.

I try opening the car door.

It's locked. Of course it's locked.

The men step inside the coffee house to talk. Panic flares inside me. I never liked the feeling of being trapped, and now, it's made worse by the fact that I've been locked inside a bedroom for the past few days.

I glance around inside the car, looking for something else to focus on. My eyes land on a file tucked into the car seat pocket behind the driver's seat.

Curiosity gets the best of me.

I open the folder to find a grainy photograph of a school bus that looks like it was taken by a traffic camera. This must

be the school bus Chloe told me about earlier this morning.

I can see the faces of some of these kids in the photograph. I know it's important evidence, but looking at their faces makes it a thousand times worse.

Purpose lights a fire in my belly. The instinct to find these kids and bring them back home takes over me.

For a second, I get the horrible doubt that Aleksandr is somehow behind this. But I flip through the rest of the pages and quickly put together that he's investigating this too. And it somehow involves the Greek mafia. On the last page, there's a photo of a beautiful, dark-haired woman.

Thalia Drakos, reads the inscription underneath.

There's a sharp rap on my window. I startle, putting the papers back in the folder just as Aleksandr opens the door.

"You're really milking this opportunity, huh?" he asks.

I'm surprised to see he's not mad. If anything, he looks amused. He must be happy to get rid of me and finally move on with his life.

"I was just curious," I say. The tips of my ears redden.

"Come, he's waiting for you," Aleksandr says, leading me toward the coffee house. There's a bounce to his step that I haven't seen in a long time.

We enter the coffee house together.

It's a fancy place with big indoor plants, leather armchairs, and polished floorboards. Classical music softly plays through the speakers.

Aleksandr and his lawyer sit opposite me.

Introductions are made.

"Do you know what an NDA is, Miss Carpenter?" the lawyer asks, cutting right to the chase.

I look at the man. He has gold-rimmed circular glasses resting on the tip of his haughty nose. He looks at me like I'm

a bug under his shoes. I suddenly have the violent urge to break his glasses in half just to watch his smug smile falter.

“Of course I know what an NDA is,” I snap.

His frown deepens as he starts reading out the agreement. It’s long and tedious. Aleksandr, for whatever reason, finds all of this highly amusing. He’s tapping his foot on the floor like this is the most exciting thing in the world.

Outside the window, a black van passes by.

It catches my attention because it’s driving a lot slower than the other vehicles on the road.

The lawyer clears his throat, drawing my focus back to the NDA.

Just as I look back at the papers, I hear the crack of gunshots.

I lower my head as bullets connect with the glass windows. I crouch behind a giant potted plant to my right. I peek through the large, dark green leaves to see that the black van’s door is open. Men holding submachine guns are firing at the café.

I reach for my hip holster on reflex, the place where I used to keep my gun.

Aleksandr reaches for me under the table.

“Are you okay, *tigrenok*?” he asks.

“Who are they?” I ask him.

“The Italians,” he says.

Blood pounds in my ears.

I’ve been trying to track down New York City’s Italian mafia for ages. After being on the receiving end of so much scrutiny in the past decades, they’re notoriously hard to find now.

The bullets are still coming.

This is my one chance.

I lift my head again. I try to see beyond the submachine guns. I’m still protected by a large potted plant, but I can see

their faces now.

One of the men, in particular, catches my attention.

Derek.

He's alive.

And he's holding a rifle against his shoulder, raining down destruction on the world.

ALEKSANDR

*I*n this relationship built on deception and lies, Julie wasn't the only one with secrets.

I had my fair share of them, too.

I knew that the man Julie so earnestly mourned was very much alive.

He was never killed by the Italian mafia. It's true that he owed them money, but instead of paying up, he saw the allure of organized crime.

He stopped writing letters home, letting Julie believe the worst had happened.

His Italian descent made it easy for him to become a made man. It's been years since he joined the mafia, but he's still a low-ranking soldier. They use him for petty crimes, like blowing up one of my coffee houses.

Earlier this morning, I received information that the Italians would try to attack this coffee house today.

It was the perfect opportunity.

All I had to do was sit behind the bulletproof glass and let her see everything. I want her to know what it feels like to be deceived by someone you love.

The black van speeds away just as police sirens sound in the distance.

She's trembling on the floor now.

“You look like you saw a ghost,” I say, smirking down at her.

Her eyes snap up to mine. “You set this up. You knew the whole time that he was alive.”

“Oh, did I forget to mention that?” I ask. “It must not have come up in our conversations.”

Something in her eyes breaks as she looks at me.

“How long have you known?” she whispers.

“I looked into him the day I met you,” I say. “I found the missing persons report you filed. When I saw a photograph of him, he seemed familiar, like someone I’d seen before. And from there, it didn’t take too long to connect the dots.”

“I can’t believe you would keep something like this from me,” she accuses.

“Yeah, because every man wants nothing more than his dream girl to go back into the arms of her ex-lover,” I say.

Julie and I are still crouched underneath the table. My lawyer had already been briefed on what was about to happen, so he didn’t bother to hide when the gunshots started.

“Why would Derek join the Italian mafia?” she muses. “It’s not like him.”

“You can ask him that yourself. I’ll give you his phone number.”

She’s lost in thought as she stares out the tall glass windows. It’s bulletproof, of course. It’ll take more than a couple of bullets to bring down one of my cafés. The same goes for every restaurant and club we own.

“Why tell me this now?” Julie asks, turning back to me.

“I wanted you to know what betrayal tastes like,” I say.

But really, it’s a test of loyalty. I want to know who she’ll choose now. Him or me.

She’s pined after him her whole life. But in the cabin, everything changed. She made me believe that a man like me

was worthy of paradise. Of love.

That was before she pulled a fast one on me.

“He was such a talented artist,” she says. “I can’t believe he would join the mafia.”

“People change,” I say.

“Or maybe I was too blind to see him for who he really was,” she says.

I grit my teeth as jealousy rears its ugly head. I don’t like that we’re still talking about him.

“And he let me believe he was dead,” she continues, shaking her head. “What kind of person does that?”

A desperate one.

“Sign the NDA, Julie,” I say, standing and motioning for her to do the same.

The police sirens get louder. We don’t have much time left.

She blinks, as if she’s completely forgotten about the NDA. The lawyer offers her a pen, which she takes with shaky hands. She signs in all the required places.

“You’re free to go,” I say, buttoning my suit jacket.

She looks up at me. And I’m hit with an intense desire to have her back in my arms.

Every single moment we spent together flashes in front of my eyes—the meadow, her painting of us, the big family dinners, how she tasted sweeter than chocolate. The stars were the only witness to our love. And for the first time in my life, I wanted to share my life with someone else.

I hand her a piece of paper.

It has Derek’s phone number.

The least that motherfucker owes her is a conversation.

And then, I turn away from the only love I’ve ever known. I greet the police with a big smile and assure them that everything is alright.

And with every second that passes, the remaining part of my heart that's human turns to ice.

JULIE

All of my senses are on overdrive.

The flashing red and blue of the NYPD with the sirens and the commotion is too much. Aleksandr is all smiles as he explains the situation to the police. The man drips with charisma in every situation.

And I can't take my eyes off him.

Tears roll down my cheeks as I watch him.

I just found out that Derek is alive. But it's not my lost love I'm crying for. I'm mourning the love I had with Aleksandr and how I ruined it all.

He doesn't want anything to do with me anymore.

And I can't blame him for it.

But his apathy stings more than his rage. At least when he was still angry with me, I knew he still cared.

I wipe the tears from my cheeks and head toward the restroom.

I find a black trash bag on the bathroom counter filled with things Aleksandr left for me. A sleek black wig for disguise and a backpack filled with clothes, money, a burner phone, and a gun.

There's also a check. It's made out for ten million dollars.

My heart twists as I think about that glorious day in the meadow. We stayed there from dawn till dusk. The painting of him and I came together so effortlessly.

It was my best work yet, and he said he wanted to buy it. I was joking when I said I'd give it to him for ten million dollars.

But Aleksandr is a man of his word.

I leave the check on the counter. No way will I ever cash it.

After I signed the NDA, the lawyer told me to go to the restroom before taking the exit at the back of the café. It's to prevent me from running into the police.

I'm still a wanted fugitive.

As I leave the coffee house, a choked sob rises up my throat.

I take the subway and end up on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The sun is high in the sky now. I take a sip of water and stare at the piece of paper Aleksandr gave me.

Derek's phone number stares back at me.

I used to dream about this.

I wanted nothing more than to suddenly find out that Derek was still alive.

But even if he wasn't a part of the Italian mafia, I know my heart no longer belongs to him. Maybe it never did. He was a strong male presence in my life at a time when I really needed one.

The two of us bonded over our mutual interests. And in my head, I made it out to be more than it was.

My heart was convinced it would stop beating if he weren't in my life.

When he left, I thought I would die.

But I'm no longer the girl I used to be. She died when Aleksandr kissed me for the first time.

I take the burner phone and dial the number.

"Hello?" Derek's rich, familiar voice fills my ears.

The rest of the city fades away, and all that exists is his voice and my rage.

He lied to me for *years*.

He must have seen my face all over the news, but he didn't come to visit me even once. Nobody knew that the arrest was all a ploy.

"Hello?" he says again. "Who is this?"

"You let me think that you were dead," I say.

He doesn't say a word, but he doesn't have to. His silence speaks volumes.

"Where are you?" he asks. "It's better if we have this conversation in person, Julie."

I realize that I no longer trust him.

He used to be someone kind, someone I could always count on. But after I saw him with his Italian gangster buddies, I don't know what to think anymore.

"I saw you at the café," I say. "Are you ashamed of who you are now?"

"You were at the coffee house?" he asks. "How did you find me? Who gave you my number?"

There's an edge in his voice that wasn't there before. I can't believe that he's the one asking *me* questions.

"Julie, things aren't always how they appear to be," he says. "Give me a chance to explain."

"Fuck you," I say.

And then I hang up.

My heart thrashes inside my rib cage.

I don't know if it's the phone call with Derek or something else altogether, but the little hairs at the back of my neck stand on end.

I get the feeling that I'm being watched.

But the pain inside me is too overwhelming. It's all I can feel right now, and it feels like it will never end.

All I know is that I don't want to be alone at this moment.

I dial the number I know by heart.

"Hi, it's me," I say. "Can you come get me?"

ALEKSANDR

She might be out in the city, but she's still in my world.

I'm the scientist, and she's the specimen under my observation.

As she walked through the streets, I had two guards behind her, two guards in front of her, and two guards on either side of her. She was protected at all times. The bodyguards were switched regularly to keep her from suspecting she was being followed.

She takes the subway and then walks through the streets of Fifth Avenue in a daze.

The guards have bodycams on them that let me see her from every angle.

Her long black wig swishes behind her as she moves. She wraps her arms around herself. Tears stream down her cheeks, but nobody passing by her seems to care.

She stops in front of the Met.

She stares up at the museum's grand entrance, like it will hold all the answers she's looking for. She remains immobile for a full minute before deciding to sit on the stairs.

She calls him.

Fire ignites inside my rib cage. Flames threaten to consume me whole. I want nothing more than to find her, throw her over my shoulder, and bring her back to where she belongs—by my side.

But I always knew I'd have to eventually tell her about Derek.

I always felt guilty about my big secret. Little did I know, both of us were lying to each other the whole time.

Andrei clears his throat. I glance at my brothers. They're seated around me, watching the camera feed.

"She made the call," Andrei says.

"It doesn't mean anything," I say, gritting my teeth.

"You're being delusional again," Ruslan says, shaking his head. "You should never have let her go."

"She's still under my watch," I say. "I didn't let her go."

"And what if she decides to go back to that man?" Andrei asks.

"Then the two of them deserve each other," I say.

"If you ask me, you're just setting yourself up for disappointment," Ruslan says.

"Nobody asked you," I say, keeping my eyes on Julie.

She hung up. It was a very short call. She's bawling her eyes out now, crying harder than I've ever seen.

It tugs at that protective instinct I still have for her.

"Do you want to know *why* I think you're making a mistake?" Ruslan asks.

"Not really," I say.

"It's because that other man was her first love," he says. "You never really get over your first love."

I lunge at him, wrapping my hand around his throat. He doesn't even blink. His face remains stoic as he waits for me to get my shit together.

But instead, I turn even more deranged.

I lean forward until my face is inches from his.

"I don't care who came first. I intend to be her last."

JULIE

A girl with strawberry-blond hair runs up the stairs. I stand to greet her, and she barrels into me, nearly knocking me back down.

“Oh my God, Julie, I missed you so freaking much,” she says, squeezing me in her tight embrace. “It’s been way too long. Promise me you’ll never leave me worried like that ever again.”

“I can’t promise you that,” I say, smiling despite the hopelessness that has descended over me like a cloud.

She squeezes me tighter and then reaches for the ends of my black wig.

“You look like a seductress,” she says. And then she scans our surroundings. “Where is he?”

“He’s not here,” I tell her.

“Are you sure?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m sure.”

I think about everything that ensued after Aleksandr entered my room this morning. For a brief moment, my world was complete. But then, everything shattered.

I take a deep breath, and I tell her everything.

About Aleksandr, about Derek, about the lies that added up.

“I can’t believe Aleksandr let you go,” she says.

“Why?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know. He doesn’t seem like the type. But I’m so glad to have you all to myself again.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from crying again.

“You had it bad, huh?” she says, giving me another hug. And then she frowns, glancing down at my body. “Hasn’t he been feeding you?”

“I lose my appetite when I’m anxious,” I say.

“I have the opposite problem,” Chloe confesses. “Anyway, fuck boys. They’re not worth crying over. I know just what you need.”

Her blue eyes sparkle with mischief.

It tugs at something inside me that’s been dormant for too long.

“Don’t you dare take me to a strip club, Chloe,” I say.

“No, we’re grown-ups now,” she says. “I’m taking you to a masquerade ball.”

“I can’t,” I tell her. “I have to go speak with my handler before she sends agents after me.”

“That can wait until tomorrow,” she says.

“Not really.”

“You deserve one night of fun,” she says. “I’m following a lead at the charity gala, but it’ll be so much more fun if you came too. Say yes, Julie.”

I want to say no.

I spent an entire life saying no to everything.

I’ve resisted everything good that came my way and sabotaged all of my relationships in the process. I made all of these sacrifices, only to find that none of it was worth it in the end.

I sigh.

Chloe claps her hands. “Is that a yes?”

“I guess it’s not like I have other plans,” I say.

She squeals and hugs me tighter. “*I love you, I love you, I love you.* We’re going to have *so* much fun tonight.”

She takes me out for lunch, and then we go shopping to find a dress for me and shoes for Chloe.

We enter a cute boutique.

“These are cute,” I say, showing her glamorous stilettos with crystal embellishments.

“Ooh, yes, these would be perfect for the dress I bought,” Chloe says.

“What size do you need those in?” the store assistant asks.

“Size ten,” Chloe says.

The assistant’s lips stretch in a flat smile. “I’m sorry, we don’t have this particular model in size ten.”

“What about these?” I say, pointing at another pair of stilettos that look like they’d be perfect for the red carpet.

“We’re sorry,” he says, shaking his head as he frowns at Chloe’s feet.

“Do you have *anything* in size ten?” she asks, resting her hand on her hip.

“I’ll have to check,” he says, disappearing into the back.

Chloe frowns when we’re alone. “I wish I had tiny feet like you.”

“Your feet are perfect for your height,” I say, bumping her shoulder with mine. “Do you want to go to another store?”

“No, the dresses are cute here,” she says. “We still have to find one for you.”

The store assistant returns with exactly one box.

He opens it to reveal iridescent glass slippers with a slightly blue hue.

“Um, these are kind of gorgeous,” I say, plucking them out and placing them in front of Chloe’s feet.

She tries them on and beams. “They match the dress perfectly, too. I’ll take them.”

“Perfect,” the assistant says. “I’ll have them ready at the checkout counter for you.”

Chloe grins as she tugs me toward the dresses.

And despite everything, I find that I’m actually enjoying myself. The worst has happened, but being in Chloe’s orbit makes it seem like it might not be the end of the world.

She tells me about her lead—a billionaire from California who’ll be attending the charity gala. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her so excited, and she’s the kind of person who gets excited about everything.

“So what’s so special about this billionaire?” I ask as we browse through the boutique’s dresses.

“His name is Max Montgomery,” she says. “He’s California’s most eligible bachelor, and he comes from one of America’s richest families.”

“Why do you want to investigate him?” I ask.

“I have reason to believe that they’re a covert crime organization masquerading as powerful billionaires,” she says.

“You just described every crime family that exists today,” I say.

“Yeah, but this family is *big, big, Julie,*” she says. “The truth will be scandalous, and I want to write a real story for once. Something deeper than celebrity gossip.”

I want to ask her how she plans to investigate this corrupt billionaire, but she pulls out a lilac dress and slaps me in the face with the hanger.

“This one is perfect,” she squeals. She shoves me toward the fitting rooms. “*Go.* Try it on.”

So I do.

When I see myself in the mirror, my first thought is to send a photo to Aleksandr. The realization that I can’t do that anymore guts me all over again.

Chloe rips open the thick velvet curtain. “Are you done?”

“I could have been naked,” I say.

“You were taking too long,” she says. “And by the way, you look like a princess. This is the dress for you, Jules.”

When we exit the boutique together, I get that feeling of being watched again.

I wonder if it’s Aleksandr. But I know the way his gaze feels on my skin—like melting honey.

This feels more like fingernails dragged across a chalkboard.

JULIE

Chloe has a wardrobe mishap, where she accidentally rips the right side of her brand-new dress.

“Shit, our limo will arrive soon,” she says. “I can’t wear this dress now.”

We’re in our old apartment. It’s risky to be here, but it’s just for a few hours. And plus, I’ll be seeing my handler tomorrow anyway, so the case against me will be dropped.

I assess the rip in her dress.

“Do you have any sewing supplies?” I ask.

Growing up poor made me resourceful. I never let anything go to waste if I can help it. And that includes a gorgeous red carpet dress that has never been worn.

“You really think you can save it?” she asks.

“Consider me your fairy godmother,” I say. “And not to toot my own horn, but I think I can add a little more zest to the dress, too.”

She removes the dress and hands it to me before fetching the sewing materials.

I inspect the dress.

The classy powder-blue number has little going for it except for the brand name. I think it could use some of Chloe’s personality.

I rummage through her closet until I find what I’m searching for—a sheer black tulle with polka dots on it. It’s

from a thrifted skirt she bought but never wore.

“Can I use this?” I ask her.

“Uh, sure,” she says.

A cute wrinkle forms between her eyebrows as I rip open the rest of her blue dress. I sew the sheer black tulle underneath the dress, my hands moving quickly as I work.

Hazel and Belle taught me how to sew when I was just a kid. It was my way of contributing to our house.

When I finish, I hold it up in front of Chloe.

It was beautiful before, but there’s an edge to it now. It will also be showing a lot more skin.

“I’ve never really worn anything like this,” she says, blinking at the dress. A thick slit down the right side of her dress is now covered with see-through black tulle.

“Girl, you’re built like a goddess,” I say, looking pointedly at her tall frame. “If anybody can pull off this dress, it’s you. And don’t wear anything underneath.”

I start working on the accessories that will complete her look.

“There’s more?” she asks.

“You’ll see,” I reply.

I fashion gloves from the rest of the black polka dot tulle. I add an elastic near the wrists. And then, I take the mask she’ll be wearing and add black lace detail around it.

“Here,” I say, handing everything to her. “All done.”

She dons the dress with the black gloves and the mask. We both turn speechless as we stare at her reflection in the mirror.

I imagined it would look good, but I didn’t think she’d look *this* good.

“You look *phenomenal*, Chloe,” I say.

Her eyes meet mine in the mirror. “Thank you so much, Jules. I don’t know what I’d have done if it weren’t for you.”

“I’m glad you like it,” I say.

She turns around and wraps her arms around me. I sink into her warm embrace.

“And now I feel bad about lying to you,” she says.

“What did you do, Chloe?” I ask suspiciously.

She wrings her hands together. “So, um, we weren’t exactly invited to this masquerade ball. If anybody asks, your name is Tiffany. And I’m Ella.”

Through the window, I see a black limo pulling up on the street.

“Tiffany and Ella?” I ask, my voice growing high-pitched. “Tell me you’re joking.”

She holds my shoulders. “But don’t worry, nobody will *ever* find out.”

“We’re *crashing* this ball?” I ask. “And you’re just telling me this now?”

“I know, I know, I’m a horrible person, aren’t I?” she says. “I’m sorry for dropping this bomb on you, but I knew you would never agree if I told you the truth.”

“Yes,” I say. “For a *reason*.”

Chloe tries to apply her lipstick, but her hands are shaking. She would never admit this in a million years, but she’s nervous about tonight. She’s been on edge the entire night, and I know she needs me as much as I need her.

And for that reason alone, I go along with it.

“Here, let me,” I say, taking the lipstick from her and applying it evenly across her lips.

She grins when I finish. “Ugh, you’re the best. I don’t deserve you.”

I spent an entire week knowing that I let everyone down and that they hated me. At my lowest point, I hated myself, too. Which is why it’s so refreshing to be around my supportive friend. In her eyes, I can never do any wrong.

We head to the limo, which drops us off at a lavish mansion.

The gala dinner is being held in an outdoor garden. It's not just any garden—it looks like something made for a queen. Everything is perfectly curated, every flower perfectly in place, and every napkin perfectly folded.

We came early just to avoid running into other people.

“So tell me about Tiffany and Ella,” I say. “Who are we supposed to be?”

“Trust fund babies,” she says. “We're sisters, and our dad is some rich oil magnate.”

“What if the real sisters show up?” I ask.

“They weren't able to make it,” she says. “They caught the flu and forgot to cancel. And please don't ever break character, Tiff. This whole place is crawling with security.”

We walk around the garden together. I don't think I've ever seen so many flowers in one place before. Royal blue orchards, crimson roses, blush pink hydrangeas, wisteria vines with lavender blossoms hanging from pergolas. The tables have gorgeous centerpieces with a single hurricane candle in the middle. It gives the whole place a very romantic vibe, like it's a place where your wildest dream could come true.

People start to filter in as we sip champagne and have tiny sandwiches.

Everyone's gaze lingers on Chloe.

I don't blame them. I can't stop checking her out myself.

She's statuesque with a smoking hot body, and the dress really brings out her best features.

“We're attracting attention,” she says, wringing her hands together again. “People might want to strike up a conversation. It's all your fault. Why did you have to make this dress look so good?”

“They're not looking at the dress. They're looking at you,” I say, smiling up at her.

She looks absolutely radiant in blue. She's also extremely nervous, but it doesn't show on her face. She's good at bottling up her emotions.

"And besides," I say. "That's a good thing since you plan to seduce a billionaire."

She told me earlier that the only way to get answers from the Californian billionaire was to seduce him.

I told her it was fine as long as she didn't fall in love with him.

My eyes catch on a tall, dark man in the distance. For a second, I think it's Aleksandr, but this man can't take his eyes off Chloe. He looks like someone important.

A server holding champagne flutes passes by. I accept one. The effervescent drink feels light and airy on my tongue.

"You have an admirer at three o'clock," I whisper, telling her about the man to my right.

Her eyes lock on his.

I know immediately this is the billionaire she told me about. Max Montgomery.

"The powder rooms are behind him," I say. "You should walk by him. Give him a chance to approach you. I know you wanted to get his attention."

I notice a flush in her cheeks I've never seen. Her hands tremble.

I've never seen her this nervous about anything before.

"What are you waiting for?" I say. "Go before your nerves get the best of you."

She looks like a trapped animal.

I know if I leave her to her own devices, she'll spend the rest of the evening avoiding the man. So I do what she would do in my position. I shove her toward him.

She shoots me a glare but continues walking.

I sip my champagne to hide my smile.

From what I gathered, this charity is for orphaned children. I look back at Max Montgomery, the billionaire Chloe says has links to the mafia. If she's right, it means dirty billionaires like him use charities like these to show the world what a generous person they are while making sure nobody looks at the darker side of their operations.

Chloe passes by Max Montgomery.

He doesn't take his eyes off her for even a moment. I don't like the intensity in his eyes. It's too focused, too sharp. His eyes track her like a hunter about to pounce on its prey.

Just then, I see a large, dark-haired man pass through the crowd. He's wearing a white mask and an expensive black suit. The sight of him has my heart racing.

Aleksandr.

I weave my way through the crowd, trying to move closer toward him.

But every time I catch a glimpse of the white mask, he slips away.

I'm taken past the lights of the outdoor garden. The golden hue is dimmer as I cross the flower garden. I see the flash of white again by the marble stairs that lead to the mansion.

The doors of the entrance are open. I walk toward it, pushing the door open the rest of the way so I can peer inside.

I bite down on my lower lip.

"Aleksandr?" I call out.

The scent of his aftershave lingers in the air. I want nothing more than to see him again.

The foyer is dark. There's a grand piano in one corner. A crystal chandelier glitters in the dark. There are shadows everywhere.

I see that flash of white again. He's right in front of me, a few feet away with his back to me.

"Aleksandr," I say again.

My pulse quickens with anticipation. He's here for me. I knew he'd come back. I knew he wouldn't let me go.

I run toward him, closing the distance between us. I grab his shoulder.

He turns around, the mask still on his face. But the angle of his jaw, the shade of his hair, the shape of his mouth—all of it is wrong.

“Can I help you, miss?” the person asks.

I step away as if electrocuted.

I remember then that the waitstaff wore black suits and white masks tonight. It's their uniform.

He's holding a tray with crumbs of appetizers on it.

“I'm sorry,” I say, trying to suppress the wave of emotions that rise inside me. “I thought you were someone else.”

He looks concerned.

“Would you like some water?” he asks.

“No, thank you.”

I walk out of the mansion.

My limbs feel heavy as I move.

Today, I found out that Derek is still alive. The same Derek who used to write me letters. The same Derek who taught me how to paint. The same Derek my entire life revolved around.

But instead, I'm thinking about the man whose heart I broke.

I didn't know until I met Aleksandr that love could feel so liberating. It wasn't something I was tied down to. It was something that set me free.

It gave me wings.

But I came crashing down anyway.

ALEKSANDR

She looks gorgeous in that lilac dress.

The beast in me wants to storm inside that pretentious gala and steal her away. If it weren't for my brothers, I would have done just that.

I have contacts attending the ball.

There will be an outdoor dinner followed by drunken revelry in the ballroom. After everyone is drunk enough, they start the auction at the stroke of midnight.

Tears stream down her cheeks as she returns to the outdoor gardens to search for her friend.

I know from the camera feed that her journalist friend left with one of the Montgomery brothers.

“How long are you going to torture yourself?” comes a soft voice beside me. Inessa closes her hardbound copy of *The Brothers Karamzov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky and places it on the table.

Andrei, Ruslan, Oksana, and Inessa take turns keeping me company.

“I'm just keeping an eye on her,” I say.

“That's what the bodyguards are for,” Inessa says. “You should get some rest, Sasha.”

“I'm good,” I say.

I never wanted to let Julie go. But it's the only way.

I glance back at the monitor.

Tears are still rolling down her cheeks. She keeps trying to wipe them away, but a fresh wave of tears replaces them. She looks so tiny and fragile that it's hard not to feel bad for her.

"Andrei told me that you plan on taking her back," Inessa says.

"I don't know how to say this nicely, but this isn't any of your business, Inessa," I reply.

"I know, but that's not going to change the fact that we care about your well-being," she says. "You haven't been sleeping. You drink like ten cups of espresso a day. You have Red Bull for breakfast. This isn't healthy behavior, Aleksandr. You need to forget about her and move on."

She stands up to turn off the monitors.

"Don't," I warn her.

Inessa sighs and stares at Julie's face. "Betrayal is the ultimate sin."

She says that like it's a reminder to herself.

"We were both at fault," I say. "She wasn't the only one keeping secrets. I had a pretty big one I was hiding too."

"That doesn't make it okay," she says.

"She was conflicted the whole time," I say. "Did I tell you about how she refused to leave that prison?"

"It was probably a part of her game," she says.

"She even bit me," I say, smiling at the memory. "And I could tell something troubled her the entire time she was with me. It was always on her conscience."

At the time, I assumed it had something to do with Derek. But I know now that she also felt guilty about having to deceive me.

Because underneath it all, Julie is a kind person.

"She betrayed us twice now, Aleksandr," Inessa says. "Don't let her make a fool of you the third time."

“There won’t be a third time,” I say.

JULIE

Chloe doesn't show up for dinner. She's not there for dessert either.

Everybody heads toward the ballroom to dance the night away. There's a DJ and a live orchestra. They play together to create the strangest symphony. Violins play furiously right before the beat drops.

I decide I like it.

I don't know anybody at this party, but the vibes are playful and fun. Especially as the night progresses.

When everybody takes to the dance floor, I do too.

I dance until my feet ache.

The euphoria of the dancing and the drinks unlocks something inside me. It makes me feel closer to Aleksandr.

This is the wavelength we existed in—playful, animalistic, *fun*.

There's a tap on my shoulder.

I turn to find Chloe standing behind me. Her dress is ripped near the neckline, and her hair is a mess. Her cheeks are streaked with mascara. She's been crying.

"Oh my God, Chloe, what happened?" I ask.

"Can we go?" she asks.

"Did someone hurt you?"

I swear to God, if I find out someone did something unspeakable to her, I will burn down this whole mansion.

She squeezes her eyes shut. “Coming here was a mistake. I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

She glances up at the antique wall clock.

It’s nearly midnight.

The auction will be starting soon. I heard there are some paintings by Vincent Van Gogh and Claude Monet. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see prestigious art that has only belonged to influential families for generations.

Needless to say, I was looking forward to it.

But Chloe needs me now.

“Let’s go,” I say, taking her hand.

She frowns. “Wait. You wanted to see the exhibit, right?”

“Honestly, I’d be just as happy to go to Taco Bell with you,” I say.

She squeezes me in a hug.

“I love you.” She sniffles.

“You haven’t told me why you’re crying,” I say, squeezing her tightly. “And why is your dress ripped?”

“Later,” she says, glancing at the ornate clock again.

It’s nearly midnight now.

She tugs at my hand, dragging me toward the exit. She starts running when we reach the marble stairs, the fabric of her blue dress blowing behind her.

The clock strikes midnight.

Chimes ring out into the cold night like haunted musical notes. The scent of flowers still lingers in the air. I feel someone watching us. I glance up to find that it’s the Californian billionaire she was going to investigate. I glare up at him, but even now, he only has eyes for Chloe.

The cherry of a cigar flares bright as he watches her leave.

When we reach the bottom step, Chloe trips over her feet, losing one of her glass slippers.

I'm about to grab it when she tugs on my arm.

"Leave it," she says, taking the other one in her hand and running barefoot.

"Chloe, you're freaking me out," I say.

"Sorry," she mumbles. But she doesn't slow down.

A taxi waits for us, courtesy of the gala. It'll drop us off wherever we want in the city.

"Taco Bell, please," I say.

It must not be the first Taco Bell request because the driver doesn't look perplexed in the least.

Chloe and I catch our breath in the back seat.

A few minutes pass, but Chloe remains quiet. She glances back at the road behind us as if to check whether anybody is following us.

I decide I'll interrogate her after she eats a burrito.

My bestie can get hangry sometimes, and when she does, the last thing she wants to do is talk.

The taxi stops in front of a Taco Bell. I try to tip the driver, but he refuses to take our money.

"Thank you so much," I say, closing the taxi door.

Heads turn when we walk into the Taco Bell. Needless to say, we're *way* overdressed. A flush creeps up my cheeks, but Chloe barely notices the attention we're getting. After placing our order, we sit down at one of the tables.

I wait for my friend to speak, but she remains unusually quiet.

Under the bright lights of the restaurant, I see things about her that I previously missed.

Her lipstick is smudged. There's a handprint on her neck, like someone grabbed her neck a little too tightly. There's also a trail of hickeys down her chest.

Her knee bounces as she chews on her lower lip. Her eyes keep moving toward the parking lot, like she's expecting someone to show up any second.

"Okay, I can't take it anymore," I say. "Speak."

Her eyes flick to mine. "I really don't want to talk about it, Julie."

"If you keep me in the dark, I'll just assume the worst," I say. "You know about me and my anxiety."

She watches me for a few seconds, like she's deciding how much she wants to share.

Again, this is not like her. She's outgoing and bubbly, not anxious like me. She likes to talk about her problems, not shove everything under the rug like I do.

Our food arrives.

Neither of us touches it.

Again. That's *so* not like her.

"What happened with Max Montgomery, Chloe?" I ask. "Because all I know is that you disappeared at the beginning, and then I didn't see you until midnight."

"I never should have tried to mess with a man like him," she says.

"What happened?" I ask.

Her eyes turn misty.

"Did he hurt you?" I ask, gripping the edge of the table tighter.

"It was wonderful." Tears roll down her cheeks. "Until it wasn't."

"Chloe, you have a bruise on your neck," I say.

She touches it absently.

"It wasn't like that." She sighs.

"What was it like?"

“I don’t even know what it was. I thought it meant something, but that was just me being a girl, I guess.”

I’ve never heard Chloe talk about another man like this. She’s either completely terrified or completely consumed.

“So he didn’t physically hurt you?” I ask.

Her eyebrows furrow as she shakes her head.

“Did he say something hurtful?” I ask.

“Not exactly,” she says.

“Then, why are you so upset?”

“I never imagined that my whole life would change in just a few hours,” she says absently, touching her neck. There’s a dreamlike look in her eyes.

A nasty suspicion crawls into my mind.

“Did he give you anything to drink?” I ask, wondering if he spiked her drink.

“No, I didn’t drink anything,” she says. “I didn’t have to.”

“I bet you didn’t eat anything either,” I say, handing her the burrito.

She takes a bite and chews. She blinks a few times, like she’s just realizing that we had burritos in front of us all along. When she’s halfway through the burrito, some color returns to her face. I’m glad I didn’t completely lose my friend.

“I had a really shitty morning, Jules,” she says.

“Yeah?”

“My stepmother called first thing in the morning,” she says. “We got into this huge fight because she wants me to move back home. And when I got to work, I heard about the school bus and the kids. It seemed like one of those days when everything was against me. But then I heard from you, and everything felt right in the world again.”

She finishes the rest of her burrito and sips her drink.

“I just...I never felt this way for anyone, Julie,” she says. “The second he took his mask off, I got swept away in the

moment. And when I was with him, it was like he took my mind off everything else that was happening, you know? It was like we were in our own world, where nothing could ever touch me.”

Her words hit a little too close to home.

I found love when I least expected it.

And from the looks of it, my best friend fell in love and had her heart broken in the same night.

ALEKSANDR

The door opens.

Andrei steps into my office, closing the door behind him.

“It’s three in the morning,” he says. “You should sleep, Sasha.”

“Not right now,” I say.

He walks around my desk to face the monitors. I have cameras on the apartment where Julie is staying for the night.

“It’s not healthy,” Andrei says. “We’re worried about you.”

“Leave me alone, Andrei. I have a blinding headache right now.”

“And why do you think that is?” he asks, picking up one of the Red Bulls littered on the desk. “You can’t keep drinking these every time your brain screams at you to lie down for a while.”

“You’re making my headache worse, Andrei,” I grit out.

My vision blurs for a few seconds. The pounding in my temples intensifies.

“I’m sorry, but you leave me no choice.” Andrei comes up behind me, and sticks a needle into my elbow.

He moves so quickly that he’s pulling the needle out before I can grab it.

I stand and spin around. “What the hell did you do?”

“Sleep,” he says, resting his hands on my shoulders. I try to fight him off, but his hands are too heavy.

“What did you do?” I ask again.

The room starts to spin.

“You’ll just sleep for a little while,” he says.

I try to keep my eyes open. I see another man walking into my office. *Ruslan*.

“You too?” I hiss. “Traitors. Both of you.”

They lift me and haul me away from the monitors. Away from *her*.

“You’re family,” Ruslan grunts. “We take care of family.”

JULIE

J trace my thumb over my FBI badge. It used to mean the world to me. It still does. I've always believed in justice. But it came at a cost.

I show my badge to security before walking into the FBI New York Field Office.

Jessica Sharpe, my handler, waits by my desk. I assume that by now, she told people that I've been undercover this whole time.

"Hello, Agent Carpenter," she says. "I trust that your report is ready?"

"I don't have anything to report," I say. "I'm here to hand in my badge and my gun."

Heads turn when I say those words.

I didn't think it would ever come to this, but here I am.

Agent Sharpe narrows her eyes. "Come have a word with me in my office."

I follow her, listening to the click of her Louis Vuitton heels. Once we're in her private office, she locks the door and draws the blinds.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" she asks.

"No, I've had a lot of time to think this through," I say. "I can no longer continue working here."

"Did he bribe you?" she asks. "Is that what this is?"

I don't answer that question.

She knows me better than that.

"If it's not money, what's the issue?" she asks.

"Things didn't turn out how I expected," I tell her.

Disappointment swirls in her eyes. I can't bring myself to look at her, so I glance at her miniature desk plants instead.

"That's a fact of life," she says. "Things *rarely* turn out how you expect them to. That doesn't mean you should give up everything you've built so far, Julie."

My eyes snap up to hers.

I've worked with this woman since the very beginning. In the first few years, I was the one who fetched her coffee and did all of her paperwork. But one day, she decided I was ready for a real case. Because she believed in me, I put many criminals behind bars—serial killers, corrupt businessmen, abusive men.

"I don't have what it takes," I say. "I'm not strong enough."

"Nonsense," she says. "Tell me what happened."

"I knew it was going to end in disaster the moment I saw his face," I say. "I knew I'd end up falling for him."

"That's what this is about?" she asks, resting her hip against the table. "An affair?"

I shake my head. "It's so much more than that."

She narrows her eyes at me. "Do you love him?"

It takes everything in me not to fall apart right this second.

"Yes," I whisper.

"Julie, do you realize how serious this is?" I ask. "I have a meeting with the Assistant Director today. He'll expect a full report when I finally tell him about your assignment."

None of my boss's superiors knew what I was up to. It was a risk she had to take because the more low-key we kept this assignment, the better our chances were of finding the mole.

I remain quiet.

She sighs like this is the biggest inconvenience ever. “Did you at least find any clues on who the traitor could be?”

“I can’t talk about it,” I say. “He made me sign an NDA.”

“You still have a legal obligation to cooperate,” she says.

“I know,” I say.

But I can’t because I made sure to read the fine print. He indirectly threatened to hurt my family if I ever spoke a word about anything I learned during my stay with him.

Thinking about our time in Silver Falls rips open the wound over my heart all over again.

“You don’t need to give up your career for this,” Jessica says softly.

I take a deep breath.

“I thought it would be more honorable than you firing me,” I say.

“I wasn’t going to fire you, Julie,” she says. “You have an excellent track record. I would be losing one of the finest agents I’ve ever worked with.”

I blink in surprise.

Agent Sharpe opens the blinds now, showing me the faces of the people I work with. These people put their lives at risk every day to make this country a safer place for others.

“They’re counting on you,” she says. And then, she turns to the New York City skyline behind her desk. “As are they. Do you still want to quit?”

I shake my head. “I won’t let you down again, Agent Sharpe.”

She nods. “Good. Your next assignment is waiting on your desk.”



I SIT BACK at my old desk and flip through the details of the new assignment. But still, my mind revolves around my previous one.

I still haven't found the FBI mole.

From what I learned about Aleksandr, his family doesn't make phone calls or send emails that are incriminating. I know because I reviewed his phone multiple times while he was sleeping.

There was nothing on it.

It's safe to assume he only meets with the FBI agent in person.

Aleksandr also has a tendency to be lazy, so whoever he's meeting up with is likely based in New York City. It's where he spends most of his time.

I look around at the people surrounding me.

The mole is among us.

I feel a headache coming on.

Coffee.

I need some coffee.

I head toward the break room and press the buttons on the coffee maker for a cappuccino. The machine springs to life, filling my cup with freshly brewed coffee.

I take the steaming cup and turn, resting my weight on the counter.

I take a sip.

This particular break room reminds me of the small kitchen at the cabin.

It reminds me of lazy mornings and late brunches.

I would give anything to go back there, even if just for a moment. I close my eyes, and that's all it takes.

I'm right there with him.

He lives in my mind. He's always there, waiting for me to come back.

"Welcome back," a voice says.

My eyes fly open. A pretty brunette grins at me as she puts Pop-Tarts in the toaster.

"Hey, Sarah," I say, giving her a rueful smile.

The two of us graduated from Quantico together. Sarah is a part of the cybercrime division. Our paths only cross when we bump into each other in the break room.

She gives me a quick hug. "I'm glad you're safe. I had no clue what to think when I saw your face all over the news—"

Suddenly, she stands straighter. Her eyes widen as she looks at something behind me.

I turn to find the Assistant Director standing behind me. He's a tall, burly man in his early fifties. He would be handsome if it weren't for his perpetual scowl.

"Miss Carpenter," he says.

My mouth goes dry. "Sir."

"I've been briefed on your failed assignment," he says. "And I have to say, I'm surprised you haven't resigned yet."

"But—"

"Your gun and your badge, Miss Carpenter."

My eyes drift over his shoulder. My handler, Agent Sharpe, stands behind him. Her ruby-red lips are flattened in a disappointed frown. She didn't see this coming either.

I didn't know I could go through so much elation and disappointment in the same day.

"*Now*," he booms.

I startle, handing him my gun and my badge. Tears burn the backs of my eyelids.

The Assistant Director leaves.

My handler tells me the “charges” against me will be dropped. The FBI will issue a statement that I’m innocent of the crimes I was convicted of. It will be erased from my record, but it won’t erase my shame.

I don’t let the tears fall until I leave the building.

My throat gets sore as the emotions build up inside me.

All I want right now is to be held by Aleksandr. He has the magic of making everything better with a single touch.

But I can’t go to him, so I call Chloe instead.

“Hey,” she says. Her voice is hoarse.

“Where are you?” I ask.

“Home,” she says. “I didn’t feel like going to work today.”

“I just got fired,” I tell her.

“Are you serious?” she asks. “Just because of one mistake?”

“I deserve it,” I say.

“Fuck that,” Chloe says, sounding more like her old self now. “Meet me at our old ice cream parlor.”

It’s just like her to want to celebrate when shit hits the fan. *Especially* then, actually.

I walk toward the little ice cream parlor.

My mind tries to tug me in a thousand directions. It feels like everything that could go wrong has gone wrong. But I’m glad I can always count on my best friend.

It reminds me that I still need to speak with my sisters. But I’m ashamed to admit the truth to them. I had them all stressed out, and it was all for nothing in the end.

As I walk, the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

I’m being watched.

My heart pounds, sensing a threat. I turn around, but I don’t see anything out of the ordinary.

As I pass by an alleyway, a whimpering noise catches my attention. I track it to a dirty abandoned puppy in the dumpster. It's sad eyes hold my heart hostage.

“Are you having a bad day too, little buddy?” I ask, walking toward it and scooping it into my hand.

It's so small that I only need to hold it with one hand. It blinks at me and licks its mouth.

And then, its eyes grow wider. It whimpers louder than before.

I turn around, but it's too late. A large man wraps his hand around my throat and presses the barrel of his gun against my temple.

“Do as I instruct, or I'll spill the contents of your brain on the sidewalk,” he says.

The puppy barks at the man before leaping at his face.

It's enough to distract him.

I grab his wrist with both of my hands and twist it, forcing him to drop the gun.

I catch it before it falls to the ground and misfires.

I don't hesitate.

I hold the sassy puppy against my chest, covering its ears with my hands as I put a bullet in the man's forehead.

A large black SUV is parked in front of the alleyway, blocking me from the rest of the people on the street. The passenger window rolls up, but not before I catch sight of a familiar face.

The Assistant Director. My boss's boss. The one who fired me.

He's the mole.

Adrenaline fires through my system.

More men emerge from the SUV, but they fall to the ground immediately. Splotches of red bloom from holes in the

middle of their foreheads. I glance behind me to see where the shots came from, but I can't see my invisible savior.

The SUV peels away to join the traffic on the main road.

When the SUV leaves, I'm left standing in an alley with a puppy to my chest and a gun in my hand.

There are dead bodies all around me.

The people on the street take notice and draw the obvious conclusion. Screams erupt when they see all the bloodshed.

"It's the girl from TV," someone screams. "*Get her.*"

An entire horde of men and women charge toward me.

I can't shoot at the innocent people.

I can't defend myself either.

So I do the only thing I can do in this situation. I make a run for it.

The mob's footsteps are heavy behind me. I run as fast as my legs can carry me. I hold the golden puppy against my chest the whole time. I take a right, entering a narrower street.

A door is thrown open.

"You can hide here," someone says.

I glance over my shoulder and make a split-second decision. I lunge toward the open door. It quickly closes behind me.

I'm breathing heavily as I wait for the people to barge in at any second. But they don't.

"Thank you," I say, looking up at the tall stranger before me. "You saved my life."

I can't make out the stranger's face. I think they might be the same person who shot at the Assistant Director's men.

The stranger steps closer.

"I saved you because your life is mine to end." Gleaming white teeth come into my line of vision. Bianca's crazed eyes stare back at me. "Hello, Rapunzel."

ALEKSANDR

I keep trying to claw my way to the surface.

Every time I do, another wave washes over me, burying me deeper inside my own body. I try to speak, but my tongue won't form the words.

Darkness keeps taking hold of me.

But whenever I see the light, I move toward it.

I need to warn her. She'll go back to the Bureau without knowing the truth.

"I don't think this is any better," I hear someone say. I move toward that voice, desperately trying to hold on to it.

I hear another voice. "We should wake him. His brain waves show sleep, but his heart rate is too high. I've never seen anything like it."

I break through the surface.

White lights burn my retinas. It's so bright that for a second, I wonder if I'm in the afterlife.

I glance down at my arms.

IV tubes are attached to my veins. I hear a beeping sound from behind me. Two doctors in scrubs stand on either side of my bed.

I try to move my limbs, but my wrists and ankles are shackled to the bed.

I need to get to her.

How long has it been?

“What day is it?” I ask. My throat feels like it hasn’t been used in days.

The doctor is about to inject something into an IV bag. I know it’s more of whatever sedative they’ve been giving me.

I’ve slept enough.

Fuck this.

“If you push that needle in, I will kill every person you ever loved,” I threaten. “I will make you watch as the light fades from their eyes.”

The syringe hovers over the IV bag.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” comes a bored voice. Oksana walks into my line of sight. “You’re no fun anymore, Sasha. You were even saying her name in your sleep.”

“Julie’s life is in danger,” I say.

“Ooh, I take it back. You’re still fun. Tell me more,” she says.

“*Uncuff me,*” I growl. “I’ll never forgive you for it if you don’t.”

She has the audacity to yawn and pat her hand over her mouth.

“*Oksana,*” I snap.

She glowers at me. “Don’t use that tone on me.”

“*Oksana, please,*” I beg. There’s a tremor in my voice now.

That makes her anger melt.

“Ugh, fine,” she huffs, walking over to each corner of the bed and undoing my cuffs. “Don’t look at me like that. We were just looking out for you.”

The second that last cuff is off, I leap out of the bed.

“You have no clue what you’ve done,” I say.

None of them know about the Assistant Director. He's an unscrupulous, immoral man who cares about nothing but money. The second he finds out about Julie, he'll try to get rid of her.

I spot Andrei and Ruslan by the door, hidden in the shadows.

As I walk toward them, I can't deny that my thoughts are more clear. There's simply more energy in my body than there was before. I don't know if it's the sleep or the adrenaline, but I'm more alert than ever.

I grab Andrei's collar. "Tell me you've been watching the monitors."

"I have better things to do than virtually babysit your girlfriend," Andrei says, shoving me off him.

"You had *no right*," I say.

"I had every right," he says, stepping toward me until we're face-to-face.

Ruslan crosses his arms, frowning as he looks at me.

My brothers and I don't fight about petty things. We don't fight, period. But we seemed to have reached the breaking point now.

Andrei's lips curl. "You have no idea how many fires we had to put out for you. You have no clue how many sacrifices we made while you were chasing after a woman who wasn't even worthy of your time. And here you are, yelling at us, ungrateful as always."

"I didn't ask for any of it," I hiss, pushing him out of my way.

"If you walk out that door right now, Aleksandr, it will be the last time we speak to each other," he says.

"I don't need you," I say to Andrei. "If anything, *you're* the one who needs *me*."

He grinds his teeth and steps out of the way.

"In that case, feel free to go fuck yourself," he says.

I walk out of the room.

A heaviness sits on top of my chest again. This feels a lot like losing Julie all over again. But I can't turn my back on her.

This feeling isn't one I can resist.

I never had a choice when it came to her.

She was my little hurricane. Once I touched her, my only option was to let myself get sucked into the eye of the storm.

Even if it left me in a thousand broken pieces, those few moments of ecstasy are worth a lifetime of agony.

JULIE

“*T*here’s no love in your eyes when you look at me,” she hisses. “You look at me the same way she does. You think I’m crazy, don’t you? Say it. *Say it.*”

I can’t speak.

She has me tied to a chair. There’s a gag in my mouth, and it has absorbed every last drop of water I have left in my body.

From the little I’ve seen, we’re somewhere in the South West, maybe Arizona. She drove us all the way across the country in her RV.

I don’t know why she hasn’t killed me yet. She keeps dragging it out, walking around me in circles as she eats her apple using a knife.

Suddenly, she crouches down to my right.

“Do you think I’m ugly?” she asks. “Is that why?”

I shake my head. If I had any tears left in my body, I would be crying right now.

We’re in the middle of nowhere. Even if I were to scream, nobody would hear me.

The white canvas of the tent flutters in the wind. The flap opens, showing me a glimpse of Arizona sky and golden sand dunes.

“I think you’re really pretty, Julie,” she says. “Such radiant skin. I promise to put it to good use after I’m done with you.”

“Please,” I choke out.

But the words get swallowed by the cloth gag, along with the rest of my cries.

“Did I ever tell you about my mother?” she asks.

A gust of wind blows into the tent, filling my lungs with more sand. I can taste it at the back of my throat.

“She was a real bitch,” she says. “She could never love me. She never wanted me. I could hear her thinking it every time she looked at me. And she spent more time with her boyfriends than with me.”

I can feel it.

She’s about to go into a frenzy.

It’s been weeks since she escaped from prison. It’s been weeks since she took her medications.

She’s violent and unpredictable. But more than anything, she’s broken.

Her heart is an empty vessel. It was starved as a child, and she never learned how to fill it up on her own. Instead, she started finding happiness in hurting other women.

“What about you, Julie?” she asks. “Are you shallow too?”

I try to keep the fear from showing. I shake my head. Only once.

It’s enough to intrigue her.

She remains quiet as she studies me.

She cuts another slice of her apple and removes the gag from my mouth.

“I’m not your mother,” I tell her in a calm voice. But every word comes out raspy.

If she doesn’t give me any water, I might just die of dehydration.

“I know that, silly,” she says. “It would be wrong of me to want to fuck you otherwise.”

Terror seizes my spine, but I force myself to remain still.

She takes the knife to my shirt, ripping it down the middle. Her eyes flicker with interest as she cuts the middle of my bra.

Lust swims in her eyes as she takes my nipple between her thumb and index finger. She pinches it. Hard.

“So perfect,” she says. And then her eyes flash up to meet mine. “I’m a collector.”

My heart thrashes against my rib cage.

I don’t care how hopeless this may seem.

I’m a fighter. I’m a survivor.

Right now, the only weapon I have is my words. I can use them to negotiate with her.

“I’m hungry,” I say. “Can I have a slice of that apple?”

“No manners,” she says. “Say please.”

“Please?”

“No.” She hums to herself, exploring my other nipple.

I know that I need to flip the script. She can’t see me as some monster she has to get rid of.

I need to distract her.

“Bianca Davis.”

She pauses.

“Give me that apple,” I say. “Good girls share their food.”

“Good girls share their food,” she repeats, blinking as she hurries to cut me a slice. She places it at my lips.

My heart starts to pound.

I can’t believe it actually worked.

I take a bite of the apple. The tangy sweetness bursts on my tongue. I’ve never tasted anything more divine in my entire life.

“Good girl,” I say.

Her eyes are fervent as she nods.

She seeks approval and praise. She responds to a stern voice. I need to be the person she wished her mother was.

Her eyes travel down my body toward my bare nipples. They darken with desire once more.

Panic claws at my insides as I remember what she said.

I collect them.

“Give me another slice of apple, Bianca,” I say.

“Okay, Mama,” she says, cutting me another slice and placing it over my lips.

“Get me some water,” I command. “Can’t you see that I’m thirsty?”

She blinks like this is the first time I begged her for some water. “Of course.”

She hurries toward the water canteen. When she returns with the water, she gently holds it to my lips. Her eyes are fervent as she watches me drink.

My parched body welcomes the hydration. It refreshes my senses and injects a little bit of hope into what feels like a hopeless situation.

I want to ask her to untie me, but I have a feeling it would only fuel her rage.

“What do you want for dinner?” I ask her.

Her eyes brighten. “Can we get McDonald’s?”

“No,” I say. “We have food at home.”

Her mouth tightens in a petulant line. She grits her teeth and then screams at me. When she’s done, that gleam in her eyes is back.

“Hello, Rapunzel,” she says. “Did you really think it would be that easy?”

She’s still the same, but everything about her is different. She seems to have two personalities—one that’s an innocent child and another that’s a bat-crazy adult.

“I saved you,” she says, her hand splaying over my belly before traveling lower. “You’re mine now. Every inch of you is mine.”

“B,” I say softly. “I was asking you what you wanted for dinner.”

She blinks. Her eyes refocus. “Not McDonald’s?”

“I’ll make you whatever you want,” I say. “How about we have some fried chicken?”

“Okay, but can you make mug cakes too?” she asks.

“Sure, but I can’t make dinner for you with my hands bound,” I say.

She smacks her hand over her forehead. “Duh.”

She unties me, starting with my feet first. Which is too bad because I hoped she’d start with my hands. By the time she gets to the binds around my wrists, she’s at eye level with my breasts.

It distracts her.

She leans forward to wrap her mouth around one of my nipples. Her other hand grabs my other breast, twisting the nipple so hard that tears form in my eyes.

“I saw you with him,” she says. “He was so in love with you.”

The tears roll down my cheeks.

It was love.

But we made it so tainted by all the secrets we kept from each other. We were selfish, but love is supposed to be the opposite of that.

“He looked at you like you were the prettiest girl in the world,” Bianca says.

My throat feels so tight that I can’t get a single word out. I’m too overwhelmed by what I lost.

Aleksandr isn’t the kind of man who takes betrayal lightly. Nothing I can say or do will make him want to come back.

There's no prince in shining armor coming to save me.

I'm on my own here.

Completely alone in this ruthless world.

"You wouldn't be so pretty without your hair," Bianca continues. And then she leans in to whisper, "Or your nipples."

She's forgotten that my feet aren't bound anymore.

This is my only chance to escape.

When Bianca walks over to a rusted metal box, I quietly stand. The wooden chair is still attached to me, but mercifully, it doesn't make any noise.

It's fight or flight now.

But first, I need to get rid of the chair. With Bianca's back turned to me, I see a way to hit two birds with one stone. I quietly approach her from behind. When I'm about three feet away, I turn around and slam the wooden chair against her body.

My body protests, but I slam into her again.

"You dumb fucking bitch," she says, lunging at me with a pair of scissors. I narrowly avoid it penetrating my cheek. "I knew you'd abandon me. They all do."

Something soft blooms in my chest, but I shut it down immediately.

I can't sympathize with my captor.

There's an electric energy in my body now. I have so much power that I feel like I can lift a mountain if I wanted to.

I squat down and shoot into the air. And I angle my body so I come crashing down on Bianca.

The ropes around my wrist dig into my skin. But the wooden chair breaks, falling to the floor in pieces.

There's nothing between Bianca and me now. My left shoulder throbs. I'm pretty sure I dislodged it. But I can't let myself feel the pain.

She grabs my hair and furiously starts hacking through it using the scissors in her hands.

“I’ll make you ugly,” she grunts. “He won’t love you anymore when you’re ugly.”

My long blonde hair falls to the floor. The scissors are sharp and get the job done easily.

Before she decides to cut off other parts of my body, I try to escape.

Bianca grabs my injured arm, making pain shoot through my body. I pummel my fist into her chin. She lunges at me with scissors, aiming it at my face again.

I duck and slam my head against the underside of her chin.

She screams in pain. I’m pretty sure I just made her bite her tongue.

Before she can recover, I grab her cell phone and make a run for it.

It’s rocky terrain for miles. There’s nowhere to hide.

But I run as fast as my feet can carry me. I keep my injured arm close to my chest, trying not to move it too much.

“You can’t hide from me, Rapunzel,” she calls out from behind me. “I own you, remember? You’re mine.”

But the joy of liberation explodes through me. The air is cool against my neck. My head feels so much lighter without the weight of my long hair. I never cut it because Derek once wrote in a letter that he liked how long my hair was.

I feel like I just shed a part of my old self.

I know that Bianca is more injured than I am. She won’t find me as long as I keep running.

I don’t dare look back.

The sky is darkening now, the sunset taking forever to settle.

The sound of gunfire cuts through my jubilee. Her aim is poor, but one bullet in the wrong place is all it takes.

I keep running until the sky darkens completely.

Until I know she's no longer after me.

Until I realize I need a miracle to survive here.

I turn on the cell phone and find the battery nearly depleted. It's at 1 percent.

If I weren't exhausted and dehydrated, I would probably call my sisters. But instead, I call him. If this is the end, I want his voice to be the last I hear.

It goes straight to voicemail.

I leave a message.

"Aleksandr, it's me," I say. "Bianca is hunting me down. I'm somewhere in the Sonoran desert. Arizona, probably. I think I see some Saguaro cacti in the distance. And...I know it's the last thing you want to hear, but I..."

Before I can muster up the guts to say those three words, the battery dies.

ALEKSANDR

“*W*here the fuck is she?” I roar, placing my knife over the FBI Assistant Director’s ear.

“I don’t know,” he wails. “I really don’t—”

I don’t let him finish his sentence. It gets lost in his scream as I cut off his right ear. All that remains is a gaping hole in his head.

He deserves it.

I saw the footage. He got rid of the bodyguards protecting Julie before trying to get rid of her too.

“You tried to attack her,” I say. “You were going to kill her, weren’t you?”

“Don’t *you get it?*” he screams. “If she talked to someone about what she knew, she would have compromised everything. I did it for *you*. For *us*. So you and I can keep working together.”

“Bull. Shit,” I say, moving on to his other ear.

I pretend I have all the time in the world, but in reality, I’ve never been more scared in my life. I never should have let her go.

Both of us have made mistakes.

Both of us kept secrets.

Both of us were at fault.

I didn't realize until I let her go that she would consume me like this. I thought I could be patient and wait for her to come back to me, but all this waiting is making me insane. And she could be hurt right now. Or worse...

But I don't go there.

I can't.

"Tell me where she is, *mudila yobaniy*," I scream, cursing him in Russian.

He squeezes his eyes shut, like that will help him escape. What a pathetic fool.

Right as I'm about to cut off his remaining ear, one of my men approaches me.

"*What?*" I snap.

"The Pakhan called," he says. "He wanted to speak with you."

"What does he want?" I ask, remembering my last conversation with Andrei and Ruslan. They said that they were done with me.

"He didn't say, but—"

"Tell him I'm busy."

"He mentioned that it was about the girl," he says.

The Assistant Director looks up then. His watery-blue eyes track me as I take my soldier's phone and dial Andrei's number.

"Hello?" I say.

"Julie left a message on your phone," Andrei says. "She's in the Sonoran desert in the Southwest. She's being chased by Bianca, the other prisoner who escaped. A helicopter is waiting for you, Sasha. Come back home."

I take a deep breath as I process everything. I need to go to her.

"Finish this bastard off," I say to my men. "And send his head to the FBI with proof of his criminal involvement."

We weren't the only family this scumbag of a man worked with. He did just about anything for a quick buck.

"No, don't," he begs. "I only worked with you because you threatened me. You said that you'd send my wife proof of my affairs."

I was bluffing then. It was only a guess that a greedy pig like him wasn't faithful to his wife, and he fell for it—hook, line, and sinker.

"Then you shouldn't have cheated on your wife," I say, quickly washing the blood off my hands before heading out of the room.

My men know how to deal with scum like him.

They'll take their time with it, drawing it out for as long as possible before letting him bleed to death.



I MEET my brothers at the helipad.

Ruslan and Andrei are already there, waiting for me. Both of them slap my back in greeting.

We don't need to say anything. We know that we didn't mean the words we said.

"Thank you," I say. "For calling me."

"You left your phone when you stormed out," Andrei says.

"You mean when you banished me from your life?" I ask.

"I regretted it the second I said it," Andrei says.

I nod. "I'm sorry for being so absent these past few months."

Ruslan rolls his eyes. "I, for one, am *not* sorry for anything I said or did. You needed the rest. You looked like you were about to go into a coma any second."

I'm so overwhelmed with gratitude for my brothers.

“We looked into Julie’s whereabouts after you left,” Andrei explains. “We kept your phone close in case she’d try to reach out. And she did.”

I have so much more to say to them, but the helicopter takes off.

It takes us toward our private jet, where the pilot and flight crew are awaiting our arrival.

Restlessness buzzes through my body. I feel helpless that I can’t do anything but wait.

We have already instructed our contacts on the West Coast to start searching for her. She escaped, but she’s still in the desert somewhere.

The lights in the private jet dim.

My brothers try to get some shut-eye before we land.

But I put my headphones on and play her voice message on a loop. I stare at my watch, willing the minutes to go faster.

This desperate feeling clawing in my chest could only mean one thing.

I love her.

Unconditionally.

JULIE

The gunfire stopped a few hours ago. I think she may have run out of bullets.

I can't see her in the dark, but I know she's still out there somewhere.

I need to escape before the light of dawn hits the sky.

In front of me, barren desert land dotted with tall cacti stretches for miles. I don't know where I'm headed, but I know I need to find some sort of refuge.

I need a safe place to lie down.

I also need food and water.

Exhaustion has sunk deep into my bones, but I push myself to keep going. It's the only option I have right now.

As I walk, the faint light of dawn touches the sky, turning it from midnight blue to the darkest purple.

It's breathtaking, but it injects terror into my veins.

I know she's still after me. In the light of day, it'll be easier for her to spot me and finish what she started.

I don't want to die.

Not like this.

I wonder if Aleksandr got my message.

Suddenly, sand blows into my eyes. There's a whirring noise coming from up above. Using my hand to shield my

eyes, I look up to see a helicopter in the distance. It could be Aleksandr, but it could also be the FBI.

When did my life get so complicated?

I remain frozen, wrapping my arms around my naked torso as the helicopter lands in front of me.

I know it's stupid to hope it's Aleksandr, but I hope it's him anyway.

As my heart races with anticipation, I'm flooded with regrets of all the things I never got to do or say. I regret not telling Aleksandr that I love him. I regret not spending as much time with my family. I regret choosing to stay stuck in the past instead of exploring the happiness that opened up in front of me.

The helicopter door is thrown open.

A tall, dark form appears. *Aleksandr*.

My mind tells me it's just a mirage, an apparition born of desperation, but I know it's him. It's really him.

We stare at each other for a moment.

And then we run toward each other, crashing hard like two stars that were destined to collide.

"I'm never letting go of you again," he says, kissing my bare shoulders and my neck. "*Ever*. And I don't care what you have to say about it."

A shudder travels down my body.

"I didn't know if you'd come," I whisper.

"There's not a single place on this earth where I wouldn't find you, *tigrenok*," he says.

The familiar nickname makes butterflies flutter in my belly. I don't need food, water, or oxygen. All I need is for this man to hold me for as long as possible.

He takes off his shirt and wraps it around my shoulders. And then he hugs me again.

“There’s something I wanted to tell you,” I say, pressing my face against his neck. He smells like sea salt and citrus.

The sky lightens, turning a deep orange. I catch a movement from behind a giant cactus.

Bianca.

She’s here. She must have heard the helicopter. And she’s holding a black gun that’s pointed right at Aleksandr’s head.

Instantly, I turn him around and climb his body. My shoulder protests, but I don’t care. I press my lips against his. *Hard.*

The bullet lodges in my back.

Now, *this*. I’m okay with dying like this.

I slump against him.

“Julie?” he says, his eyes growing wide. His fingers travel over my back, finding the wound from the bullet. “*Julie.*”

And finally, I let myself slip away. He cradles me in his arms.

There’s chaos behind us as his brothers chase Bianca.

Aleksandr’s tears fall on my forehead. I cup his cheek and say the words I should have said a long time ago.

“I love you, Aleksandr. I love you so much.”

My world fades to black.

ALEKSANDR

“*W*e can’t take her to a hospital,” Ruslan says. “They’ll ask too many questions.”

“I don’t fucking care,” I say, clutching her small body toward my chest and applying pressure to her wound. “I’m taking her to the nearest fucking hospital.”

Andrei watches me. “She took that bullet for you.”

“Don’t fucking rub it in my face, Andrei,” I growl.

“Let me finish,” Andrei says. “I was just thinking that if something like this happened to Inessa, I’d want her taken to have immediate treatment, too.”

“But—” Ruslan protests.

“Nearest. Fucking. Hospital,” I say. “End of discussion.”

“Fine,” Ruslan says, giving the orders to the helicopter pilot.

I lean down over Julie’s body. I know she can’t hear me over the whirring of the rotor blades, but I need her to hold on. I can’t live in a world without her.

“Hold on, baby,” I say. “Don’t give up just yet. Hold on just a little longer.”

In this moment, I think about the red-haired woman I met in Silver Falls. She told me not to read into people’s words but to read their hearts.

And Julie’s heart is as pure as they come.

I was so blinded by rage that I didn't realize what was actually going on.

She was falling in love with me. That's why she sacrificed everything just so she wouldn't have to keep lying to me. I press kisses on her face, not caring about who's watching. I promise to give her all of my purple chocolates. I promise to give her the world, only if she would hold on.

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THE DOCTOR FEELS FOR A PULSE. She purses her lips and shakes her head.

"What's wrong?" I ask the doctor.

"You're not supposed to be in here," she says, glancing up at me. "Who are you to the patient?"

"I'm her husband," I say. Maybe not yet, but I will be.

"She keeps going into cardiac failure," she says. "Her body is weak right now. She's malnourished, and she lost too much blood."

"I'll donate," I say. "We have the same blood type."

"You lost a lot of blood, too," she says.

The bullet hit the both of us, traveling through Julie's body before entering mine.

"I can handle it," I say.

She eyes me. "We have to do a cross-matching first."

"It's not necessary," I say. "I'm telling you that we have the same blood type. And plus, I'm a universal donor."

She looks at me and then at Julie before nodding at the nurse. I'm taken to the bed next to Julie's. They start the transfusion.

I don't take my eyes off Julie.

One of the staff tries to close the curtain between us, but I scream at them until they leave it open.

I watch them clean her wound and hook IV tubes to her veins. They start CPR on her every time her heart starts giving up.

I force myself to watch it all.

I'm the reason she's in this mess in the first place. I'm the one who was too blind to see that this girl loved me.

A few minutes later, they start giving her the blood.

"Take more," I tell them.

"It's enough," the nurse says.

"Take more," I repeat. "Please."

I stopped believing in a divine when I was a young boy. No God would let children starve for days on end. But now, I pray to anyone who will listen. I bargain with God, promising to donate my wealth to charities benefiting sick children if he gives Julie back to me.

She still doesn't open her eyes.

She barely breathes.

They take another bedside X-ray. This time, they insist on closing the partition between us for the procedure, but I promise to rip their throats out if they so much as touched the curtain.

A radiologist arrives, and both of the doctors study the X-ray together. I try to listen to what they're saying, but they're barely audible.

When I glance back at Julie, I find her green eyes quietly watching me.

"You're awake," I say, rushing to her side and cupping her face. I kiss her forehead and inhale the scent of her skin. "I'm sorry I ever let you go in the first place, baby. How do you feel?"

"Everything hurts," she whispers, searching my eyes.

I take her hand in both of mine. I kiss her cold fingers.

“I love you, *tigrenok*,” I say. “You’re my everything. Please don’t ever scare me like that again.”

“You’re lucky your husband brought you here just in time,” the doctor says, placing a stethoscope over Julie’s torso.

“My—” She glances up at me.

I wink at her, delighting in the way she blushes. She turns quiet as she waits for the doctor to finish checking her.

When the doctor completes her examination, Julie reaches for me. Her lower lip wobbles as her eyes fill with tears. “I’m sorry I hurt you, Aleksandr. I understand if you can never trust me again, but I promise you. No more secrets, no more lies.”

“I’m the one who fucked up, Julie,” I say. “I was scared you would leave after you got the information you wanted.”

“You’re the only person I called last night,” she says. “I thought I was going to die, and yours was the only voice I wanted to hear.”

I hold her close.

And I promise myself that I’ll spend the rest of my life taking care of her. I’ll do everything I can to ensure she never knows another worry ever again.

There are a thousand more things I want to say to her, but we’re interrupted by Julie’s other visitors.

Her sisters push me aside as they sit on Julie’s bed. “*Julie*. Oh my God. We came as soon as we heard.”

“I’m sorry,” Julie says. “I know you guys were worried about me the whole time.”

“Shh,” Belle says. “It’s all over now.”

Hazel glares at me.

“I’ll be watching you,” she mouths before turning her attention to Julie.

I glance back at Julie.

I can see the adoration in her eyes as she looks at me. My heart glows. Years of violence and darkness are replaced by pure light. That's what she does to me.

I step away to give the sisters some privacy.

My brothers are out in the lobby. They look so out of place in the hospital. Their bulky arms are crossed over their chests, and they keep their heads down as they talk. They're trying to look as non-threatening as possible, but everyone still gives them a wide berth.

They look up at me as I approach them.

"How is she?" Andrei asks.

"She's awake now," I say.

"I'm glad to hear that," Ruslan says.

And I know they mean it. They forgave her the second she took that bullet meant for me.

"I'm going to marry that girl," I say.

They nod like they knew it all along.



JULIE

## 2 WEEKS LATER

*I*'ve been staying in his safe house in New York City. Life is good. I wish I could say that things have gone back to normal, but each day feels different.

My phone dings with a message. It's from Aleksandr.

Get ready. I'm taking you out for dinner.

But you said last night that I was the only meal you wanted for the rest of your life...

I THROW my phone on the bed and head to the shower.

He never tells me where we're going, but he takes me to the most exquisite places in New York City. He's spoiling me rotten these days.

As water from the shower hits me, my skin buzzes with need, reminding me of how he came home early last night to join me in the shower. He fucked me against the wall, my moans drowned out by the sound of the water pounding against his back.

I do my hair and put on a little makeup before getting dressed. I wear a classy forest green dress that falls a few inches above my knees. I select a green satin bow to put in my hair.

It still feels different to walk around with shorter hair. My neck, for one, is very pleased with the unexpected outcome.

Just as I put on my gold earrings, I hear the front door opening.

My heart leaps in my chest.

I rush to greet him.

He's holding a bouquet of red roses. The sight of them makes my belly flutter.

"Are these for me?" I ask, taking them from him.

"No, they're for the chef," he says.

I lean down to smell the roses.

"Thank you," I say.

He tugs me against his hard body. "You look exquisite, *tigrenok*."

His eyes have so much devotion that it makes my soul burn. The few days of separation we had only cemented our bond. It made it clear to both of us that we were made to be together. Why else would we fit like two pieces of a puzzle?

He puts his briefcase aside and hugs me harder.

I exhale softly at the sensation of his hard, muscled body against mine. I don't think I'll ever get used to how he feels against me.

"I was thinking about you all day," he says, leaning down to kiss me.

Lava forms in my belly, pooling and spreading just for him.

"We have to go," he says. "There's something I want to show you."

"Can't it wait?" I ask, pressing another kiss against his mouth. His stubble grazes against my cheek.

My left shoulder still throbs from when it was broken, but Aleksandr learned how to perform physiotherapy. He massages it every night to speed up the recovery process. The areas where the bullet entered and exited my body are still tender, but I'm gradually healing.



“Come on,” he says, taking my hand as he leads me toward his car garage.

We get in his red Ferrari and join the evening traffic.

“How was your day?” he asks.

I brighten as I think about how I spent my day. My sisters and the kids are in New York City.

“We went to the Met,” I say. “The kids loved it. Kylie had so many questions, but Tommy was there to explain every exhibit to Kylie. The boy has endless patience.”

Aleksandr stiffens. “The Monte’s are here?”

The Monte’s are the Italian mafia family who rule over Chicago. Tommy is Nico Monte’s son.

“I’m surprised your team of bodyguards didn’t tell you,” I say.

“They only tell me things they see as a threat,” he says. “And they only give me a full report when I ask for it.”

“It was just Luna and her teenage son,” I say. “You know that they’re close to my sisters. They’re basically family at this point.”

Aleksandr’s mouth is set in a firm line.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, touching his shoulder.

He shakes his head. “Are you eating well?”

“Yes,” I say. “The chef you hired is incredible.”

He nods, but that crease between his eyebrows remains.

“Aleksandr, I know you have something on your mind,” I say.

He huffs out a breath. “Sometimes, I just wonder if...you would’ve been happier if you’d never met me. Nothing bad would have happened to you if it weren’t for our relationship. I almost lost you in that hospital, Julie.”

I suck in a breath. “You’re joking, right? Aleksandr, you’re the best thing to have ever happened to me. You pulled me out

of the miserable state I was existing in. It's because of you that I'm painting again."

"The kidnapping, the FBI turning against you, the injury, all of it could have been avoided," he says. "If you didn't have a connection to me, that is."

"You're leaving out a lot of things there," I say, combing my fingers through his thick hair. "You're leaving out some of the happiest moments of my life."

Something bubbles to life inside me. I know that everything we went through so far was just the beginning. The best years are yet to come.

I know they'll come with their set of challenges, but we're strong enough to weather any storm.

"Are you happy?" he asks. "With me?"

I suppress a smile. It's sweet how concerned he looks right now. I tug at his hair and lean over to kiss his cheek.

"I'm the happiest I've ever been," I say.

"But your career..." He sighs.

I swallow. After being dishonorably discharged from the Bureau, I didn't want to go back to working for them. The FBI and everything it taught me will always hold a special place in my heart, but there's no way I can have a relationship with Aleksandr *and* work for the FBI.

They would probe into his various businesses and ruin everything he worked so hard to build.

Aleksandr always has and always will be a criminal.

And I'll be a criminal's girl.

"You know something?" I say.

He looks at me.

"Painting has always been my first love," I say. "And you gave that back to me. And for that, I'll always be grateful."

"You're not just saying that to make me feel better?" he asks.

“No,” I say. “You make me really happy, Alexandr.”

He searches my eyes to make sure I’m telling the truth. And then he nods.

“There’s something I wanted to discuss with you,” he says.

The traffic in front of us clears out. He floors the accelerator, his Ferrari showing off as it effortlessly weaves between the other cars.

“Remember when I said that I made a deal with God when you were at the hospital in Arizona?” he asks.

“Yeah?” I thought he was joking.

“I told him I’d donate ten million dollars every year to children around the world,” he says. “I want you to be in charge of our donations and charity work from here on out.”

My heart swells in my chest.

I know that the Bratva donate their money regularly to make it seem like they’re respectable members of society, but still, ten million dollars is a lot of money. It can do a lot of good in the world.

“Really?” I ask.

He nods. “There’s something else. I want you to work for us, Julie. We need a private investigator. And since most of these are sensitive cases, it has to be someone we can trust. I want it to be you.”

“Are you serious?” I ask.

“I want you to be in charge of the missing school bus case,” he says. “We suspect it has to do with the Greek mafia, but we can’t be sure. All we know is that they have an invisible boss. Someone else is calling the shots, and we don’t know who else is involved.”

“I would love to be a private investigator for you,” I say. “But have you spoken to your brothers about this?”

“They trust you too, Julie,” he says.

“Do they, though?” I ask.

“They were there in the hospital too,” he says. “They saw you fighting to survive after you took that bullet that was meant for me. They know where your loyalty lies.”

“I’ll do it,” I say. “I’ll be your private investigator.”

He breathes out a sigh of relief. “If there’s anyone who can solve the case, it’s you.”

Talking about the missing children has a sobering effect on both of us. Aleksandr is putting in long hours at work trying to solve this case. He’s putting resources together and forming alliances with other mafia families, but they haven’t found a single child yet.

The school bus is still missing, as are all of the children who were inside it.

We pass by my old neighborhood, the one where I used to live with Chloe.

A fresh stab of pain twists in my belly.

Aleksandr squeezes my thigh to comfort me.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I bite down on my lower lip and look out at the street. We pass by the falafel truck Chloe loved so much. There’s also the ice cream parlor we used to go to. And the theatre where we watched late-night movies together.

I came to our old apartment last week to find all her stuff had been cleared out.

Everything that belonged to her was gone, except for a single note.

It was in her handwriting.

*I need to get away for a while.  
Please don't come looking for me. I*

love you.

xx

Chloe

SHE CLOSED all of her social media accounts. She quit her job in New York. She turned into a ghost.

After some digging using Aleksandr's resources, I found that she bought a one-way flight ticket to London. I don't know why she moved there, but I'm worried about her.

I was so caught up in my own drama that I had no clue what was happening in her life.

The note she left behind is the only reason I'm not completely flipping out.

But still, I miss my best friend. I miss the way it used to be between us. She was the best thing in my life for a long time. She was always there for me when I needed her. And looking back, I never asked her about her life. I never asked her if she was doing okay.

"We'll find her, *tigrenok*," Aleksandr says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"There's no point in finding a person who doesn't want to be found," I say.

My eldest sister, Hazel, disappeared from my life a few years ago. She had some things to deal with, and even though she was living with us, she didn't open up about any of it until she was ready.

I just hope that Chloe doesn't go too long without reaching out to me.

Aleksandr and I sit in silence for a long time.

"So," I say, clearing my throat. "Which restaurant are we going to?"

“Who said anything about a restaurant?” Aleksandr asks.

I twist in my seat to face him. “I thought you were taking me out for dinner.”

“I am,” he says, smiling to himself.

He’s up to something. I glance around to find that we’re passing through a tree-lined street in what looks like a residential area. We stop in front of tall, imposing gates.

Aleksandr rolls his window down, showing his face to the security guards. They greet him and let him through.

“Welcome home, sir,” the man says.

The heavy wrought-iron gates open. Red maple trees cover either side of the road. We pass by houses so big that each of them look like they have their own zip code.

They’re nearly as big as Blackwood Estate in Silver Falls, where my sister Belle lives with her husband and their twins.

Each house has a perfectly manicured lawn and gorgeous flower blooms. He stops in front of one of these houses.

“Do you like it?” he asks.

It’s a gorgeous mansion with ivy-covered stone walls and French windows.

“Who lives here?” I ask him.

“We do,” he says, taking my hand. He places a key in my hand. I glance up at him in shock.

“Are you serious?” I ask.

“I know how much you love being surrounded by nature,” he says. “It’s where you’re happiest. You deserve a beautiful home, Julie.”

He walks around the car to open my door. My cheeks heat as I look at the house.

“It’s in your name,” he says. “If anything ever happened to me, I want you to be well taken care of.”

“Why would you even say that?” I ask, looking up at him.

But I know that it's only the reality of this life. Tomorrow is never guaranteed, so our only option is to make the best of today.

He pulls me against his body and kisses the top of my head.

“Don't you want to have a look?” he whispers against my hair.

His hand is protectively draped over my lower back as he leads me toward the front door. I'm holding the key in my hand, but the doors open for us as we enter.

A butler greets us, letting us know that dinner will be served shortly.

I glance around the house. Sconces line the walls, bathing the space in a warm golden glow. The house smells like herbs and roasted chicken. I hear the soft clang of plates.

But apart from the light fixtures, the house is bare of furniture.

“I want it to feel like home to you,” he says. “Decorate it however you wish.”

It's too much. But he takes my hand and gives me a tour of the house. The sweeping views from the windows make my jaw drop. But when I see the sunroom, I freeze completely.

It's made of glass entirely. The windows, the ceiling, even the floor. All that exists is the green of the trees below me and the blue sky above.

Aleksandr wraps his arms around my middle. “What do you think?”

“I don't know what to say,” I whisper.

“You can paint here if you wish,” he says.

I twist around in his hold and look at his dark eyes. There's so much love in them. He knows me so well. He knows that I need a peaceful space to make art, and I didn't even have to ask him for it.

I clutch his shirt and yank him down toward me.

His kiss is hot against my mouth, making desire unfurl in my belly. I need him inside me. Our touches grow urgent. We leave a trail of clothes on the floor as we walk to the bedroom, where there's a king-sized bed waiting for us.

I guess this house isn't *completely* unfurnished, after all.

Aleksandr closes the door behind him. There's hunger in his eyes as he prowls toward me.

And in this moment, I feel like the luckiest girl in the world.

Aleksandr is not the kind of man who promises a girl the world.

He's the kind who makes sure to place it at her feet.





ALEKSANDR

## 1 MONTH LATER

She's wearing bows in her hair now. She's smiling more. She's happier in general.

"Come here," I say, taking her soft mouth in a kiss that only leaves me wanting more. My cock pulses with need every time I'm in her aura.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?" she asks.

"It's a surprise," I say, taking her hand as I make her sit in the helicopter.

I help her into her seat before getting into mine.

It's a beautiful day for a proposal.

The black velvet box burns a hole through my pants. My heart races as I think about what's coming.

For such a long time, I was ruled by my fear of rejection. It stemmed from the fact that nobody seemed to want me as a child. The people who were supposed to care for me turned their backs on me. And I grew up believing that I was all I had in this world. I thought everyone else would turn their backs on me too.

Meeting Ruslan and Andrei changed that, but I didn't break my old patterns of thinking until I met Julie.

I was forced to change who I was at my core. She demanded it. I always knew that she needed me to be strong.

I watch her now.

My love, my everything.

She glances out at the city for a while, before resting her precious head on my shoulder. She sleeps like a log until we reach our destination. It's partially my fault.

I've been keeping her up all night, making her ride my cock just so I can watch her princess tits bounce.

I press a kiss on her head to wake her up. Her eyes flutter open.

"We're here," I tell her.

She looks around at the surroundings, but the only source of light is the moon. The sun had just set. She can't see anything, but she hears it. The gentle trickle of flowing water as it passes over land.

"You brought me to Silver Falls?" she asks, her eyes wide.

There's no other place where I would want to do this.

She steps out of the helicopter and stretches her legs. And when she turns back toward me, I'm down on one knee.

The cool breeze of the countryside blows her hair to the side, along with the pink ribbon in her hair. She claps her hand over her mouth as she watches me.

Because I'm so overwhelmed by emotions, I speak in Russian.

"I didn't know what I was missing in my life until I met you, Julie," I say. "You brought the sunshine into my dark world when I needed it most. You made my heart feel things I didn't know it was capable of. I love you more than I can ever put into words. When you left, I thought I would love you from a distance for the rest of my life. But you're back in my arms now. And I never want to let go. Will you keep lighting up my world, *tigrenok*? Will you do me the greatest honor and be my wife?"

Her eyes grow misty with tears. It's almost as if...she can understand me.

She gets down on both knees and wraps her arms around me.

“I didn’t tell you, but I’ve been learning Russian for the past few years,” she replies in Russian. Her words are muffled against my neck, but I hear her clearly. “Yes, I’ll marry you, Aleksandr.”

Just as she says the words, there are fireworks in the evening sky. Julie watches them in wonder. I can see the reflection of them on her face. And that’s enough.

Looking at her and being by her side for the rest of my life is enough.

“It’s beautiful,” Julie murmurs, glancing back at me. Her eyes are glassy as she looks at me.

Something pulls my gaze away. I swear I just saw a movement in the woods. I swear I saw a flash of red.

It reminds me of the red-haired woman who spoke with me at the farmer’s market.

I hope it was her.

I hope to see her again, so I can thank her in person. She’s a total nutcase for sure, but she’s also the wisest person I ever met. She saved my life.

Her words about forgiveness made me see things differently.

“What is it?” Julie asks, concerned.

“Nothing,” I say, pressing my lips against her soft mouth. “Nothing at all.”

I still have one last surprise planned for her.

I could take her to Paris. I could take her to exotic islands and book the fanciest resorts. I could buy her a little Maserati. And all of those things are great, but that’s not what Julie craves most.

I stand up, making Julie stand with me.

“Aleksandr,” she says.

“Yes?” I ask.

“Are you forgetting something?”

“I don’t think so?” I say.

“You have a little black box clutched in your hand?” she says.

I suck a breath. I can’t believe I screwed up the most important event of my life. I had *one* job.

Julie is laughing as I get down on one knee again. I show her the diamond. Her laughter comes to an abrupt halt.

“Aleksandr, this is—”

“Everything you deserve and more,” I say, slipping the ring on her outstretched finger. I kiss her small hand.

She deserves the biggest diamonds and the finest silks. She deserves trips around the world and all my love.

We made mistakes together, and we learned from them. But it made one thing very clear—we’re meant to be together. There’s no me without her. She’s what completes my soul. She’s what lights me on fire. She’s my purpose in this world.

I take her toward the Jeep that’s waiting for us.

“Where are we going?” she asks, her eyes wide and excited.

“I think you already know,” I say, helping her into her seat before getting in the driver’s seat.

A few minutes later, we’re pulling up in front of the gates of the Blackwood Estate.

Her family is expecting us.

The facade of the building is eerie and gloomy in the moonlight, but as we round the corner toward the backyard, there’s life and light everywhere. Thousands of fairy lights are strung up between tree branches. There’s a long dinner table outside spilling with flowers and food.

Her sisters are waiting for her. All of my family is here as well.

“She said yes,” I say.

“*Congratulations,*” everyone cheers.

Her sisters rush to hug her. Julie’s brother-in-law’s nod at me. My own brothers, along with Inessa and Oksana, come to congratulate us.

Kylie, Julie’s niece, leaps into my arms.

“When’s the wedding?” she asks. “I’m doing Auntie Julie’s hair. I also want to be the bridesmaid. I’m *so* excited.”

Julie overhears her niece and grins at me.

That smile.

It hits me in my stomach and seizes my heart.

I spent an entire lifetime searching for meaning in this world, only to find it in this girl. She’s the home I so desperately wanted.

She’s the sun and the stars and the entire universe.

She’s my world.

THE END.



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STILL NOT OVER THE COUPLE? Grab the smoking hot extended epilogue [here](#). Warning: your kindles might catch on fire, because this might be the spiciest scene in the whole book.

Catch up with Aleksandr’s brother’s in the [Villains series](#). If you’re into the Daddy/princess kink like me, I also recommend that you check out the [Royals series box set](#).



DEAR READER,

Thank you so much for coming along on this journey with me. Aleksandr and Julie's story is special to me for so many reasons, and I know I say this about every couple, but I didn't want their story to end.

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your patience. Your support and love means the world to me. You bring meaning to these books I write, and that means everything to me. I love knowing that you love these characters and this world as much as I do.

I have so many new books planned in this series, and I can't wait to share them with you!

With all my love,

Aria



I MADE A PLAYLIST AGAIN! Check it out on [Spotify](#).



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# A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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