



Punish



A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

DARK & DEADLY TALES

NICOLA JANE

Punish - A Dark Mafia Romance

Nicola Jane

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Disclaimer

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are all products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any similarities are entirely coincidental.

Spelling Note

Please note, this author resides in the United Kingdom and is using British English. Therefore, some words may be viewed as incorrect or spelled incorrectly, however, they are not.



A Note from the Author

This story was written as part of the Dark & Deadly Tales, a collective of different authors each writing a dark and deadly tale, which is to be released at one book a month beginning August 2023. Therefore, you can expect this story to be dark. This story contains most things considered to be trigger worthy, so please do not continue if you're easily triggered. There is also no happy ever after.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to my dedicated readers who literally read anything I put out there. I appreciate you all.

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Playlist

What Was I Made For? – Billie Eilish

The A Team – Ed Sheeran

Idontwannabeyouanymore – Billie Eilish

Something in the Way You Move – Ellie Goulding

hostage – Billie Eilish

Going Under – Evanescence

Playing With Fire – Thomas Rhett ft. Jordin Sparks

You Give Love a Bad Name – Bon Jovi

Trouble (Stripped) – Halsey

Praying – Kesha

A Little Too Much – Shawn Mendes

Creep – Radiohead

One More Night – Maroon 5

The Voice Within – Christina Aguilera



CHAPTER ONE

GRACE

I'm cold. How I made it through the night is beyond me. I rub my hands together and blow into them, trying to warm them. I watch people weave in and out of each other, making their way to work. They don't see me. I'm invisible to them. The funny thing is, I used to be just like them. I had a good job in the accounts department of a huge firm. I was working my way up and then things changed. Sometimes, I want to stop these people and tell them how quickly they can lose it all. They wouldn't listen, though, because we all think it won't happen to us.

"Grace," my friend, Danny, heads towards me holding up a coffee, "wanna share?"

I smile gratefully. It's good to have a friend on the streets. We look out for one another, and when one eats, we both eat. I take the Styrofoam cup and hold it, enjoying the warmth. "Any luck?" he asks.

I shake my head. "I'm invisible, remember."

"It's the wrong time of day. People are too busy," he reminds me. "Let's go and see Lenny. He might sneak us in for a shower if the boss ain't around."



When we arrive at The Lodge Hotel, Lenny greets us with a smile. He's worked here for years, and I once stopped him being robbed by another homeless guy. Lenny is over sixty, and I don't agree with stealing from the elderly or kids. As a thank you, he said I could pop in from time to time and shower at the hotel. He usually finds us an empty room and gives us those little free shampoos you get when you stay. Today is no different. He gives us a key to room ten, then we make our way up in the elevator.

"You go first," Danny tells me. "I'm gonna go down to the laundry and see what there is."

"Go to lost property," I say. I don't want to take advantage of Lenny's good nature.

I shower and brush my teeth using the disposable brush Lenny gave me. I wrap myself in a towel and go back into the bedroom just as Danny rushes back in, thrusting some clean clothes from lost property "Quick," he snaps, "put these on, we've gotta get out of here."

IVAN

I walk with purpose, causing my men trouble keeping up. “Boss, I need to brief you before we go in there,” says Lev. Lev, my Sovietnik, advises me, but today, I’m not in the mood.

“You know what today is?” I ask.

“Of course.”

“Then you know I’m not in the mood to talk.” He slows, trailing behind, along with my two bodyguards.

The hotel is busy, and this immediately worsens my already terrible mood. Lev goes to the front desk to see if our guest has arrived. “Who found this place?” asks Maxim, looking around in disgust.

“It was Lev’s idea. Less conspicuous,” I mutter.

“Through there,” says Lev, pointing to a set of double doors.

I spot Akin right away. He stands to greet me, bowing his head. “Make it quick, I have somewhere to be.” I turn to my entourage. “Go. I don’t need you lingering behind me.” My men disperse, standing by the doorway instead, but Maxim stays. As my second in command, he’s always by my side when it comes to business.

“Did Lev brief you?” asks Akin waiting for me to sit before he does the same.

“Why would he need to brief me? I’m here in person. Brief me yourself.”

He glances nervously at Lev, which tells me I'm not going to like what I hear. "There's nothing, boss. No one is talking, and those who are, say they saw nothing. There're no more businesses to threaten, no more houses to upturn. We've approached every known enemy. We have nothing."

"*You* have nothing," I correct him. "Six months and you have nothing. That makes me look weak. It makes me look like a fool."

"Boss, I swear, I've tried everything."

Lev steps forward. "Boss, maybe it's time—"

I stand abruptly, and he immediately moves back. "It will never be time, Lev. Someone knows something, and I won't stop until we've made them pay for Lara. Am I clear?"

"Crystal," he mutters, bowing his head.

I storm out the room towards the exit, accidentally knocking the shoulder of a man. I take notice because he looks out of place, like he's homeless. He apologises, and I give him an angry glare before continuing on my way.

"Idiot," mutters one of my guards.

I step out into the fresh air. I should check my phone before I head to the cemetery, so I go into my pocket, but it's not there. I pat myself down. It's not here. "Everything okay, boss?" asks Maxim.

"My phone, it's not here. Nor is my wallet."

GRACE

“Why the rush?” I ask, pushing my damp legs into a pair of jeans with great difficulty.

Danny holds up a wallet and mobile phone, grinning. “He looked posh, so he might realise it’s gone soon.”

I give him an uneasy glance. “Maybe we should hide out here?”

“No, he took note of me. He’ll give a description, and they’ll know exactly who he’s talking about.”

There’s a tightness in my chest and I groan. “Danny, we’re not supposed to do anything to upset Lenny. He’ll stop us coming here.” I pull on the sweater and grab my rucksack. “And let’s face it, no one else is lining up to take a chance on us.”

“Relax, hopefully, the guy won’t even notice until he’s eating caviar for lunch, and by then, I’ll be a distant memory.” He grins, grabbing my hand.

We take the back stairs, breaking out into the alleyway that runs behind the hotel. “Maybe we should split up in case he’s hanging around,” Danny suggests.

I shake my head. “No way. If you’re in trouble, then so am I.” He gives me a knowing smile before opening my rucksack to put the wallet and phone in there. We’re fiddling with the bag when a shadow falls over us, causing us both to look up at the same time. At the entrance, there’s a group of men. They don’t look like good people, and I glance at Danny nervously.

The hairs on my arms prickle and a shiver runs down my spine as the man in front assesses us with curiosity.

“You have something that belongs to me.” The man speaking is important. It’s obvious just by the way he stands, so confident, like the world belongs to him. His expensive suit and gold Rolex show his money, but his demeanor shows his power.

“No, I don’t,” snaps Danny. “Now, fuck off.”

My eyes widen in panic at the tone of Danny’s voice. “Danny,” I hiss. I don’t feel like these are the type of men who’ll listen to his fake threats.

“I’ve got a knife,” he continues, and I groan.

“Just hand it over so we can all go on with our day,” says another of the men.

I pull the zip on my bag. “What are you doing?” hisses Danny.

“We don’t want any trouble,” I mutter.

“Bring it to me,” the man commands.

I take the items from my bag, hesitating warily before moving towards the group. “Grace,” snaps Danny, “what are you doing?”

I look back at him. “You got caught, accept it.” I don’t see the hand until it’s around my throat. I drop my bag and his belongings. The mobile skitters across the ground, smashing

the screen. I gasp for breath, trying to prize his fingers from my throat.

“What the fuck, man?” Danny yells, running towards us. He falls to the ground in a heap, and I frown in confusion. My neck is released and I fall to my knees, holding my throat and gasping to pull air into my lungs. My eyes fall to Danny, who lays still. Something feels off, but I can’t place a finger on it. I crawl to him, rolling him onto his back.

I gasp at the blood covering his face, and I gently shake him. “Danny,” I whisper, smoothing his hair from his face. He remains still. “Danny, wake up,” I say, more desperately this time. I glance back at the men watching me and I wonder why the fuck no one seems to be moving or helping or even bothering to look remotely alarmed. I grab his jacket and shake harder. His lifeless head falls onto my lap and blood smears over my jeans. “Oh fuck, Dan, please wake up. Please,” I beg.

“Take her,” the powerful man orders, bringing me back to reality. Another man steps forward, and I cling to Danny harder, shaking my head. He grabs me under the arms and drags me back, and I stare in horror as Danny’s head falls to the ground with a sickening thud. My tatty trainers scrape along the floor as the man tries to get me to my feet, but I wriggle until he loses his grip.

Scrambling to get away from them, I rush back down the alley towards the hotel’s fire exit. As I reach it, I see it’s firmly closed and I cry out in anger, slamming my fists against the

cold metal. “Help,” I scream. “Help me.” Two men pin me against the door. One slams my head against it, holding it still, and I feel the other grabbing my arms and pulling them behind my back. Next, I feel a sharp scratch against my thigh, and I look down in time to see a syringe being withdrawn.

“Night-night, *pretty*,” one of the men murmurs in my ear, and I feel my eyes growing heavy. Each man takes an arm and they begin to lead me back towards the exit. Danny has been moved to the wall. He’s slumped with his head on his knees, and his coat has been wrapped around him. He looks like he’s sleeping. My legs feel dead and they begin to drag on the ground. One of the men pulls me into his arms, lifting me from the ground with ease. I feel like I’m floating as I allow myself to drift away.

IVAN

I crouch by the graveside of my beloved Lara, placing the white roses beside her headstone. “I need you. I love you,” I say quietly. It’s the same words I utter each time I come here. It’s the same words she’d tell me each day she woke in my arms. *I miss holding her in my arms.*

I stand, inhaling sharply. Six months since she was cruelly taken. Six months of pure hell, not knowing who did it or why.

I hear a commotion from the vehicle and sigh. Is five minutes peace too much to ask for? Maxim rolls down the

window. “Boss, she’s awake, and Lev has no more stuff to shut her the hell up.”

The woman begins to scream, so I move quickly, opening the back passenger door and grabbing her by the hair. I pull her from the vehicle, and she falls to her knees, but I force her to look at me. “Unless you want to end up like your friend, you should be quiet.”

“You lied,” she whispers, her expression full of hurt. “We gave you the things back, and you killed him anyway.” I stare at her innocent face.

Her green eyes give away every emotion she’s feeling. They remind me of ... I shake my head, pulling her to her feet and shoving her back inside the vehicle. I climb in beside her so she’s sandwiched between me and Lev. “Drive,” I tell Alek.



I made the unusual decision to bring the woman back to one of my homes. I could see the questioning expressions on my men’s faces. They wanted to ask why, but none dared to. Instead, they followed my orders, and as we enter the large mansion, they bring her in kicking and screaming. I smile to myself. She’s a live-wire. I like that.

“Downstairs,” I instruct Igor, and he helps Alek manhandle her to the basement.

Maxim follows me to my office. “Should I ask?” Out of all my men, Maxim is my closest confidante. He gets away with much more than anyone else. I’ve known him since he was eight and I was thirteen, and that gives him a free ticket to ask me things no one else dare.

“No.”

“We could have killed her too and yet you spared her. Then you bring her to your Morozov manor.”

“She was an unexpected find. It was the closest property.”

“Will she be joining our girls?”

I think over his words before shrugging. “I haven’t decided.”

“Of course, she can’t go back onto the streets of London, but we have a lorry going to Poland this evening and a boat going to Russia tomorrow.”

“I haven’t decided,” I repeat, giving him a warning glare.

“Ivan,” he says with a sigh, “what’s going on?”

“Get me her name and run her checks.”

“I know it’s been hard, and today is harder than most—”

“I’m bored,” I say bluntly. “She might liven things up a little.”

“You’re going to toy with her?”

I shrug. “I haven’t decided. Do as I ask and run the checks.”

GRACE

I'm thrown into a basement. It's cold and dark, and there's only a small window high up on one wall that gives a slither of light. There's nothing down here but a bucket, and I dread to think what that's for.

The door opens and footsteps descend the stone stairs. A man comes into view and pulls a cord, then a light flickers on, but it's dim, hardly making a difference.

"Name?" he asks firmly.

"Fuck you."

"Name, little girl, or I will make sure fucking is all you do."

"Fuck you," I repeat.

A smile plays on his lips. "Your boyfriend made a stupid move today. It was his own fault."

"Not my boyfriend."

He holds up my rucksack, and I rush to him, trying to grab it. He kicks me away like I'm a dog, and I fall back onto my arse. "Touch me again and I will slit your throat," he warns in a deadly tone. He proceeds to open the bag and empty the contents on the floor. My passport hits his foot and he grins, swooping down to collect it. "Grace Parker," he reads. "Welcome to the Manor."

"I'm not scared of you," I warn him. "You're a bunch of dicks, and when I get out of here, I'll make your life a misery." I say it with promise, but if I ever get out of here, I'll run as far as I can away from him.

He laughs hard, throwing my bag on top of my few belongings. “I’ll look forward to it.”



It’s been over twenty-four hours. I know this because it’s been dark and now it’s light again. A woman brought me food last night, but it remains on the step, as does the breakfast she brought earlier. There are also two bottles of water which I refuse to drink in case I’m forced to use the bucket. Even being homeless hasn’t made me resort to acting like an animal. I find public toilets every time.

The door opens and I watch as shiny black shoes step over the food and head down towards me. The man who I suspect is in charge towers over me. It’s the first time I’ve seen him since the alleyway, but his presence has the same effect on me and I shrink back into the shadows. “Maria tells me you did not eat.” His voice is deep and full of authority. I remain silent, going back to resting my forehead on my knees. “Is my food not good enough?” When I still don’t reply, he sighs heavily. “And you haven’t drank?”

“Why do you care?” I snap, looking up.

“Do you want to die down here?”

“Of course not. I don’t want to be here at all.”

“Drink.” He holds out a bottle of water. I shake my head, even though my mouth is dry and my throat hurts. “You must

be thirsty.” I stare at the bottle longingly, then my eyes go to the bucket. He smiles. “It’s the bucket putting you off?”

“I’m not an animal,” I mutter.

“Drink,” he hands me the bottle, and I unscrew the cap and gulp it down. “Now, follow me.”



CHAPTER TWO

IVAN

The girls we move never meet me or Maxim. Those jobs are left to our Brigadiers, our captains. Each captain has their groups of Boyeviks to watch over and trafficking is down to them to arrange. Any problems that arise go to Lev and then Maxim as a last resort.

So, when I announced I wanted to be there today to watch them test her, I could see Maxim biting his tongue, wanting to ask what my interest in this woman is, but in truth, I don't know myself. I still haven't decided what to do with her. All I know is she's the first woman in a long time to intrigue me. The fact she appeared yesterday, on Lara's six-month anniversary, makes me think it wasn't a coincidence. Maybe Lara sent her my way. Maybe she knew I needed distracting.

Igor brings Grace into the room where Maxim and I are already waiting. Her eyes dart around, searching for a way out. I smile. She won't find one, and even if she made it out the front door, which in itself would be a task, she'd have to make

it past the roaming dogs and the security before she got to the ten-foot gate controlled by a release button that very few people have access to.

I took her from the basement and showed her to a spare room where she could use the toilet and have a shower. It's the least I could do before her real horror begins. She's now wrapped in a white robe with her wet hair sticking to her neck.

"Remove it," I tell Igor.

He nods, taking hold of the robe tie she's wearing. She suddenly grips it tightly. "What the fuck are you doing?"

I sit back against the desk and fold my arms over my chest, smirking. "Alek," I say, and Alek moves from the doorway he was guarding to help Igor. They wrestle Grace from the robe until she stands before me naked. I push off the desk, and she eyes me warily. They each hold onto one of her wrists as I circle her, taking in every curve of her body.

Maxim dug up her information, and I was surprised to see she's homeless. The man she was with looked it, but she was clean and her clothes were fresh. There are no bruises, and I peer closer at her arms for track marks. There's nothing. She's been homeless for a year, and it's unusual not to find signs of drugs or prostitution or even a criminal record.

I stand before her, and she ignores me, staring past me to the window. "How do you afford to eat?" She remains quiet. "You're homeless. You don't do drugs, unless you sell?"

"That's a mug's game," she mutters.

“Do you have a pimp?”

She scoffs. “Even if I did have to sell myself, I certainly wouldn’t split my hard-earned money with a pimp.”

I smirk. “Sensible.”

“So, if that’s what you think is going to happen here, you’re mistaken.”

I laugh. “I like that you think you hold all the cards, Grace. Especially when you’re the one standing here naked in a room full of men.”

“You think this is the first time I’ve dealt with bastards like you?” she spits angrily.

“Leave,” I tell my men. They clear the room, and Grace brings her eyes to me. I step close, giving her no room as I run my hand through her wet hair. “Such a pretty thing but the mouth of a sailor.”

“Look, I’m sorry my friend took your wallet, but we were hungry, okay. We just needed a break.”

I run a finger over her shoulder and her skin breaks out in bumps. “Never apologise for things you meant.”

“But I didn’t take it, and you punished him, so why can’t you just let me go?”

Her begging turns me on. “When did you last eat?” I ask, running my finger over her protruding hip bone.

“Please, I’ll do anything, just let me go.”

“I asked a question. Answer.”

She slaps me. It comes from nowhere, and for a second, I freeze, hardly believing she'd dare to be so stupid. I grab her by the throat and see panic in her eyes as I back her up towards my desk. I push her against it, and she leans at an awkward angle. "You have a choice. You obey me and I treat you well enough to feed you, or I let my men in here to carry out the worst afternoon of your life."

I loosen my hold, and she gasps. "I'm not good at obeying," she spits, trying to land a kick to my shin but missing.

I grin, backing away. "Very well." She stands, keeping her hands gripped on the edge of my desk. "Maxim," I shout. I'm not used to disappointment, and I'll hate to see this one hurt, but she's made her choice. By tomorrow, she'll be in a crate in the back of a lorry to fuck knows where, and I'll never think about this moment again.

My men return, and I grab her by the hair. She cries out, releasing her death grip on the desk, and I shove her in front of me. "She's ready."

"Come," Maxim orders.

"No," I cut in. "Do it here."

I round the desk and take a seat. My men shift awkwardly. I've never shown an interest in watching these women break, but I've never been in a situation where we've stumbled across a woman like her. So, I relax in my chair and loosen my tie. She'll be so high by tomorrow evening, she'll forget what I look like.

“Alek,” Maxim says sharply, causing my men to jump to attention, “get on with it.”

GRACE

The last time I felt fear like this was my first night sleeping rough. I was a nervous wreck. If it hadn't been for Danny, I probably wouldn't have survived as long as I have. But something about these men tells me my luck's about to run out.

They've stripped me of my clothes to disarm me, a move that's not unheard of by pimps and other bastards who want to control women. But it'll take more than this to make me break, so I fix my eyes on the man in the suit. He's handsome, and the way he watches me tells me he's attracted to me too. And I can't deny that the way he handled me sent shivers across my body. He's the sort of man who can break me with one hand and fix me with the other. But I'm not stupid enough to let my body rule my head, and my head is definitely telling me this man is dangerous.

He holds all the power in this room, and as his men grab my arms, I keep my eyes on his to show him I'm stronger than he thinks. He'll break before me, I just have to hold out.

I hear one of the men unbuckle his belt, but I refuse to tear my eyes away. The sound of a foil packet ripping makes my heart race faster. He *will* break before me.

“Igor,” says the man, smirking at my defiance, “join him.” Sickness swells in my stomach. He'll call this off, I know it.

But Igor wastes no time grabbing a second condom and ripping it open.

“So, you’ll have them rape me, and then what?” I ask, glancing behind me as they descend. One of them squirts lube into his hand and rubs his semi-hard erection. My throat is almost completely dry with panic.

The man grins, stroking a large hand over his stubbled jaw. “You’ll make us good money.”

“On the streets?” I ask. He smirks again, shaking his head. “A brothel?” He shakes again. One of the men cups between my legs, coating me in the cold lube. I close my eyes tightly, trying to keep the vomit from spilling. “Then where?”

“Another country,” he replies. “Far, far away from here.”

Jesus, these are people traffickers. Skinny Lu from the streets once told me about men like this. They don’t care about anyone and will take women and kids to sell abroad, getting them hooked on heroin.

I feel the presence of Igor as he shifts behind me, taking my hips roughly and lining himself up, and I realise he isn’t going to break first. “Okay,” I cry out, and Igor stops, waiting for instruction from his boss. “Okay, I choose the first option.”

He grins, waving Igor away, and I sag in relief. He stands, moving towards me. “That was close, Grace. You don’t want to test me again.” He turns to his men. “Leave.” They don’t question him as they file out the room.

“Does everyone do as you say?” I ask in a low voice, watching as he takes a handkerchief from his pocket.

“Yes.” He places a hand in my hair, gripping a fistful while pressing his handkerchief between my legs and slowly wiping away the lubricant. I shiver against his touch, and he laughs. “Easy, we’re still strangers.”

“Are you going to sell me?”

He remains silent, throwing the cloth in the bin by his desk. “The doctor will need to run some tests,” he eventually says. “Comply, so we don’t have to repeat what just happened.” He leads me from the office, still gripping my hair in his fist. The men outside the room all stand straighter as we pass. “Someone get me the doctor,” he orders, and they scurry off like slaves desperate to please their master.

I’m forced to walk up the stairs, and when we get to the first floor and my toes sink into the soft carpet, I can almost pretend this isn’t happening and I’m back home with my mum. I close my eyes, picturing her smiling face, and then I stumble, almost falling to my knees. The man grips my hair tighter, and I cry out. He impatiently shoves me into a bedroom. “On the bed,” he snaps.

“You haven’t even told me your name,” I say, trying my hand at light conversation as I lie down stiffly.

“You don’t need to know my name,” he snaps.

There’s a knock on the door and he turns to see the doctor. “Mr. Morozov,” the doctor greets, bowing his head slightly,

and I smirk at the name drop despite the man's scowl. "The usual tests?" he asks, stepping into the room and placing a bag on the bedside table. He doesn't acknowledge me as he opens it and begins to take out equipment.

"Yes." The man takes a seat by the window.

"You're not staying," I blurt out.

"Why do you need privacy?" he asks, arching a brow.

"Every woman likes privacy when it comes to this sort of thing," I snap.

"Tone," he says in warning. "And if you thought my doctor would help you out of here, you thought wrong. He works for me."

I narrow my eyes and stare up at the ceiling while the doctor proceeds to take swabs from down below. "Age?" he asks me as he pops a small stick into an empty tube. I ignore his question, so Mr. Morozov answers instead. "Twenty-five."

"Sexual partners?" he continues, and I scoff. As if I'm going to tell him that.

"She's a street rat, probably lost count," Mr. Morozov mutters.

"Two," I snap, "and, yes, I used protection. No, I don't have any children and, yes, I'm clear of HIV and all other STDs. They have free clinics for street rats like me."

The doctor exchanges an amused smirk with the man before pulling off his gloves. "I'll rush them through, Mr. Morozov.

How long until she's moved?"

"Undecided," he answers.

"I should have the results by this evening."

IVAN

I wait until the doctor leaves before moving from the seat to the end of the bed. Grace stiffens. "Two?" I repeat, referring to her sexual partners. It's rare to find a woman of her age with so little experience.

"Please let me go," she whispers, pulling the bed sheet over her naked body.

I tug it away again. "I haven't told you to cover yourself," I say coldly. "Why are you living on the streets?"

"Because I am."

I'm tired of her smart mouth. "Grace, we've been here before. Don't make me force answers from you."

"I just want to leave. I won't tell anyone about this or about Danny—"

"Danny?" I repeat. "The dead boyfriend?"

"He wasn't my boyfriend."

"The thief."

"I told you, we were hungry. He was looking after me."

"Yet I offer you food for free and you refuse to eat."

"I don't want anything from you."

“Just your freedom.”

She nods. “Yes,” she whispers. “Please.”

I rise to my feet. “Sleep. Don’t leave this room.”

“What are you going to do with me?” she suddenly cries, sitting up.

“Don’t break my rules, Grace, and you’ll live to see another day.”



I go down to the kitchen, where Maria is making lunch. Igor is eating as usual but stands when he spots me. “Boss,” he murmurs in greeting.

“Go to the first floor and watch she doesn’t leave the room.”

“And if she does?”

I smirk. “Call for me.”

“You don’t want me to lock the door?” he asks.

I shake my head. I’m testing her. It’s a test I know she’ll fail, and that excites me more than anything.

“Should I make her lunch?” asks Maria.

I shake my head. “No. She won’t be eating today, Maria.” Because I already know she’ll need punishment.

GRACE

I lay for ten minutes staring up at the white ceiling before I glance around the room. It's clean but plain, with all white walls and not a drop of colour. I sit, letting my feet touch the soft carpet then rise to my feet and carefully move across the room until I'm by the window, where I peer down into the garden below. There're men chatting right below my window. A high wall surrounds the property along with large iron gates where men stand guard with dogs. I groan. How the hell am I going to get out of this?

I curse Danny for the hundredth time. If only he hadn't have stolen the damn wallet. Then my heart twists, remembering the price he's paid, and tears fill my eyes again. I'd told him so many times it wasn't worth the hassle. Not unless you were somewhere crowded, where it would be impossible to pinpoint when a wallet went missing or who took it.

I move to a door next to the exit and carefully open it, trying to be as quiet as possible. Inside there's a bathroom, so I close it again and turn to the exit. I know it's unlocked because I didn't hear him lock it when he left. My hand hovers over the doorknob as I replay his words in my head. I know I won't make it downstairs and out the front door without being noticed, but maybe I can check out the other side of the house. Men might not patrol there, meaning I can at least try to climb the wall. I just need to get into a room overlooking that side.

I quietly open the door, slowly peering out into the hall. There's no one immediately outside my room, and I breathe a sigh of relief. There's a door opposite this one and I pray it's another bedroom as I creep across the landing.

IVAN

“I can have this girl on a boat by ten this evening,” Maxim tells me, swirling his whiskey around in the tumbler.

I sigh heavily. “Why are you so keen to get rid of her?”

“It’s unusual for us to keep hold of a woman we intend to sell on. She’s seen us, heard our names. Aren’t you a little concerned?”

I smirk, pouring myself a glass of water. “Why would I be concerned?”

“She’s not on drugs, she’s thinking clearly, and she witnessed a murder.”

“And she won’t get out of here to tell a living soul, so what’s the problem?”

“So, you don’t plan on selling her?”

I sigh. “Yes, Maxim, I plan to sell her to a very good man in Russia. But not yet. First, I want to entertain myself.”

He frowns. “Why?” When I don’t reply, he leans a little closer. “I can’t help but notice how she looks like—”

I slam my hand on the table and fix him with a glare. “Don’t finish that sentence,” I growl. “Stop questioning my decisions.”

He sits back, nodding once. “Okay. Sorry, boss.”

There’s a knock at the door. “What?” I snap.

It opens and Igor steps in. “She’s left the room, boss,” he tells me, and I grin.

“Where is she?”

He hesitates before taking a deep breath and answering, “In *her* room, boss.”

I stand abruptly. “What?”

“In Lara’s room, boss. It must have been left unlocked by mistake,” he mutters.

I rush from the office, taking the stairs two at a time until I reach the first floor. I stop outside the door to a room I haven’t entered for six months and take a breath before pushing it open. Grace spins to face me, looking shocked. She’s holding a perfume bottle inches from her neck, and I notice the liquid glistening in the light. “Put it down,” I growl, rage filling me. Grace slowly lowers the bottle of Lara’s favourite perfume back onto the dresser, where everything is exactly how Lara left it the day she left me. I scan the room. “What else did you touch?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing,” she whispers.

“Liar!” I bellow, and she flinches. “What. *Else?*”

She points to the silk dress laying carelessly on the bed, the one I ripped from Lara in a jealous rage the night before she left. “I was just looking,” she mutters.

“I told you not to move from the bed,” I remind her, stepping closer. She steps back, and I snigger. “Come,” I tell her, and

she shakes her head. “Grace,” I say with a warning tone in my voice as I hold out my hand.

“Whose room is this?” she asks. “Why is it untouched like the person never returned?”

I feel Maxim behind me. “Boss?” he asks in a low tone.

“The basement,” I mutter, stepping to one side.

Grace backs farther away until she’s in the corner of the room cowering. “Please ... I’m sorry. I’ll stay in the room.”

Maxim grabs her by the hair, and she falls to her knees. “Stand,” he roars.

“Please, Mr. Morozov,” she begs.

I stare at her with disdain. “And book her a place on the boat.”

“No,” she cries. “Please, I’m sorry. I’ll do anything you want.”

Maxim drags her stumbling from the room, leaving me alone with my demons.



CHAPTER THREE

GRACE

I gently blow the graze on my knee. Maxim dragged me all the way to the basement and practically threw me down, leaving me in the dark. I can't get that bedroom out of my mind. It was so beautiful, yet eerie. It was like whoever had lived in there went out one day and never returned. The makeup was still spread out over the vanity unit, the hairdryer was still plugged in at the wall, and then there was the ripped dress on the bed. The material was expensive, and it had been torn so carelessly.

The door opens and Mr. Morozov descends the stairs. He doesn't look mad now, just lost.

I push to stand, making sure to keep my back pressed against the wall and my eyes lowered to the ground. He gets close to me, his feet either side of mine. Placing a hand on the wall beside my head, he leans closer, inhaling the spot where I sprayed the perfume. He releases the breath before taking another, then his spare hand cups my face gently as he buries

his nose into the crook of my neck, inhaling some more. I turn my face into him and his mouth brushes against my own. We both freeze for a second, and then he slams his lips against mine in a bruising kiss. Running his fingers through my hair, he gently tugs the roots as our tongues clash together. His kiss is commanding and forceful, and I find myself getting lost in him, forgetting I'm here against my will and scared out of my wits.

Suddenly, he breaks the kiss and pushes away from me, panting hard and turning his back to me. Then, without a word, he leaves, rushing up the steps and slamming the door.

IVAN

I head straight for my bedroom and strip, then I step into the walk-in shower and turn it on, inhaling sharply as the cold water hits my skin. *Fuck*. She smelt exactly like her, and her body felt the same pressed against my own. I growl angrily, slamming my hand against the tiled wall. I pull at my hair in frustration. It's another reminder that Lara isn't here, that she's gone forever. Six months without her and the pain is still as fresh.

By the time I dress and head down to the office, Maxim is waiting. "The boat is full for this evening," he tells me.

"Not good enough," I snap, taking a seat.

"Tomorrow is the soonest I can get her on it."

"Surely, you can make room for one more?"

He shakes his head. “We’re already over by ten. We don’t wanna risk a stop and search. She’ll be fine down there until collection. Should we proceed with ... breaking her?” It’s how the lower ranks would do it as it’s how they’ve been taught to run things—make the women compliant by asserting authority, and once your men have taken their turn, shoot them up with heroin.

I scrub my face with my hands. Why does that thought make me sick when it comes to her? I shake my head. “No.”

He asks, “Will she go quietly?” I scoff. He’s seen her already, so he knows she won’t. “Maybe I should give her a hit this evening and then again tomorrow?” he suggests.

“I’ll do it,” I mutter. “Get me the stuff.” We don’t keep drugs in any of my houses. The police wouldn’t raid me, I have too much invested in their pockets, but I never risk it just in case. Maxim nods and heads out the office to arrange it.

I throw myself into work until a few hours later, when Maxim stops by to leave the foil package on my desk. I stare at it and, for the first time in my life, I think about the impact of what I’m about to do. “You want me to do it?” he asks, seeing my hesitation.

I snatch it up angrily. “Of course not.” He nods, handing me a sealed packet containing a syringe and a cigarette lighter.

I head to the basement, stopping outside the door and resting my head against it. “Derzhi menya sil’nym,” I murmur. *Keep me strong.* I take a deep breath and open the door.

Descending the stone steps, I spot Grace crouched in the corner, shivering uncontrollably. She looks up slightly, her hair hanging limply in her face, and I wonder when she last ate a good meal. I shake my head, clearing my concerns. I'm here to do a job before I ship her off to another country and sell her to men for sex.

Grace watches cautiously as I place the paraphernalia on the windowsill. I take the foil, opening it, then I take the lighter and flick the ignite button, watching as the orange flame dances beneath the foil to heat the contents. She watches without a word.

“Who was the thief to you?” I ask, concentrating on the bubbling liquid.

“My friend,” she whispers. Her voice is low and her throat hoarse. “He looked after me on the streets. Or maybe we looked after one another.”

“It's his fault you're down here,” I tell her.

“It's your fault,” she replies. “You made the choice to take me.”

I place the foil down and pick up the syringe, taking it from the packet. “Why aren't you on drugs?” I ask. Most of the women we pick up from the streets are taking something to get them through.

“I don't drink or take drugs. I'm not an idiot.”

I place the cotton swab in the liquid and draw up the drug into the syringe. I hold it and flick the end, clearing the air

bubbles from it. “What about you?” she asks, holding out her arm expectantly.

I frown, confused as to why she’d not bother to fight me. “Never,” I mutter, pulling a band from my pocket and crouching to wrap it around her arm as she watches. “You’re just going to accept it?” I ask.

“What choice do I have?” She’s right, there isn’t one. “One day, I’ll escape whatever hell you put me in and I’ll get clean. Then I’ll find you.”

I arch a brow, resisting the urge to smile. “And what will you do when you find me?”

“I’ll make you fall in love with me.”

I stare into her green eyes. Her answer was unexpected. “Why?” I ask.

“Because you need love.”

GRACE

I keep my breathing even as he watches me. He’s conflicted, I can see it in his eyes. He wants rid of me because I remind him of something or someone, but there’s a part of him fighting to keep me here, and that’s the part I have to appeal to if I want to survive this. I slowly run my tongue over my lower lip, and he follows the movement with hooded eyes. Typical man, easily distracted.

“Will it hurt?” I whisper, and he shakes his head slightly, trying to break the spell between us. “The needle?” I add. He

inhales sharply, like he's just remembered to breathe, then he wraps the rubber band around my upper arm and ties it tightly, pinching my skin. I wince, and for a second, I think he's going to remove it, but instead, he rubs my arm where he intends to inject me. "Will I be addicted right away?" I ask, watching as he tries to find a vein.

"Stop talking," he murmurs.

"Sorry," I whisper. "I like to know what's happening ... childhood trauma," I say, shrugging. "I like to know the next steps."

He sighs in irritation. "It depends," he mutters, rubbing harder. "Some people get addicted right away, after one or two hits. Others take a while."

I nod, watching as he stands to grab the needle. "And will I forget what's happening to me?"

He frowns, crouching beside me again. "What do you mean?"

"The rapes," I almost whisper. "Will I be aware of what's going on?" He bites his lower lip and shakes his head once. I smile, trying to look relieved. "Good. I don't think I want to remember that." He checks the needle in the light. "I mean, it's just sex, right," I continue, "but if they hurt me, I don't want to remember that. Will they hurt me?"

"Grace," he says, his voice growly, "stop talking."

I nod, forcing a smile and taking a deep breath. "Okay. I'm ready." He places the point of the needle at my arm. "I don't

like needles,” I blurt, and he sighs again, this time impatiently. “Can I look away?” He nods once. “Thanks.” I turn my head, and when I feel him lining it back up with my vein, I add, “Don’t tell me when you’re doing it, like when a nurse says sharp scratch ... I hate that.”

“Grace,” he growls.

“Sorry,” I whisper. “One more thing ...” He growls louder this time, and I smile awkwardly. “What’s your real name?”

“Why?”

“Because how will I ever find you again?”

“You won’t.”

“What’s the harm? If this stuff is as good as you say, why can’t you tell me? I won’t remember.”

“Ivan.”

“I like that. Ivan Morozov. Russian, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’m ready, Ivan Morozov. When I find you again, I’ll tell you I need you and I love you. That way, you’ll know it’s me. In case I’m unrecognisable.” It’s a low blow, but I heard the men talking when we stopped by the graveyard after they first took me. They thought I was passed out, but I laid silently listening to the way they were doubting their boss and laughing at the way he spoke to the grave he stood by, always uttering the same words, ‘I need you, I love you.’

I turn my head away again and squeeze my eyes closed, waiting for the sharp scratch. When it doesn't come, I open one eye and turn back. He's staring at me with wide eyes. He drops the needle and grabs my face in his hands, kissing me hard for a second time. He steals my breath before pulling back.

"Why did you say that?" he asks.

"I don't want to die, Ivan," I say, gently placing my hand on his cheek. "I'll do anything. Just don't send me away to die."

He stands abruptly, staring down at me for a few silent minutes before turning his back and heading up the stairs. I watch him go, relieved he didn't stick that needle in my arm. The second he's gone, I grab it and empty the contents on the ground. I'm sure he could get more if he wanted to, but at least he'd have to start again.

IVAN

"Is it done?" asks Maxim.

"No. Cancel the seat. She stays."

He frowns. "What?"

I glare at him. "Are you questioning me again?" I shout.

"No, of course not. I'll cancel."

I go into my office and slam the door. Falling into my seat, I rest my head back, staring up at the ceiling. The second the words fell from her mouth, I knew she must have heard them from someone else, but they sounded good coming from her,

and there was no way I could stick that shit in her arm after that. Now, I've got to work out what to do with her. My cock twitches, knowing exactly what it wants me to do with her.



I sit at a table with eight other men, discussing the shipment of drugs I have on a return ship from Russia. Three of the men, who I've been close friends with for many years, are heading up the police force. They make sure they avert police attention on the day of shipment, so we discuss arrangements before our host, Marcus, gets his wife to bring out the food she's lovingly prepared. Dinner parties used to take place in one of my homes, as Lara loved to entertain, but since her death, they've always been at Marcus's house.

After dinner, Alek drives me home. As we pull to a stop, Maxim comes out to greet us. He opens the door and pops his head in. "Your guest has been very loud since you left," he tells me.

"And you couldn't keep her under control?" I snap, following him into the house. I stop to listen, but I'm met with silence. "Well, she seems to have calmed."

"Amazing what some rope can do," he retorts, and I narrow my eyes. "You didn't say what we were supposed to do if she kicked off," he adds, shrugging.

I shake my head, unlocking the door to the basement and heading down. Grace is tied to a chair. Her head hangs limply

to one side and there's a rag stuffed in her mouth with tape over it. "Jesus, you can't handle a woman unless she's tied up and gagged?" I snap.

Maxim smirks. "It's how we prefer them, no?"

I untie her wrists, noting the red rope burns on her skin. I clamp my jaw tightly, anger coursing through me. I pull the thick tape from her mouth and she cries out. Her lips are dry and chapped, and the tape ripped some of the skin away and blood now coats her lips. I pull the rag from her mouth and gently dab it away. "You can't be making a fuss," I tell her.

"I was cold," she croaks.

I glance at Maxim, who shrugs again. "Was I supposed to ask her if she was comfortable?"

I ignore him, shrugging from my jacket and hanging it over her shoulders. "Sleep," I tell her, stepping away.

She looks around in disgust. "Where?"

"I don't care," I mutter, heading for the stairs. "Just keep quiet."

Maxim locks the door behind us. "How long are we keeping her down there?"

"Until I say otherwise."

"Did the meeting go well?"

"Yes," I mutter, going into the kitchen.

Maria is stirring something, and I peer over her shoulder. "Make sure the girl gets some," I tell her, and she nods. "Sit

with her while she eats,” I add as an afterthought.



It’s almost seven. I pour myself a third drink and leave out the ice. Stepping out onto the balcony of my bedroom, I stare into the dark fields that lay beyond the house. It’s the ideal location—close enough to drive into the city for business, yet far enough away that there’s an eerie silence at night only filled with wildlife.

I wander back into my room and head out across the landing until I’m outside Lara’s door. I stare at it, wondering what scares me most of all, the fact she isn’t in there waiting for me or the fact that her belongings are the only thing I have left, and if I go in there, I might lose my mind and finally give in to the rage that’s been waiting to take me for the last six months.

Damaging her things will break me once again, and I don’t know how much control I have over myself. I inhale deeply and hold it in while I remove the key from the frame above the door and insert it into the lock. It clicks, and I release a nervous breath as I push the door open.

After Lara had gone, I refused to come back in here. It was her space, untouched by anyone but her. Maria occasionally comes in here to open a window and air it, but she’s under strict instructions not to touch anything. Lara was chaos and mess—this room showcases her personality perfectly, and I’ll kill anyone who messes with that.



CHAPTER FOUR

GRACE

“I’m Maria.” The woman shifts closer, laying a tray down on the ground. Its contents smell amazing, and my stomach grumbles loudly. Maria chuckles. “Borscht,” she clarifies, nodding at the bowl of steaming soup. “In Russia, they say this is a poor man’s meal, but it’s a favourite in this house.”

“Are you from Russia?” I ask, watching as she slides the tray closer.

“No, I’m from Poland originally, but I’ve been here for ten years.”

“Do you know why I’m here?” I whisper, taking the bowl from the tray and bringing it to my mouth. I sip the borscht and close my eyes as the warmth runs through my body. The flavours hit my tongue and I groan in delight. It’s the best tasting thing I’ve had in months.

“I know nothing. I am told to feed the men, so I feed them. I don’t ask questions.”

“They took me,” I whisper, glancing past her to make sure there’s no one listening from the steps. “I need help.”

“If you have favourite foods, maybe I can make them. You need to eat more. You’re all bones.” Maria heads towards the steps.

“Please,” I hiss desperately, “get help.” Maria smiles awkwardly before rushing up the steps, closing the door and locking it securely. “Damn it,” I mutter.

I finish the meal and drink some water. Wrapping Ivan’s jacket around myself tighter, I press my nose into the material and inhale his spicy, expensive scent.



Cold water hits my face and I gasp for breath, jumping up from the floor. My body protests, and pains shoot through my knees and back as the blood rushes back into my limbs. “Jesus,” I scream, looking at Igor holding a now empty bucket of water.

“The boss wants to see you.”

I use Ivan’s jacket to wipe my face. “There are better ways to wake me,” I snap.

Igor slaps me. It’s unexpected and I stumble back, clutching a hand to my cheek as I crash against the wall. He moves in close, grabbing a handful of my hair. “Let me be very clear, bezdomnaya devushka. *Homeless girl*. When he gets bored of

you, I'll be first in line to teach that smart mouth of yours a painful lesson."

My pulse races rapidly, and I feel my hands begin to tremor. The evil glint in this man's eyes tells me he's not someone I should backchat—my stinging face is testament to that—but like an incorrigible idiot, I square my shoulders and smile. "I doubt your tiny penis would make much of an impact, and I certainly doubt your ability to make it painful." I brace myself for the next slap, but it doesn't come. Instead, he grips my chin in his hand and forces me to stare into those cruel eyes some more.

"Breaking you will be a pleasure."

"One that will have to wait for now," comes Ivan's voice from the top of the steps. "Why am I still waiting?"

Igor tightens his hold on my hair and guides me to the steps. "Apologies, boss. She decided to get a little excitable."

"It must have been the thought of seeing you again, Ivan," I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

Igor shoves me harder, and I trip up the steps, hissing when he pulls me back by the hair. "Show some damn respect," he warns.

I'm taken into another room, one I haven't been in before. There are black couches with gold edging and a gold table in the center. A large mirror hangs on one wall, its gold edging matching the couches. I glance around. I've never seen anything like this place, not unless you count what I've seen

on television about extravagant lifestyles. Igor releases me and leaves the room as Ivan takes a seat on the couch, watching me with interest.

“Igor will tear your insides out with a knife if you continue to bait him.”

“I’m yet to decide if that’s a better option than being here like this,” I mutter.

Ivan almost smiles. “Don’t annoy him for fun, Grace. Who knows what will happen when I’m not around?”

“Have you decided what to do with me?” I ask, changing the subject.

“You need to shower.”

“What’s the point if I’m going to sit back in that dungeon?”

He stands, and I immediately step back. He almost smiles again before passing me to lead the way from the room. I follow, taking in each closed door that we pass. This place is like a maze, and I doubt I’ll ever find my way out if I’m able to make a run for it.

We go upstairs, but this time, he leads me to the farthest room along the hallway. There’s a keypad on the door, and he covers it with his body while he inputs the code. The door opens and I gasp as we step inside.

There’s a large four poster bed against the wall with sheer curtains hanging down each one like a goddamn fairy tale. The bed is so high, there’s a step around it to climb on. Ivan points

to a shower opposite the bed. There's a glass screen to keep water inside. "Shower," he says.

I glance around and ask, "Are you leaving?"

"No."

I look back at the walk-in shower longingly. "But I can't go anywhere. Can't you wait outside the door?"

Ivan sighs impatiently. He takes me by the upper arm and marches to the shower, leaning in to turn it on. Water jets blast out hot water and steam immediately billows up into the air. Ivan pulls the jacket from me, tossing it on the floor, and then he shoves me under the spray and releases my arm. "Now, shower," he orders, moving over to the window and taking a seat in one of two chairs.

There's a built-in shelf with products placed carefully in a line. The Harrods labeling causes me to raise an eyebrow, but I reach for the shampoo regardless and squirt some into my hand. As I massage it into my hair, I close my eyes, inhaling the Shea butter and hazel nut oil scent described on the label. Next, I reach for the body wash. The lime basil and mandarin bursts to life the second I begin to massage it into my skin. It's the most luxurious shower I've ever had, and it might just be my last, so I'm making the most of it.

I stay under the spray until Ivan reaches in to turn it off. He hands me a towel, which I wrap around my body. There's a tiled grey wall that hides a sink unit and mirror from the rest of the room, which he goes behind, indicating for me to follow. He opens a new toothbrush, handing it to me after he squirts

toothpaste onto it. Stepping in front of the sink, I stare at my pale reflection in the mirror. There are dark circles under my eyes and my cheeks look hollow. I've lost too much weight.

As I begin to brush my teeth, I notice Ivan inching closer. I watch through the mirror as he presses his face almost into my hair and inhales deeply. It reminds me of when he did the same after I sprayed the perfume. He trails a finger along my bare shoulder, his eyes drifting closed. The opportunity is too good to pass, so I carefully lean closer until I feel his warm breath on my neck. Then I angle my body so his crotch area is in line with my arse before bending slightly to rinse my mouth. I hear his sharp intake of breath and glance back over my shoulder innocently. His eyes are heated, and I lower my gaze to his erection straining against his trousers.

When I stand, our eyes meet in the mirror. He reaches around my shoulders and tugs me against his front. "Sladost, you're playing a dangerous game," he whispers.

He takes my hand and leads me towards the bed. That anxious feeling reappears as he tugs back the sheets and stares at me expectantly.

"Are you going to ..." I trail off.

"Get in," he tells me.

As I slide under the sheets, he pulls my towel away and immediately covers me with the sheet. As I sink into the bed, I groan in pleasure. It's been such a long time since I slept in a warm, soft bed. Ivan goes back over to the chair, turning it to face the bed. Then he takes a seat and stares at me.

IVAN

Smelling the products Lara loved from the bottle is not the same as smelling them on a real woman. The entire bedroom smells of Lara, and I relax back in the chair, enjoying the vision of her I have in my head.

We'd spend hours in this room, lost in one another. She'd shower, and I'd always end up joining her, fucking my troubles away. I take a few deep breaths to try and gain control of myself, but with each thought that fills my mind, my erection grows painfully harder. I picture her on her knees, lapping at my cock like she was starved, and a smile plays on my lips. Fuck, I miss her mouth.

I open my eyes, and Grace is softly snoring. It took minutes for her to dose off. She must need rest—I can't imagine she got much in the basement. Her wet hair splays out across the pillow and I'm reminded of Lara once again. I groan, disturbing Grace, who rolls over, turning her back to me.

I wait another half-hour before moving from the chair and climbing onto the bed. I lean over to where Grace lays and inhale her freshly washed hair. If I close my eyes, I'm transported back to happier times. Laying on my back, I stare up at the ceiling. *What the hell am I doing?*



I feel the bed shift and immediately open my eyes to find Grace sitting on the edge with her back to me. She's clutching some of the sheet to her chest, but I'm lying on the rest, so she's unable to cover herself completely. It's dark outside, and I squint at my watch to see the time is four in the morning. I must have fallen to sleep—five hours is the most I've had in six months.

“I need the bathroom,” she whispers.

“Through the door,” I reply.

She gets off the bed, dropping the sheet, and makes her way to the toilet. Minutes later, she returns, but instead of getting into bed, she wanders over to the doors leading to the balcony and stares through the windows. “You should get more sleep,” I tell her, sitting up.

“Has he been found?” she asks, folding her arms over her chest.

“Who?”

“Danny,” she mutters. “My friend.”

“The thief,” I say. “Forget about him.”

“He didn't have family. There will be no one to go to his funeral.”

I smirk. There will be no funeral. His body is already ashes. “Come back to bed.”

“Can I have some clothes?” She turns to face me, and I run my eyes up her body.

“No.”

She gives a slight nod before coming back to bed and pulling the sheet over herself. “I’d still run away, even though I’m naked,” she tells me. I stare at her for an explanation. “Isn’t that why you won’t give me clothes? Because you think I’ll run?”

I grin. “No, sladost. I know you won’t run.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because what I’m offering you is better than what you had before.”

She frowns. “You don’t know what I had before.”

“Did you sleep in a bed?” She shakes her head. “Did you eat hot meals?”

“Sometimes.”

“Did you have a toilet and a shower?”

“Sometimes.”

“I’m offering it to you all the time. This is better.”

“I’d rather be on the streets than here, Ivan,” she says, tucking her hand beneath her cheek. “Right now, I live with the threat of being hurt. Out there, I can run.”

I turn to face her, tucking her hair behind her ear. “You can run here,” I tell her. “You just can’t escape.”

GRACE

“You like the scent of the shampoo,” I say after a few minutes of silence. He doesn’t reply. I carefully slide closer, and he eyes me with suspicion. I lay my head on his chest, and he stiffens. After a minute or so, I feel him relax and his hand gently rests against my back. It doesn’t take long for his light snores to fill the room. Clearly, the scent is a comfort to him, and I have no doubt it has something to do with that bedroom full of personal things belonging to a woman. Which proves Ivan has a soft side. Just the way he reacted to my presence in the room tells me she was important to him. Now, I realise if I ever want to leave here alive, I have to bring that side of him out.



Warm kisses wake me. They’re hungry and hurried, just like his hands as they roam my body. I try to remain calm, opening my eyes as Ivan buries his face in the crook of my neck and groans. “Ivan,” I whisper, lightly touching his back. He freezes, then his head shoots up and his eyes are wide. He blinks down at me before suddenly diving up off the bed and backing away like I was the one to ravish him.

“Lara,” he murmurs, sounding confused.

I frown. *The mystery woman has a name.* I shake my head. “Grace,” I whisper.

His features twist in pain and he rushes from the room, slamming the door behind him. I release a breath and push

myself to sit up. *What the hell was all that about?* When he still hasn't returned after a few minutes, I get out of bed and make my way over to the door. I twist the handle as quietly as I can, praying that in his haste he forgot to lock it, but it doesn't budge.

I turn back to the room. It really is gorgeous. I go over to the double doors, and to my relief, they're unlocked. I push them open and inhale the fresh air, closing my eyes as the smell of freshly-cut grass hits my senses. Stepping out, I take in the scenery. Fields stretch out for miles, not a car or person in sight. Great if you want some peace and quiet, but not so great if you're planning a big escape.

I walk to the edge of the balcony and peer down to the garden below. There's a man with a large dog walking the grounds, and I step back so he can't see my naked self.

Going back into the room, I take a towel from a rack next to the shower and wrap it around myself before stepping back outside and taking a seat. If I just had a book, I could pretend I was on holiday.



My stomach grumbles with hunger right about the same time Maria enters the room. She takes me in, lounging in the sun, and smiles. "You needed some colour on that skin." Stepping out onto the balcony, she places a tray on the table beside me. I stare at the salad containing olives and feta and my mouth

waters. “Bread roll also. I think you need carbs,” she tells me, pointing to the warm bread roll oozing with melted butter.

“Thank you, Maria. It looks amazing.”

The bedroom door opens again and Igor fills the frame. Maria dips her head and leaves.

“Come,” he orders as he throws a bag on the bed. I remain outside, forcing myself to ignore the terror currently trying to take over my body. “Now,” he hisses, and I see him flex his fingers before balling them into tight fists.

When I still don’t move, a cruel grin spreads across his face. “Have it your way.” He moves like lightning, taking me by surprise. For such a large man, you’d think he’d struggle with speed. He whips me off the sun lounger, taking my upper arm in a vice-like grip and hauling me to stand. In the bustle, I knock the tray of food and it crashes to the ground. I watch the olives roll away and cry out in frustration. I was looking forward to that food.

I begin to fight, kicking out and screaming as he drags me into the bedroom and throws me on the bed like a rag doll. My towel falls away and I scramble to cover myself with the sheet, which he rips away from me.

“You think you’re safe because he has you in his bed?” he roars, grabbing my ankles and pinning them to the mattress. I twist my body, desperate to get away, but it’s no use—he’s too strong. “You’re nothing, just a toy to keep his mind occupied,” Igor spits, dragging me down the bed towards him. He pins me with his weight, so he can release my ankles and grab my

wrists instead. “You fucking smell like her,” he hisses, inhaling beside my ear. I turn my head away. “I hope you taste like her,” he murmurs, running his tongue up my cheek. “I hope your tight cunt drips for me like hers.”

I turn my head towards him and sink my teeth into his cheek. He yells words in Russian, pulling away from me and gripping his face. His nostrils flare and his eyes widen when he removes his hand to see blood. It drips down his cheek and runs down his neck like a river.

Then he roars, rushing at me and throwing himself on top of me. It winds me, causing me to cough violently while he pins me down. He reaches between us to unzip his trousers, taking full advantage of my stillness, then he pulls my legs apart and presses himself at my entrance. “Be a good whore and fight,” Igor hisses, pinching my nipple hard.

The door opens and Ivan stands stock-still, staring at the scene before him. Igor is oblivious to his presence, too busy trying to ram his erection into my dry vagina.

He grunts, and then, suddenly, I’m squashed beneath him. It takes me a second to realise he isn’t moving anymore, and then he’s ripped away from me. I scoot up the bed until my back hits the headboard. Igor’s lifeless eyes stare at me as blood trickles slowly from his mouth, mixing with the blood from his cheek. Ivan grips Igor’s collar and drags him to the floor before spitting on him and muttering something in Russian. A second later, another man runs in and stops dead in his tracks. “What the fuck happened?”

“Get him out of here, now,” Ivan orders. The man whistles and is joined by three other men, each taking a part of Igor and carrying him from the room, leaving a trail of blood behind.

Ivan doesn't move from the foot of the bed. “Are you hurt?” he eventually asks.

“No,” I whisper. Then he turns and leaves.



CHAPTER FIVE

IVAN

I slam my office door, and Lev looks up in alarm. “Everything okay, boss?”

Maxim rushes in before I can reply, loosening his tie. “What happened?”

“Who left him alone with her?” I yell, shoving Maxim up against the door.

“He was taking her the clothes you asked for,” he tells me, his eyes wide with panic. “What happened?”

“He was about to rape her,” I shout, releasing him. He takes a few breaths before removing his tie completely and opening his top button. “In my own bedroom.”

“Why is she different, Ivan?”

I rake my fingers through my hair, gripping a handful as I pace the office. I feel their eyes on me, waiting for an explanation I don't have. “I didn't okay it,” I snap. “Since

when do my men take matters into their own hands without my permission?”

“You’re right,” says Maxim, calmly. “I’ll speak to them.”

“Any man who decides he wants to behave like a fucking dog in my home will be put down like a dog. Make it clear.”



I tip the last few drops from the vodka bottle into my glass and snatch it up, heading upstairs to my bedroom. Stepping inside, I’m met with the scent of Lara again. I close my eyes and allow myself to enjoy it one last time.

When I open them, I catch a glimpse of Grace’s legs outside on the sun lounger. My heart twists painfully as I head onto the balcony where she lies, soaking up the sun’s rays. She’s wearing the shorts and vest I’d brought for her.

She blinks a few times and uses her arm to shade her eyes from the sun. “Thank you,” she murmurs. “You didn’t give me chance to say it before.”

“Did you anger him?” I ask bluntly.

She stiffens at my words, slowly sitting up. “What?”

“I told you not to antagonise him. Did you?”

“How dare you,” she spits. “You left me in here alone. You put me at risk.” I turn my back to her, and she follows as I go

back inside. “If I wasn’t here in the first place, naked, that wouldn’t have happened at all.”

I remove my tie, throwing it on the bed, followed by my shirt. “If you kept your mouth shut, you wouldn’t have pissed him off. Now, he’s dead.”

“And that’s my fault?”

I turn to her as I unfasten my belt, and she glances at the discarded shirt, becoming wary as I remove the leather and toss it beside it. I kick off my shoes, remove my socks, then drop my trousers. She gasps, turning away, and I smirk as I step into the shower. “I’m a man down,” I say. “Igor has worked for me for five years. Men like him are hard to find.”

She scoffs. “I can take you to plenty of bars that have men exactly like him, if it’s a replacement rapist you’re after.”

I chuckle to myself. “Maria is making dinner. Shower,” I order, grabbing a towel as I step out and wrap it around my waist.

While she showers, I go into the next room, which Lara had turned into a walk-in wardrobe. I pick out shirt and trousers for myself and then turn to Lara’s side and stare at the rails of clothes. Clothes she no longer needs. I sigh, running a hand along them until I find a dress with the tags still attached. Lara has many clothes she’d never worn, and as I take it down from the rail, I smell it first to make sure. It smells new, and I relax. If she’s never worn it, it will be fine for Grace to borrow for this evening.

When I return, she's drying off. I hand her the dress. It's slightly bigger than her slender frame, but with a few more meals inside her, it'll fit perfectly. "No underwear?" she asks. I shake my head, dressing quickly.

Before we leave the room, I turn to her and take her chin in my hands. "If you play up tonight, I'll send you back into the basement. And if any of my men come to you there, I cannot stop them. Are we clear?" She nods. "I'm giving you a chance, *sladost*. Don't make me regret it."

GRACE

His words scare me. After Igor's little show of alpha bullshit, it took me hours to stop shaking. I was so relieved to see Ivan that I felt grateful, but that was swiftly replaced by anger for putting me in that situation in the first place. I'm no safer here than on the streets. And now, he's acting like it was normal to have a man attempt to rape me before dying on top of me.

My hands tremble as I follow Ivan downstairs to the dining room. He pulls out a seat for me before taking his place to my left, at the head of the table. Maria has set out places with a glass of wine at each, and Ivan tops up our glasses. I don't usually drink alcohol, as I like to have a clear head, but after the last few days, I deserve a drink.

Ivan lifts the lids of the silver dishes that sit between us. There's meat on one and vegetables on another, and as he

serves me, I smile gratefully. After losing my lunch earlier, I'm extremely hungry.

“What do you do for work?” I ask politely.

He smirks. “Eat.”

I try the meat. It's like nothing I've ever eaten before, but it tastes amazing. “Maria seems nice.” He keeps quiet. “Has she worked for you long?” He continues to eat in silence. “How many people work here?”

He places his fork down. “Grace, we don't talk at the dinner table. Eat.”

“Sorry, nervous habit. It used to drive my mother mad.”

Once dinner is over, he stands, holding out a hand for me to take. I do, because after my afternoon with the devil, something about Ivan comforts me.

He takes me back upstairs and into his bedroom, which disappoints me. I was hoping to see more of the house and look for a way out.

Ivan sits in the chair by the balcony doors and pulls out his mobile phone, clicking away on it. I head out to the balcony again. It's a lot cooler now the sun is setting.

A long time passes before he calls me into the bedroom. He's stripped out of his shirt and trousers and is sitting up in bed. He pulls back the sheets. “Undress.”

I glance down at my dress. “I like to sleep in clothes,” I say.

“Undress,” he repeats.

I tug the dress over my head, not bothering to cover myself because he's seen me naked more than I care to remember. I slide into bed, turning my back to him. A minute later, he slides down behind me and hooks an arm around my waist, burying his nose into my hair and inhaling. It's weird behaviour, but I don't question it because I need him to need me, and if the scent of Shea butter or lime basil keeps me alive, then he can sniff away.

His erection presses against my arse and I think about moving away. He didn't react well when he woke up this morning touching me up like a condemned man, but I take a chance and fidget innocently, causing his breathing to hitch. I smile to myself and do it again. This time, he grips my hip, digging his fingers into the soft skin, and I wince. "Keep still, sladost. You don't know what you're asking of me."

"Don't you want to know?" I whisper.

"Know what?"

"What it's like to fuck someone else?"

A small laugh escapes him. "You think I don't have sex?"

"Not with anyone like me," I say, sounding more confident than I feel. I've never had to seduce a man, especially not to keep myself alive.

He laughs a little louder. "And what's so special about you?"

I turn to face him, and he eyes me cautiously. "I smell like Lara."

His hand darts out, wrapping around my neck and squeezing hard, around the same time his eyes change from amused to deadly. He pushes up until he's above me, adding more weight to the pressure on my throat, making it difficult to breathe. I lay still, forcing myself not to fight. Instead, I stare into his eyes. He's panting heavily, and his expression is mixed with pain and anger. "Don't fucking say her name," he spits.

My hands grip the sheets, twisting them as white dots dance around, blurring my vision. "You're not Lara ... you never will be."

Panic takes over and I twist against him, bringing my knees up either side of him and trying to force him off me. He looks down between us where his erection is pressing at my entrance, and the only thing stopping him entering me is his boxer shorts. He releases my throat, and I gasp desperately, placing my own hands there and rubbing the skin.

Before I'm fully recovered, he grips my face in his hands and presses his lips to mine. I don't push him away as his hunger controls him. He rubs himself against my core, a moan escaping him, then he suddenly pulls back. "Sleep," he snaps, climbing from me and turning away.

I stare at his back. I should hate him, and deep down I do ... but, *fuck*, that was hot.

IVAN

I lie awake, making sure to keep my back to her. I can't hear her light snores, which means she's probably awake too. I feel

like she's some sort of test, or maybe that's just what I've made her. She's not Lara, I can't even kid myself that she is, but she smells good like her and she's warm like her. My cock twitches again. I want her so badly, and I don't know if it's because she's Grace or because I'm trying to kid myself that she's Lara.

I throw the sheets back on a sigh and head out to the balcony. It's cool out here, which might do me some good. Minutes pass before I hear the soft padding of Grace's feet across the slate tiles. I resist the urge to yell at her to stay away, which makes me want to laugh because it's me making her stay and it's me making her shower in Lara's scent. Fuck, it's messed up.

She rests her hands on the rail, her little finger almost touching my own. "I'm sorry," she whispers. "I was out of order."

After a few silent minutes, I ask, "Have you ever been in love, Grace?"

"Yes."

I wait for her to elaborate, but she doesn't. "Where is he now?"

"How do you know it was a man?" she asks.

I smirk. "The way your body reacts to mine. You're straight."

The moonlight picks up the blush on her cheeks. "Nick. He was my one true love," she announces proudly.

“Let me guess, he left you for someone else?”

She shakes her head, then shrugs. “I mean, he left but not for anyone else. Will you tell me about her?”

“No,” I say firmly.

“It might help.”

“I don’t see how.”

“You clearly miss her. Maybe talking about it will help you move forward.”

I laugh, but it’s cold and empty, just like my heart. “I don’t need to move forward. No one will ever replace her and no one will ever compare to her.”

“Did she leave you?”

“No one leaves me by choice, Grace.”

“Did you ... did you kill her?”

I frown. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You seem to be good at it. And you don’t even blink an eye when you take a life. I’ve seen two people leave this world because of you. That’s more murders than I’ve ever seen in my entire life.”

“You should get some sleep.”

“What exactly is the plan here?” I glance at her. “Well, you’re keeping me here, and I don’t understand why.”

“You said it yourself, you witnessed me kill two people. I can’t let you leave ... at least, not alive.”

She lowers her eyes to the ground. “Are you going to kill me?”

I stare out over the fields. “Go to bed, Grace. Tomorrow, I’ll put you in another room.”



I’m in the office when Akin calls. “Tell me you have something for me,” I answer.

“Not exactly. I spoke with a criminal profiler. This wasn’t anyone from our world.”

“I don’t have time for this.”

“Hear me out, Ivan. Please.” I sigh. “We went over all the evidence. The missing phone and purse—”

“Fuck, Akin, I’ve been over this with the police. Whoever killed Lara took those things to cover up the hit. I’m not fucking stupid. We’ve done it ourselves. This was personal.”

“Ivan, this criminal profiler is the best of the best. He’s certain this was some kid taking a chance.”

I disconnect the call. Someone took her away from me on purpose. This wasn’t some mindless act—it was planned and calculated.

Maxim enters, and I arch a brow. He backs out again, knocking and entering when I give permission. “Sorry, boss. Didn’t think you’d be in here today.”

“Why would you think that?”

“You’ve been working from the house for the last few days.”

“She will have my child,” I announce, and he pauses, eyeing me with caution. “I’m not getting any younger,” I say, adding a dry smile. “And no one will ever replace Lara, so using her to have my child makes sense.”

Maxim lowers into a chair. “Ivan, that’s madness. You’re grieving, but that doesn’t mean you’ll feel like this forever. You can find another, marry, have children.”

I shake my head. “One child, a son. She will be his mother.”

“And what does she think of this?”

“I haven’t discussed it. I think maybe ...” I pause, shaking my head because I know how crazy it sounds.

“Go on,” Maxim encourages.

“I feel it was a sign, finding her on the six-month anniversary.” I sigh. “I want to believe Lara sent her to me for a reason. This is the reason.”

“Ivan, she’s a nobody from the gutter. We found her because she’s a thief.”

I shake my head. “Her friend was the thief.”

He clasps his fingers together. “You’re like my brother, and I want whatever you want. Is there a plan for after?”

“After?” I repeat.

“The birth. Will she stay or leave?”

“I haven’t decided. She’s strong, so separating her from her child won’t be easy. She’d never stop looking. If I decide to let her go, she can only leave one way.” Maxim nods, understanding what I’m saying. “You’ll be the first to know once I’ve decided.”

GRACE

Maria brings me some more clothes, two bags crammed with brand new things, including underwear. I’m so grateful, I almost cry. She begins to strip the bed, so I stop looking through the bags to help. She stops and says, “You can’t help me.”

“Why?”

“It’s my job. If Mr. Morozov was to come in and see—”

“I’m helping,” I say firmly, continuing. She smiles gratefully. “Are you married, Maria?” I ask.

“No. I never met the right man,” she says with a sad smile.

“Do you live far from here?”

“I live here,” she tells me. “Most of Mr. Morozov’s close employees live here.”

“The house is so quiet, I didn’t think there was anyone here but me and Ivan.”

“He has many properties. This is the largest.”

“Does he stay here the most?”

“No, actually. He hasn’t stayed here for a long time. When he met ...” she trails off, wincing.

“It’s fine, Maria, I won’t say anything. I know about Lara.”

She relaxes. “They chose a house together. It was smaller, but she loved it.”

“He must miss her terribly,” I mutter, helping her to pull on a fresh sheet.

“The day she died, the light left his eyes. He’s never been one to show affection, but he would do anything for her. She was his life.”

“Had they been together long?”

“Not long enough,” she almost whispers. “A year.”

“Wow, that really isn’t very long. Were they married?”

“Yes.” Her happy smile returns. “A large wedding with many guests. After that day, he was a better man. Happier and less ... angry.”

The door opens and she snatches a pillowcase from me before Ivan appears. He glances between us suspiciously. “Thank you for the clothes,” I say to him, distracting him.

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he goes over to Maria’s bucket, picking it up and going to the shelf near the shower. He clears off the expensive products, placing them into the bucket. “Maria, dispose of these.”

I frown as he begins to remove new products from a bag he’s holding. “Didn’t you like those?” I ask.

Maria gathers her things and leaves the room. Ivan turns on the shower and orders, “Get in.”

“I’ve already showered today.”

“Get in,” he repeats.

“No, I’ve already showered.”

He growls impatiently and marches to me. He grabs the neck of my dress and tears it away. I gasp as the material falls away. “Now, get in.”

“Did I do something?” I ask.

He mutters in Russian, taking me by the arm and dragging me to the shower, pushing me under the spray. “Wash,” he instructs, nodding to the new products. He remains there, watching intently as I take the pear-scented shampoo and begin to lather it through my hair. I rinse and pick up the same-scented shower gel. I squeeze it into my hand and begin to massage it over my wet body. His eyes track my hands, and I smirk at the bulge in his trousers.

“Better?” I ask, stepping closer to where he is so he can smell me. He remains still. “I prefer the other one personally.”

I turn to go back in the shower, but his hand dashes out, catching my wrist and hauling me against his body. My breath catches in my throat as he runs his hand through my wet hair, inhaling deeply. I tentatively run my wet hand over his shirt as he watches. I slide lower, waiting for him to stop me, but he doesn’t. I grip his belt, unfastening the buckle and pulling it open. He remains still, not talking, just watching.

I use both hands to open the button on his trousers and then I lower farther until my face is level with his crotch. Tugging his trousers below his arse, I look up at him to make sure what I'm doing is okay.

His breathing is heavier, his chest rising and falling faster than normal, and his eyes are hooded. I pull his boxer shorts over his erection and it springs free. It's impressive in length and thickness, and I wrap my hand around it. Skinny Lou once told me there would come a time in my life when sucking cock and opening my legs would be my only way to survive. I told her she was wrong, yet here I am, just trying to survive.

I lick the end of his cock, tasting the saltiness on my tongue. He jerks slightly, and I glance up at him as I open my mouth wider and slide him inside. He clenches his fists at his sides as his breathing quickens.

I'm terrified to fuck this up and make him angry again, so I close my eyes and hollow out my cheeks. I use my mouth like a vacuum, sucking, licking, and choking until his hands wrap in my hair and he begins to move. I risk a glance up and see his eyes are closed. He's lost in his head, and I momentarily feel a pang of something in my chest because I know he's thinking of her.

I remind myself this isn't for pleasure. This is how I stay alive. Making Ivan need me buys me time until I can find a way out of here. Building trust is all I have right now.

His thrusts become jerky, and he groans, pulling my hair tighter and forcing himself deeper into my mouth until my

eyes are watering. Then he stills, and I taste his warm cum coating my throat. A low growl escapes him, and he thrusts one last time before opening his eyes and stepping back. He tucks himself away and fastens his belt, then turns around and leaves without a word.



CHAPTER SIX

IVAN

I go down to my office and slam the door closed. Pulling out a bottle of vodka, I fill a glass halfway before knocking the liquid back in just a few gulps. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and top up my glass.

It felt wrong, like I was cheating on Lara, but at the same time, it felt fucking good. Too good. I had to leave or I'd have done a whole lot more and the guilt would have ripped me apart.

I stare at the photograph of Lara on my desk. She placed it there, knowing I'd hate it because men like me, we don't have sentimental things displayed. We never know who our enemies are from one week to the next, and risking loved ones would be careless. But after she died, I couldn't take it down. Now, it looks like her beautiful smile is taunting me.

I lay it face down and drink more vodka.



I feel along the wall to my bedroom. It takes several attempts to put in the right number on the keypad, but the door eventually opens and I stumble into the bedroom. I can just about make out Grace's silhouette in the bed. I tug off my shirt, some of the buttons popping off and scattering over the floor.

I throw it down and kick off my trousers before climbing into bed. Now she doesn't smell like Lara, it doesn't seem so hard being beside her. I smell her hair just to make sure and then fall onto my back and drift off to sleep.

GRACE

I watch the rise and fall of his chest. There are a few scars littering his skin, some raised and ugly, others faint and hardly visible. I resist the urge to run my fingers over them. His days of teasing me have my mind twisted, and all I can think about is him.

I glance down at the semi-hard erection outlined under the thin sheet. All I've been able to think about is our earlier encounter. The one I shouldn't have enjoyed as much as I did. Since he left, there's been an aching between my legs, and I have a terrible feeling that only this man can resolve it.

Besides, I have a plan, and he seems reluctant to let me carry it out. This will be like ripping off the Band-Aid—once it's

done, he'll relax and let his guard down. *Hopefully.*

He twists, causing the sheet to fall away. His boxer shorts encase what I need, and I slowly rise to my knees. Maybe if I could just have a small taste of what he can offer, it would dull the buzz I've had between my legs for most of the day.

I rub my hand over the bulge, glancing up at his sleeping face. He mumbles something I can't make out as his cock gets harder. I slip my hand into the boxer shorts and it jumps against my hand. Wrapping my fist around it, I enjoy the feel of the silky smoothness. I pump it slowly, and he moans again.

I carefully drag his boxers lower until I have full access, and then I throw my leg over him. He hardly stirs as I grip the head and place it at my entrance. My breathing hitches as I push down, his cock opening me up. I close my eyes, pressing my hands to his chest. Fuck, he feels good. When he's in as far as I can take, I slide back up. He stirs, mumbling more words in Russian. I sink down again, crying out in pleasure.

Ivan's eyes shoot open, and he cups the back of my head and drags me down to him, kissing me hard. He turns us so I'm beneath him and begins to fuck me hard. He pins my legs up against my stomach, making him sink deeper into me with each thrust. "Fuck, Lara," he whispers, pushing hard.

My heart hammers in my chest. *Is he sleeping?* He suddenly pulls out, and I feel the loss. He slides down my body and buries his mouth against my pussy, thrusting his tongue into me and lapping at me like a thirsty animal. I grip his head, my fingers tangling in his hair. Seconds later, my entire body

convulses as an orgasm rips through me. I scream, twisting away while pulling him closer.

He rises above me, gripping a handful of my hair and dragging my head down to his cock. He pushes into my mouth, hitting the back of my throat until I gag. He does this several times, holding it at the back of my throat until I bang his thighs to release me.

Then he's back between my legs, slamming into me wildly. My head is reeling from his pure instinctive need to fuck.

I know the second he comes because he stills, growling as he releases into me. "Lara," he whispers into my hair, "I need you. I love you."

I freeze, unsure of what to say. This seems to confuse him and he pulls back. "Lara?" he repeats. He reaches for the bedside light, and when he sees me, he frowns, lifting off me and looking down between us.

Then his face morphs into something I've not seen on him so far. He's horrified. "Did we ... did I ... fuck." He climbs off the bed and heads straight for the shower, not bothering to let it warm before he steps under the spray. "Fuck, fuck, FUCK!" he yells.

I watch as he picks up his body wash and squeezes it into his hands, enough that it's dripping over the edge and spilling out onto the shower floor. He lathers himself like he's dirty, like I contaminated him.

I feel my heart crushing as I wrap the sheet around myself and curl into a ball. I know it's what I needed to do, but now, I feel disgusting, unsure whether I used him or he used me.

The shower turns off and he wraps himself in a towel. "Get up," he barks, and I immediately do it. The tone of his voice tells me he isn't messing. "Follow me." He leads me into the hallway and towards another room. He opens the door and nods for me to go inside. I do, and then he closes the door, locking it.

I take in the single bed. It's a lot smaller than any of the other rooms I've seen so far, but at least it isn't the basement.



Days pass and the only person I see is Maria. She brings me three meals a day and makes light conversation, but it doesn't make me feel better. A part of me feels like a disgusting animal, taking what I wanted without any thought, and the other part of me is screaming, telling me to wake the fuck up. I'm here against my will. I didn't ask for any of this, and, yes, maybe a sick part of me fancies my captor, but I'm pretty certain there's a name for that.

I flop back on the bed and stare up at the ceiling. The longer he stays away, the less chance I have of building on that connection. And until he trusts me enough to let me out of this room, I'll never find a way to escape. So, when Maria returns with my evening meal, I ask, "Where is Ivan?"

“Do you need something? I can arrange for whatever it is.”

“I want to see him,” I say firmly.

“I can ask him to come up and see you, but he was clear I am to deal with the day-to-day things.”

“He’s avoiding me?”

She looks away, hesitating. “I’m not sure. He just told me to make sure you have what you need.”

“What I need is to get out of here. Tell him I want to see him right now.”

She disappears for a few minutes, and when she returns, she almost looks embarrassed. “He’s asked what you need.”

“The morning after pill,” I say bluntly, and her cheeks colour. “We had unprotected sex, and I need that pill. I’d also like a health check to make sure he’s not given me anything.” I’m already using birth control as I have the implant in my arm, but he doesn’t know that.

She gives a slight nod before disappearing for a second time. I’m halfway through my salad when the door opens and Ivan appears looking annoyed. I lean back casually and allow my eyes to run down his body. He’s in a suit, which isn’t new but this looks smarter than his day-to-day suits. “Is there a reason you’re embarrassing my staff?” he snaps, remaining in the doorway.

“We need to talk,” I say firmly.

“I’m entertaining. It’ll have to wait.”

“I could be pregnant,” I snap. “You haven’t even been to check on me since you dumped me in here. What exactly are you planning to do to me? Leave me here forever?”

“Grace, I am in no mood to discuss this right now. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

I stand, moving closer. “We’ll talk now,” I snap.

It’s a mistake because he grabs me by the throat and shoves me back, reminding me who has the power. I land on the bed, thankfully.

He leans over me, pointing a finger in my face. “You are not my wife. You’re not even a guest. I make the rules, and right now, we’re not going to discuss this. Do not make demands to see me and do not embarrass my staff with tales of your whore behaviour.” He straightens up and adjusts his shirt collar. “I’m busy. I will speak with you tomorrow.”

He leaves, and I fight back tears. I never thought I’d hear myself say it, but I miss my freedom, even if that means living on the streets.

An hour passes before Maria returns. I wipe my eyes quickly, but she smiles sympathetically, showing she’s seen my puffy face and red eyes. She collects my half-eaten dinner. “How about a hot chocolate?” she offers, and I shake my head. “I shouldn’t have interrupted him. He left instructions to only go in there in an emergency,” she says. “I should have asked you to wait until he was free.”

“What’s so important anyway? He’s keeping me here and doesn’t have the decency to check in on me.”

“Between me and you, he’s entertaining a lady,” she says with a smile. “He’s not done that since ... well, it doesn’t matter. But maybe he’s finally moving forward, and who knows, we might see that smile return.”

I frown. I want to scream at her to make her see none of this is normal. He’s on a fucking date while I’m locked in his house against my will. She’s acting like she wants me to respond to her gossip with the same happiness she’s feeling. Like we’re all friends who’re worried about him. And there’s a small part of me that’s jealous. How the fuck can I be jealous he’s dating a woman when I don’t even know the man and he’s kidnapped me?

Anger begins to replace my upset. “Actually, Maria, I will take that hot chocolate.”

Once she’s gone, I pace the room. I know my plan is going to go wrong, but I’m desperate. When she returns, I rush over as she’s coming through the door. “I’ll get it,” I tell her, reaching for the cup. She smiles gratefully as I take it in one hand, then I use my other hand to grab her wrist around the same time I throw the hot chocolate across the room. She’s so focused on that, she doesn’t realise what I’m doing as I tug her into the room and twist us so I’m in the doorway. “I’m so sorry, Maria,” I say as I slam the door shut. I press the lock key on the keypad and it lights up red.

There's nobody in the hallway, but I still creep along like someone's about to pop out and grab me. I reach the top of the stairs and peer over the banister to the hall below. It's empty, and I can see the front door from here. That's my goal as I take each step, careful not to make a sound.

At the bottom of the stairs, I glance towards the kitchen. The door is open, but I don't see anyone, so I move closer to the exit. Hearing Ivan's voice, I freeze and press myself to the wall. He's in the living room, and then I hear a woman's voice. She laughs and it angers me more. I begin to wonder if he's luring her in. What if she ends up trapped here like me?

I reach for the door handle and slowly twist, holding my breath. My heart is pounding in my chest and sweat begins to bead on my forehead. I tug, but the door doesn't budge. I angle my body until I'm facing the door and pull again. It's locked. I do a silent scream, looking around helplessly for a key, but there's nothing.

I take a calming breath and go to the door opposite where I'm standing. I push lightly and it opens into a library. Slipping inside, I head straight for the window. I try to slide it up, but again, it doesn't budge. *This damn place is a prison.*

IVAN

It's my first date since Lara. I've known Angelina for years. Her father is also Bratva, as is her brother.

We've had dinner, and now, we're enjoying a glass of wine in the lounge. Maria was supposed to bring us coffee, but she

seems to have disappeared. Angelina places her empty wine glass on the table. “I should go. I’ve had a lovely evening, Ivan.”

I smile tightly and stand, holding out my hand. She takes it, and I lead her to the door. “Me too,” I lie.

I thought after my night with Grace, I could try to move forward. The hard part was done, but all I’ve done all evening is think of Grace. Not Lara ... Grace! And then she decides to throw a tantrum halfway through, distracting me more.

I walk Angelina down the steps to her waiting car, kissing her on each cheek and opening the passenger door for her to slide in. I head back up the steps, turning at the top to watch as the car drives away. Then, out the corner of my eye, I see Grace.

It takes me a second to get my brain around the fact she’s creeping along the steps behind me, heading for the large, planted bush. She’s frozen in fear, but because of my slow reaction, she must see an opportunity, and before I can say anything, she screams and takes off down the steps.

I frown, watching her run across the sharp stones in bare feet. I place two fingers in my mouth and whistle for one of my men to intercept. One of my security dogs bolts across to her, snarling and baring his teeth. His handler whistles and the dog sits, keeping Grace rooted to the spot. “If you run, he’ll take you down,” I explain as I saunter down the steps towards her. She’s stiff and her hands are balled into tight fists of

anger. I smirk. “I’m hoping for your sake that you didn’t hurt anyone to make it this far.”

The handler clips a leash onto the dog right as I reach Grace. I take her by the hair, and she winces. “Explain why you’re here, Grace,” I whisper in her ear.

GRACE

My heart hammers in my chest as he waits for a reply. When he doesn’t get one, he twists me to face him. “What exactly was the plan?” I cautiously eye the dog, who’s still growling and baring his teeth, like he wants to eat me.

“Fuck you,” I hiss.

He laughs. “We’re back to that?”

“Just let me go,” I murmur, and a frustrated sob slips out. “Please. I won’t tell anyone about any of this. I don’t have anyone to tell.”

“You’re not leaving, Grace,” he tells me, and it sounds so final, I sob harder.

“You’re going to keep me here forever?” I wail. “Why?”

He grins. It’s cold and cruel. “I need a son, and you’re going to give me that.”

I stare wide-eyed, waiting for him to laugh and tell me he’s kidding. When he doesn’t, I break into high-pitched, hysterical laughter. “Good one.”

He releases my hair, reaching for my wrist instead, but I snatch it away. "Let's get back inside."

"You're not serious?"

"Deadly." He reaches for me again, this time catching me by the arm. He pulls me towards the house.

"Ivan, listen to yourself. That's crazy talk." He leads me through the hall and into an office.

"How did you get out of the room?"

I look down at my feet. "Maria. She came in, and I pushed past her and left, locking her in there."

He rolls his eyes and picks up his telephone, putting a call into someone and instructing them to go and let her out. "Sit," he orders, and I lower into a seat opposite his desk. "We can do this one of two ways," he begins.

I scoff. "We're not doing this at all."

"You seem to think you have a choice here."

"Ivan, you've broken the law, more than once. When I get away from you, I'm going right to the police and having you arrested."

"How do you plan to get away?" He looks amused. "You tried once, it didn't go well."

IVAN

She folds her arms across her chest and fixes me with a stubborn glare. I smirk before continuing. "One, I can keep

you in that room and come to you when I need to. Or, two, we can make an agreement.”

“I’m not agreeing to this,” she snaps.

I shrug. “Fine, option one it is.”

She scowls. “You can’t even look at me after we fucked once. How the hell do you plan on making it a regular thing?”

“You don’t have to be so crude,” I murmur, irritated by her sailor mouth.

She huffs. “Tell me the agreement.”

I smile. “I need a child, and you have no home or money. I think we can reach an agreement that will suit us both.”

“You want me to give you a child and you’ll pay me?”

I nod, and she laughs, shaking her head. “No.”

“I don’t think you understand, Grace. I’m in control here. I will take what you won’t give me willingly.”

“You’re going to rape me?” she almost screeches.

“In case you weren’t aware, I traffic women like you every day. I’ll get what I want and put you on the next boat out of here.”

“You make me sick,” she spits.

“So much so, you decided to fuck me without my consent.” I arch a brow, and she blushes.

“I thought you were awake.”

“Always check. That wouldn’t wash the other way around.”

“It sounds like you’re an expert in the sexual assault field, so maybe you got what you deserve.” I take a calming breath. I’ve never met a woman who’s not been scared of me, and although she shrinks back occasionally, she always forces herself to give me grief. *Just like Lara used to.* “Besides, I can’t get pregnant, I have the implant.” She looks smug.

“So, you asking for birth control earlier was a ploy to see me?” I ask, cocking a brow. She blushes again.

I slowly move over to where she’s sitting, and she watches me suspiciously. I place my legs either side of hers and squash them together, then I place my hand on her neck and hold her in the chair. She frowns, struggling to no avail. “Relax, Grace, or this will be painful.”

I press around on her arm until I feel the hint of something hard. I check the spot and see the small scar where the implant was stitched into her skin. I take out my flick knife, and she panics, struggling harder. “Grace,” I growl, squeezing her neck tighter, “keep still.”

Someone knocks on the door, and I give them permission to enter, relieved when Maxim steps into the office. He takes in the scene before him and smirks. “Help me,” I order, and he rushes over, taking her arms and holding her back in the chair.

“What are we doing exactly?” he asks.

I press the point of my knife to her arm, making a small incision. I squeeze the area until the implant pops out the hole, and I smile. “Removing this,” I say, guiding it out.

“You’re actually fucking insane,” she screams.

“What is it?” asks Maxim, letting go of her arms.

“The implant.” I discard it in the trash bin and release her legs. She kicks out, catching my shin, and I hiss. She doesn’t even have shoes on, so it must hurt her more than me. But I slap her hard, an instant reaction to her display of disrespect in front of one of my men. She cries out, gripping her cheek and lowering her head. “Now, she can get pregnant.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

GRACE

I'm angry. Raging, in fact. Why the fuck did I open my mouth and tell him I had the implant?

Maxim leaves and returns with a first aid kit, which he hands to me. Once he's gone again, Ivan orders me to patch my wound. "Are you ready to talk about this?" he asks.

"I hate you," I whisper, pulling out an antiseptic wipe and ripping it open. I spit the top part onto the floor, and Ivan narrows his eyes.

"I don't need you to like me, Grace."

"Just meet someone else and have a child together. Children should be born into love."

He rolls his eyes. "My child will be loved."

"But not by its mother?"

He shakes his head. "I don't want a relationship, but I need a child."

“What for?”

“Are we in agreement or not?” he snaps.

“I have a right to ask,” I argue.

“It doesn’t matter how many times I choke you, hit you, lock you away, you’re never going to learn to stop with the questions and just accept your fate, are you?”

“Never. You’ll have to kill me for that to happen.”

He arches a brow. “It can be arranged. I have other women I could use for this.”

“Then why am I here? I’ll tell you why,” I hiss, “because you like me. You just don’t want to admit it. Do I look like her, Ivan?” His features harden. “Do I fuck like her?” He clenches his teeth. “It’s sick, yah know.” He rests against his desk in front of me, trying to play it calm, though I can see he’s angry. I have no choice but to antagonise him. He needs to hate me so he’ll forget this ridiculous idea. “She’s gone. Making women dress like her and smell like her is just fucked-up. You need serious medical help.”

It works. His hand dashes out and grabs me by the throat. It’s his favourite way to get control of me, but this time, it won’t work. I’m better off dead than stuck here.

He lifts me to stand. “You will learn to stop talking.”

“Cut out my tongue and I’ll still find a way.”

He sneers. “That’s a good idea.” He tightens his grip and my airway restricts. “You will agree to this, Grace. There’s no

other option.”

“Death,” I whisper, my throat burning.

“Once you’ve given me what I want, I can send you there too, if you wish.” He shoves me away, and I stumble, landing hard on my backside.

“If I agree, will I spend my time locked in that room?”

“No.”

“You’ll let me be free?”

He sniggers. “No.” He sits in his office chair. “You’ll get free run of the house and garden.”

“And after I’ve had the baby?”

“I will transfer one hundred thousand pounds into your bank, set you up in a house, and walk away.”

“How can I trust you?”

“You can’t.”

“So, why should I agree?”

“Because you have no other options.” He sighs. “Grace, you have no home, no family looking for you, no friend—”

“Thanks to you.”

“No money. I can solve two of those problems. Take the deal. It’s the best a woman like you is going to get.”

I think over his words. I don’t have a choice, not really. And I don’t believe for a second I’ll get out of here alive if I refuse, but it’ll buy me some time.

“You can’t kiss me,” I state, feeling the need to implement some rules so I at least feel a little in control. He bites his lower lip, hiding a smirk. “Or stay in my bed. It’s just sex, and then you have to leave.” He nods once. “And you can’t see other women. I don’t want to catch anything.” He remains quiet. “And I want to choose my house. The second I give birth, I want to see the money transferred.”

“Okay.”

“If I get a chance to escape, I’m going to take it.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

IVAN

Maxim enters my office. “I need you to gather some house listings together. Not around here—the farther away, the better.”

“Are you looking to invest?” he asks.

I smirk. “It’s to fool Grace into thinking she’s got a life after me.”

“You’ve told her your plan?”

“Part of it. The part where she’s having my child.”

“Then what happens?”

“You take her on a drive to what she thinks will be her fresh start. I’ve decided she’s too ... much to keep around.”

“So, there is no fresh start?”

“Not in this lifetime, Maxim, no.” He bites his lower lip, and I sigh. “Spit it out, I know you want to say something.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to let her leave after watching her bring your child into this world, boss?”

“She’s a means to an end. There will be nothing between us.”

“And you plan on raising this child alone?”

“There are things such as live-in nannies,” I say with a laugh.

“With the upmost respect, Ivan,” he says cautiously, “if it’s a child you want, there are other ways. For a start, you don’t need to have sex.”

I laugh again. “And where would the fun be in that? Grace was brought into my life for a reason. This is it.”

“So, the point of me gathering listings is?”

“To give her hope. Everyone needs a little of that.”

“Right. I’ll get on it right away.”

“She’s also going to be allowed to walk around the house and the grounds. Make sure the gatehouse is aware to check for her each time the gate is opened. She’s made it clear she’ll leave the first chance she gets.”

“I know you live for the danger, boss, but I have a feeling this one is going to be the death of you,” he warns.

I smirk. “I do hope so, Maxim.”



I find Grace sitting on the bed in her room. She's freshly showered in just a robe with her wet hair wrapped in a towel. "Are you ready for a tour?" I ask. The door was unlocked, but I'd asked her to wait for me to return. I'm pleased she listened.

"I'll get dressed," she says, getting up from the bed.

"No need." She removes the towel from her hair and ties the cord to her robe tighter before following me out the room.

I move along the hall. "My room," I tell her, pointing to the door. I avoid Lara's room. She's already seen it, and I don't feel it needs an explanation, but as we pass, I say, "That room is completely out of bounds. No matter what."

"It's unhealthy keeping it as a shrine," she mutters, and I ignore her.

We go up the next flight of stairs. "The staff sleep along here," I say, not bothering to walk the hall. "Maria and Maxim have permanent rooms here. The rest are rooms for whoever is on shift."

Next, we go down to the ground floor. "Kitchen, living room, library, and my office. I don't like anyone in my office unless I say so. And always knock before coming in."

"In case I catch you doing something you shouldn't be?"

"It's respect," I tell her. "And you will respect me at all times, especially when the staff are around. I'd hate to have to

make an example of you.”

She goes towards the library, which is unlocked, and heads inside. I follow, watching as she takes in the shelves full of books. “All this time I’ve been here, you could’ve given me a book to read.”

“Help yourself.”

“When will we start?” she asks, running her fingers over a row of books.

I eye her rounded backside and my cock twitches. She glances back over her shoulder and the sexy look she gives me makes up my mind. I move fast, going up behind her and pulling her against me. I bury my face in her neck and inhale the scent of fresh pears and vanilla. “How about now?”

She unwraps herself from my grip. “This is a transaction,” she states. “Forget the touching and nuzzling.” She lifts her robe, exposing her lower half. “It’s just sex, right?”

I frown. Put like that and it seems so much less sexy than it did in my head. I release my cock and rub it a few times. It’s already losing interest and deflates, so I stuff it back in my trousers. “Maybe later.”

She smirks. “I’m just sticking to the rules, Ivan.”

I don’t bother to answer, leaving and heading back to my office.



The rest of the week continues the same. The second I get near her, my cock goes soft.

By Saturday, I'm agitated and stressed. Maria makes dinner, and I invite Grace to join me in the dining room, hoping that will help the situation, because if I can't get it up to carry out my plan, her time here will be a lot shorter. And when I find her sitting at the dining room table in a silk robe, I wonder if she's come to the same conclusion.

I take my seat and notice she's gone to the trouble of applying makeup. A red lace bra is peeking out of the silk robe, and my cock becomes more interested. "I thought maybe I should make an effort," she says, sipping her red wine. "Because we never really discussed what would happen to me if I don't get pregnant."

"I'm guessing by the effort you've put in, you know it's not good."

We eat in silence. She's learning to abide by my rules, which relaxes me some more. Once dinner is over, Maria clears the plates and I stand. Grace doesn't follow. "Actually, I thought we could try something." I arch a brow, waiting for her to explain. "Just trust me." She stands and gently pushes me to sit back in the chair. She stands before me, her legs apart, either side of my own. She slips the silk robe down her arms and allows it to pool at her feet while I take in the matching red lace underwear. She looks good.

She rests her hands on my thighs and leans close, nuzzling her nose against my throat. I automatically inhale and close

my eyes as a new scent hits my senses. It's warm and soft, reminding me of summer nights and slow music. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle and my cock strains.

She slowly moves around me, trailing her fingers over my chest and across my shoulder until she's behind me. She rubs my shoulders, and I allow my head to fall back while she works her fingers into my tense muscles. After a few minutes, she moves back to my front, lowering to her knees and placing her hands on my belt, looking at me for permission. I nod once, and she snaps it open, pulling it through the loops and discarding it. Seconds later, she's pulling my erection free from my trousers. She stands and shimmies from her knickers, then holds onto my shoulders and sits facing me. Taking my cock, she guides it towards her opening, sinking down onto me and throwing her head back.

I bury my nose into her neck, inhaling her scent over and over while she fucks me. I usually change positions before I come, but I'm so lost in her that my orgasm creeps up on me, taking me by surprise. I growl through my release, wrapping my hands over her shoulders and pulling her down onto me while thrusting up. I give one last thrust and then release her. She climbs from me, scooping her knickers up and pulling them on. "Sladost, you didn't finish," I point out.

"That's not part of the plan."

"Fuck the plan. I want to make you come."

She puts her robe on. "I don't want you to. We've done what we need to do." I watch as she leaves, feeling a swirl of

different emotions. Emotions I have no business feeling for a woman who hates me.

GRACE

My legs shake as I walk away with purpose. I thought sex without feelings would be a piece of cake, but each time he came to me and was unable to perform this last week, I took it personally.

I'd lie awake each night wondering why the fuck I cared. I should hate him, and I should feel relief he couldn't touch me. But I didn't. I felt like I was the problem, and so, I made it my mission to get him hard enough to fuck me.

But right as he came, I woke the fuck up. We're not a couple and we're not in love. He's a sick fucker who needs teaching a lesson.

I get into my room and head straight to the bathroom. Squatting over the toilet, I remove the Femidom, wrapping it in tissue and flushing it away. I can't risk him finding it. I know I can't always use one because there will be times when he takes me by surprise. The clinic used to give them to women like me for free, just in case, but I only have six left in my bag.



The following night, Ivan isn't in the house. Maria seems to think he's working from his office in the city, so I spend time in the library lost in *Wuthering Heights*. I feel my eyes getting heavy, but I'm so comfortable, I refuse to move, and I drift off snuggled on the couch.

It's sometime later when I feel myself being lifted into strong arms. I don't need to open my eyes to know it's Ivan because he sniffs my neck as he carries me up to bed.

I'm lowered into his bed and my shirt is pushed up my thighs. He pulls my knickers off and crawls between my legs. I clamp them closed, but he pulls them apart, burying his head between them and licking me. It's against the rules, and I mumble a protest which he ignores. The build-up is quick and intense. I cry out, and he pushes his fingers into me, causing the orgasm to ripple through me. When he's satisfied I've come, he crawls up my body and pushes into me. "From now on, you'll orgasm every single time," he growls in my ear.



Each night that follows is the same. Tonight, as he comes on a roar, he remains buried inside me. "Tell me about your life before," he murmurs against my damp neck.

"What do you want to know?"

"Where are your parents? Why is no one looking for you?"
He falls beside me, staring up at the ceiling.

I turn away slightly. “This isn’t what we agreed, Ivan.” In fact, so much is happening that we didn’t agree to.

“Tell me,” he insists.

“We had a disagreement,” I tell him. “Mum left me and Dad when I was fourteen. She met someone else and had been having an affair. After that, she became someone else, a less nice version of the mum I once knew.”

“In what way?”

I sigh heavily. Having a heart-to-heart with this man isn’t what I want to do. “She was cold and irritated by my presence, so I stopped going to see her. I blamed Dad for not chasing her and begging her to stay. I guess I was angry at them both. They let me down. Eventually, Dad moved on too, and I felt like I was in the way. His new girlfriend had two daughters around my age, and they all hated me.”

“So, you left?”

I shake my head. “I had a huge row with his girlfriend’s youngest daughter. She stole my jumper, normal teenage stuff, but it got physical. Her mum gave Dad an ultimatum—me or them. I left that night.”

“He chose them over you?” Ivan looks annoyed.

I shrug, pushing down that familiar ache in my chest that I get whenever I think about my past. “I couch surfed for as long as I could, but eventually, I was out of favours. So, I went into care.”

“Then how did you end up on the streets?”

“What about you?” I ask, changing the subject. “Where are your parents?”

“Both dead.”

“Sorry,” I whisper.

“What happened after you grew up and left care?”

“I met someone. I thought I was in love, so we moved in together. We worked for a few years, then I met someone else. I moved into his place and things didn’t work out. I had nowhere to go.”

“Why didn’t it work?”

This is the longest conversation we’ve had. Maybe when he knows my past, he’ll realise I’m not worth the hassle. “I cheated on him.” Ivan props his head up and stares at me. I feel my cheeks burn with shame. “I’m not proud.”

“So, he kicked you out?”

“He killed himself,” I confess, and his eyes widen. “I found him.”

“Fuck.”

“The house was in his name. His family made sure I couldn’t get any of it. I don’t blame them.”

“Was it a full affair?” he asks.

“Does it matter?” He continues to stare, so I sigh. “Yes, with his friend. His best friend.”

Ivan begins to laugh, flopping back onto the bed. “Fuck, sladost, you’re lethal.”

“I deserve bad things to happen,” I mutter, feeling his eyes on me again. “Maybe that’s why I’m here.”

“No, sladost, Lara brought you here.” It’s my turn to stare, but he doesn’t elaborate, and I’ve learned not to pry too much when it comes to Lara. “How did he kill himself?”

“He hung himself from the attic rafters. I walked into the house one night after work and he was right there, at the top of the stairs. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen anyone hanging, but it’ll haunt me for the rest of my life.”

His smirk tells me he knows exactly what haunts me. “Sleep, Grace.”

I sit up, throwing my legs over the edge of the bed. “Goodnight,” I whisper, getting up and heading for my own bedroom.



CHAPTER EIGHT

IVAN

Lev sits opposite me. “I spoke with Akin.”

“And?” Since my last conversation with Akin, I haven’t bothered to answer his calls. He has nothing I want to hear unless he has the names of Lara’s killers.

“We’ve exhausted all options,” he begins, and I shake my head. He sighs. “I know it’s not what you want to hear, boss, but it’s true.”

“She didn’t die of natural causes, did she?” I bark, and he shakes his head. “She didn’t kill herself?” He shakes again. “Therefore, her death was at the hands of somebody else.”

“And we’ve explored every avenue. So have the police. I think it’s time we accepted—”

“No,” I snap, standing abruptly. He shifts uncomfortably, his eyes falling to the gun lying on my desktop. “I will not accept Lara’s death was a robbery gone wrong, so don’t even bother

to say the words. I want the person or people responsible for her death. Get them.”

“The money we’re spending on manpower alone—”

“Are you trying to tell me my dead wife isn’t worth the money?” I yell, and he shakes his head frantically.

“But as your advisor, you need to be aware that funds are draining fast.”

“I have plenty of money,” I spit.

“So, you’d like to continue?” he asks, his expression telling me he doesn’t agree.

“Yes.”

Once he leaves, I have an overwhelming need to see Grace. As each day passes, I’m breaking more rules. When she left last night, I almost told her to stay. I put a call into Maxim and request a girl. It’s not something I’ve ever felt the need to do, but I’m angry and tense and so damn confused. I need to burn off some steam.

When he arrives an hour later, dragging a woman from the back of his car, I relax a little. This is me. This is the man I am.

I meet him at the door. “One of the spare rooms,” I tell him.

He drags her off, and I go back to my office. When he comes to me minutes later, I know he wants to ask questions, so I nod, allowing him a minute of my time. “Is everything okay?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I ask.

“It’s just an odd request for you.”

“I’m bored.”

“This is the second woman we’ve brought to your home. It’s careless,” he says, his words rushing from his mouth.

“What difference will it make?” I ask impatiently. “She won’t remember me, let alone this house, by the time we’ve finished with her.”

He nods once. “We have a boat leaving in four hours. I’ll get her a place on it.”



The woman is terrified. She’s bound and gagged, with a cloth sack over her head. I whip it off, and she jumps in fright. The parts of her body on show are bruised, and it’s clear she’s been used for many months already. I pull her to stand and open the buttons on her dirty white dress. Taking a step back, I rake my eyes over her body. I tug her gag from her mouth, and she immediately spits out words in Arabic, telling me she’ll kill me in my sleep. I smile, answering her in her own language and telling her she won’t get the chance. I turn her away from me and force her to bend over the bed. She tries to shrug me off, but with her limbs tied, it’s impossible and she soon gives up.

I release myself, about to rip open a condom, when the door opens and Grace wanders in. Her face is buried in a book, so

she doesn't immediately see me, but when she finally looks up, her eyes fix on me and then the struggling woman. Her mouth opens slightly like she's going to speak but thinks better of it. Instead, she remains there, staring at me.

"Get out," I eventually say.

She blinks a few times. "What the hell are you doing?"

"What does it look like?"

"We had an agreement," she says, looking angrier by the second. Her face flushes a deep shade of red and she drops the book on a nearby chair before folding her arms over her chest.

"Am I supposed to care about the rules you made?" I ask.

"Maybe not, but at least respect them."

"You are nothing to me," I remind her. "I don't owe you a thing." I shove the woman onto the bed and drop the condom. I'm losing interest with her standing here judging me. "In fact, you owe me for saving you."

She scoffs. "How so?"

"Without me, you'd still be out there, slumming it in alleyways and eating from rubbish bins."

She looks affronted. "I have *never* eaten from a bin," she hisses. "And I'd rather do that than be like you."

"You don't even know me."

"I know you're a piece of shit," she yells. "I know you rape women." I glance at the woman lying on her side, watching us with interest. "I know you kill people."

I tuck myself away and fasten my trousers. “I kill people who deserve to die,” I tell her.

“And you rape women because?” She glares, waiting for me to answer.

“I don’t have to answer to you,” I snap, gripping her upper arm and shoving her towards the door. “Get out.”

“Lara would be disgusted,” she yells, trying to pull free. “She would have left you.”

I slam her against the wall hard and it knocks the breath from her. She winces, turning her face away to avoid mine as I move in closer. “I told you before, do not mention her name.”

“Or is that how she ended up here? Did you rape her? Was she one of us?”

GRACE

The fury running through his eyes is wild. It’s the reaction I needed to get him away from the woman he was about to attack. He forces me back into my room and onto the bed. “Stop talking,” he warns, his faces inches from my own.

“Did you make her stay? I bet she hated you as much as I hate you.” He covers my mouth with his hand, hissing in my ear for me to stay quiet. His hand is so big, it covers my nose too, and I struggle to get a full breath.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he continues, seemingly ignoring the fact I can’t breathe. I struggle against him, digging my nails into his wrists. “You’re not worthy to

“speak her name.” I begin to see stars, and the blood rushing around my body hums loudly in my ears. I close my eyes and allow the feeling of heaviness to take me.

I’m not sure how long I’m out for, but I wake with Ivan staring down at me. The memories of him covering my mouth hit me and I shuffle away, putting distance between us. “Are you calm now?” he asks.

My eyes widen. “Me?” I exclaim. “I’m not the one who lost it.”

“Why did you come into that room?” he asks, holding my book up as if to remind me.

“I like to read in there. It’s peaceful.”

“The house is peaceful, Grace. Why that room?”

“I just like it. It has a nice view and a balcony,” I lie. It has those things, but it also has a good view of the fields that lay beyond the house, and I’ve noticed the farmers are beginning to stack up hay bales and I was checking on the progress. If I make it out, I can hide behind those as I make my way over the fields, “Who is that woman?”

“None of your business.”

“She is if you’re having sex with her and me.”

“Jealous?” he quips.

“I had a rule. It was important. No sex with other women. I don’t want diseases.” My real reasoning is I don’t want to risk

him getting someone else pregnant. His need for me would end and then he'll kill me.

“As you saw, I was using a condom.”

I pull my knees to my chest. “Is that the kind of sex you like?” When he doesn't reply, I continue. “Rough, forced?”

“I was angry,” he mutters. “I needed a release.”

“Isn't that what you have me here for?”

He stares down at the ground. “I didn't want to hurt you,” he mutters. My heart slams hard in my chest. It's the first sign he's shown me that he gives a shit, and if he gives a shit, my plan is working.

“Don't you feel bad hurting her?” I ask cautiously, in case it's the wrong thing and he explodes again.

“I don't know her,” he says with a shrug.

I don't bother to point out he doesn't know me either. “She's somebody's daughter, sister, cousin. She's something to someone.”

“But not to me,” he says.

“How would you feel if someone did that to your mum or sister?”

“I don't have either.”

“Okay, what if it was Lara?”

His eyes burn into mine. “Grace,” he says, his tone warning.

“I’m just saying, someone, somewhere, loves her like you loved Lara.”

“Love,” he corrects, reminding me she’s still at the very front of his mind and deeply embedded in his heart. “I can’t think like that,” he snaps, moving over to the window and staring out. “To me, she is money. A transaction.”

“She’s one of the women you sell on?”

He nods. “And when she’s gone, I won’t think about her again.”

“What happens?” I ask, not certain I want to know the answer, but he seems like he’s in a talking mood, so I take full advantage.

He glances at me. “There’s a big market,” he says. “Women, girls. Men all over the world are eager to buy from me.”

“So they can marry them?” I ask hopefully.

He sniggers. “They’re probably already married, sladost. They want extra.”

“Like a mistress?”

He nods. “Or a sex slave.”

“Did Lara know about this?” I ask.

It was the wrong thing because his eyes darken again, and I feel him shutting down. “Stay in here. Do not wander about into other bedrooms,” he mutters, heading for the door.

“Stay,” I bark, and his hand stills on the doorknob. I don’t know why I blurted it out, but I know he can’t go back to that

poor woman and hurt her. "Please."



CHAPTER NINE

IVAN

She's asking me to stay to save the girl. It's obvious as I take a seat and her body visibly relaxes. She's putting herself at risk to save a woman she doesn't even know.

"Tell me about your affair." She doesn't like to tell me about herself, but she sits back on the bed and crosses her legs.

"I told you, it was his best friend."

"You don't seem the type to hurt someone," I say, bemused.

"You don't know me," she mutters, looking away. "I can be a selfish bitch."

"How did he find out?"

"Nick and Liam were inseparable. They grew up together." She literally ruined his friendship. I laugh hard, and she hesitates before continuing. "I'd been seeing Liam behind Nick's back for about six months. He found us in bed together."

I smirk. “Who’s bed?”

“Mine and Nick’s.”

“So, you lived with Nick?” She nods. “And you fucked his best friend, in the bed you shared?” She nods again, and I laugh harder. “You’re a savage. Who came on to who?” I’m enjoying her discomfort.

“I did,” she admits quietly.

I sit forward. “You came on to Liam?” She nods. “Why?” She shrugs. “Don’t hold back, sladost. There was a reason you fucked your man’s best friend.”

“Things weren’t great between Nick and me. He was never home and—”

“Where was he?” I cut in.

“Working.”

“Providing for you?” I ask.

“No, I worked too. I paid my way.”

“What did you do?”

“I was a manager,” she says, and it’s the first time she looks proud.

“Of?”

“A private nursery.”

“Childcare?” I ask, arching a brow. “How does one go from management to homeless?”

“It’s easier than you think,” she mutters. “One day, you can have the world, and the next, it’s gone.” She clicks her fingers.

“I need more, sladost, if you don’t want me to go back to what I started,” I say, nodding to the door.

She sighs. “I worked for Nick’s parents. They own lots of childcare settings. That’s how I met Nick. I was a trainee at his mother’s nursery, and he used to pop in and see her. He asked me on a date. We hit it off.”

“What did he do?”

“He was area manager for his father’s building societies.”

“Rich family,” I muse.

“I worked my way up until I got to management. Nick had a house, and after a year, I moved in. Things got ... boring,” she admits, “in the bedroom.” I frown, waiting for her to continue. “I was always outgoing and I liked sex. So, I suggested a threesome.”

I grin. “He agreed to share you?”

“At first, it was random men we met on a night out, but we started to wonder what it would be like to have more ... as in a regular guy. Three of us together all the time.” I smirk. She’s more adventurous than I give her credit for. “Nick suggested Liam. We all got on anyway, so it made sense. Liam was single, and when Nick asked him, he was up for it.”

“So, how does an agreement like that end in an affair?”

“When you stop asking the third person to join in,” she mutters. “It started well. We made clear guidelines that there would be no intimacy unless we were all together. But as the weeks went on, I found myself more attracted to Liam, and he admitted he felt the same. We started sneaking around until, one day, we got caught out.”

“And Nick kicked you out?”

“Not right away. He wanted us to try and make it work, but I couldn’t stop seeing Liam. It was breaking him apart and I knew that, and then one day, I came home, and he was dead.” Tears fill her eyes, and she swipes them away before they have a chance to fall. “Liam wouldn’t speak to me. He told Nick’s parents everything, and I got sacked from the nursery. Then they kicked me out of the house.”

Talking to her makes me realise she’s not the person I assumed she was. “Didn’t you have money to get a new place?”

“Joint account,” she mutters, shrugging. “They froze it once Nick died, and I didn’t have the energy to fight for it. I deserved what I got.”

“Not really,” I say. “You both agreed to experiment, and it didn’t work out. It’s not on you alone.”

“I feel like it is. They buried him but didn’t tell me when the funeral was, so I didn’t get to say goodbye. Liam did.”

“They forgave him?”

She nods. “From what I hear, he was welcomed back into the family. I assume he placed all the blame on me.”

I stand, leaning down to place a gentle kiss on her head. “Rest, sladost.”

“Wait,” she cries. “Don’t go and hurt her,” she begs.

I feel my eyes soften, and I run my thumb over her wet cheek. “For you,” I whisper.



I have Maxim remove the woman. When he returns to my office an hour later, he confirms she’s on the boat for a new life. One that’ll make her wish she’d stayed here with me.

“Things are good with the girl?” asks Maxim as I pour us each a drink. I nod. “She’s still happy with your plan?” I nod again. “She’s getting confident,” he adds, and I glance in his direction. He shrugs, taking his drink and sitting down. “Talking to the staff. Making herself at home.”

“And that bothers you?” I ask.

“I just wonder how it will all end.”

“It will end the way I want it to. Don’t let details concern you, Maxim.”

“If I may speak openly?” I take a gulp and nod for him to continue. “The men are worried. Things before were ...

slipping. There are concerns your attention will be on her and not the businesses.”

I frown. “Which men?”

“Does it matter, Ivan?” he asks, his tone brisk. “The fact they’re even talking may get back to our associates and unsettle them.”

I stand, and he shrinks back slightly. “*My* associates,” I correct. “These men who are talking should have been dealt with, no?”

“You want me to cut out the tongues of every man speaking out? They have bills to pay, Ivan. They’re allowed to question what is happening.”

Anger rages through me and I slam my hands down on the desk. “No one can question me,” I roar. “I remember a time when you’d never allow anyone to speak out against me. Unless, Maxim, it’s you who has concerns and you who is speaking out against me?”

“I’d never ...”

“No? You’ve made it clear you hate me being with anyone. Lara, Grace ... don’t you want me to have an heir to hand over the businesses? Or maybe that’s it?” I ask, moving around the desk and closer. “Maybe you want it all?”

“Ivan,” he stutters, “I’ve always backed you, right from the beginning. I want to see you happy, but this woman ... she’s not Lara. She won’t make you happy.”

“I don’t need her to,” I hiss through gritted teeth.

“But she’s in your head, whether you like it or not. You’re not in the office, and you haven’t visited the businesses in weeks. Are you so focused on an heir that you’ll let things slip? Then there will be nothing left to pass on.”

“I built this empire from the ground. Me. Alone. I have customers begging me for girls because I have a good reputation which I built. If my own men are turning, you’re supposed to deal with that. If you can’t, step down and allow me to find someone who has my back.”

I go back to my seat, and he places his drink on the desk. “I will always have your back, Ivan. I apologise if I overstepped. I’ll deal with anyone doubting you.”

GRACE

I feel smug as I remove the Femidom and wrap it in tissue. It’s been a month since Ivan made the offer he considers kind, and so far, I’ve managed to avoid pregnancy by using protection. He makes us use tests to show when I’m fertile, so I always know when he’s going to visit me. And I usually ask to use the bathroom before we do anything. I flush away the evidence and hit the shower. The good thing about the agreement is we don’t share a bed and cuddle like we’re a real couple. It helps me to focus on my hate over anything else.

So, I’m surprised when I go back into my room to find him lying in my bed. I frown, and he smirks. “Round two?”

I almost choke on my panic. “No.”

He scoffs at my answer. “No?” he repeats.

“We just did it,” I say. “I’m tired.”

“Sladost, I will do all the work.”

“Ivan, I said no.”

He looks annoyed but forces the expression away, smiling. “I was asking to be polite, angel. Get into bed.”

I shake my head. “You want to force me? Create a child through rape?”

Agitation replaces his smile. “Bed, Grace. Now.”

“We never talk,” I snap, hoping to avert his attention. “I’m tired of you just turning up to fuck me.”

“It’s the agreement.”

“Fuck your agreement.”

“Now, you want to forget the agreement?” he asks, amused. “Where will that lead, Grace?”

“Tell me about Lara.” It’s the one topic I know will make him explode, but this time, he pulls the sheets back and pats the space beside him.

“Okay.” I cautiously slide in beside him, knowing if he decides to take me, I won’t stand a chance. “I will tell you one thing. What would you like to know?”

Questions race through my mind. I have so many. “Was she here against her will?”

He slides the strap of my cami top from my shoulder and it falls away, exposing my breast. “No.” He takes my nipple in his mouth and sucks until it hardens.

“Like ever?” I ask, trying to ignore the reaction he’s causing inside me. “Did you take her like you did me?”

“I answered your question, Grace,” he murmurs, going back to teasing my nipple.

“It’s not fair. You know so much about me, and I know nothing about you. Tell me something real, Ivan. Please.”

It works because he releases my nipple on a sigh and rests his head against the headboard. “We fell in love the old-fashioned way,” he says. “I met her when she accidentally ran her bicycle into my very expensive car. It scratched the paintwork, and she was extremely apologetic. I was drawn to her ... innocence.”

“Did she pay for the damage?”

He smiles, staring at the opposite wall like he’s picturing that exact time. “Not with money. I told her I’d let her off if she agreed to have coffee with me. Coffee turned to dinner, and we were never really apart after that day.” His smile fades and is replaced by a frown.

“She just stayed with you after dinner?”

“I couldn’t be apart from her,” he admits, looking confused and lost. “It was like she became the light I needed to keep breathing. It was a whirlwind. *She* was a whirlwind.”

“How did she die?” I whisper.

His jaw tightens. “She was taken from me. The police say she was robbed in broad daylight, but I believe she was targeted.”

“How did a robbery turn into her death?”

“She refused to let go of her bag. When she eventually did, she fell back and hit her head. It was hard enough to kill her.”

“So, you didn’t get to say goodbye?”

He shakes his head and inhales sharply. “Enough.” He sits up, and for a second, I think he’s leaving, but he removes his shirt. “I came here for a reason, sladost. Stop distracting me.”

He pulls me to sit over him, pulling the straps to my camisole until it’s around my waist. “I gave you enough information, now you should do the work.”

“Ivan,” I mutter, trying to climb from him.

He pins my thighs either side of him. “Being inside you helps me to forget,” he whispers, and I see a flicker of vulnerability. “I need to forget.” And then he lifts me slightly, encouraging me to move towards his face. His mouth finds my opening, and I’m lost to him once again.



I wake the next morning, and Ivan is wrapped around me. He never stays, so I’m confused and way too hot. Sliding from his grip, I glance back. He looks peaceful and almost human without that angry scowl.

I dress and head down to the dining room where Maria usually has breakfast waiting. But the table is empty, and I check the clock in the hall. It's only six-thirty. She usually serves at seven. I take a seat at the head of the table, where Ivan usually sits, and open his newspaper. It's been so long since I've had a glimpse of anything outside these four walls, I find myself reading about things that never usually interest me, such as politicians. I glance up at the sound of heavy boots and find Maxim staring at me with hatred. It's how all the men here look at me. "Good morning," I say, forcing a smile.

"You're in the wrong seat."

I nod, shifting to the next seat. "Sorry, I wasn't thinking."

"You've made yourself very comfortable," he mutters, and I remain quiet. "Don't get used to it, vor."

"I don't understand," I say, narrowing my eyes because I'm sure he isn't saying a kind word.

"Thief," he clarifies. "Don't get used to being here, thief."

"I don't want to be here anymore than you want me to be here," I snap. "In fact, open the door and I'll happily leave."

He moves his arm swiftly towards the door, indicating I can go. "Please, be my guest." I stand, wondering if it's a trick. "Go," he adds.

I move towards the exit, but as I pass him, he slams his arm across the doorway so I can't go farther. "Are you sure? Because I hear your cries of ecstasy when he fucks you, vor. I think you enjoy being here."

“If you want me to go, let me leave,” I hiss.

“What is it about you?” he muses.

I fold my arms over my chest and smirk. “Try and find out,” I whisper close to his ear. His breath hitches. “The last man who wanted to do that ended up dead.” My words wake him, and he steps back, grinning. “Are you scared?” I ask, tipping my head to one side.

“Of a man who relies on pussy to breathe?” He scoffs. “I’m not scared, vor. I just don’t fuck tramps.”

I smile. “Really? I heard that’s what you specialise in. Ivan tells me you’re first in line to break the girls he traffics.” His expression darkens. “Isn’t that how you like your women? Scared, broken? Maybe that’s why I don’t do it for you, Maxim? Because I’m not scared of you.” He slaps me, and the sound rings out in the silent house. I hold my cheek but laugh. “It takes more than a pussy slap to make me scared.”

Maxim grabs me by the throat and slams me hard against the door frame. My head takes the brunt of it, and I go dizzy. “You want me to scare you, vor? Let me tell you a little story about the big bad man and the little lost girl. He used her to have a child, promising her a better life with lots of money and a house wherever she chose. Only it was a lie. Because the second she gave birth to his child, he passed her over to his men to dispose of. And dispose of her, they will. If you think this life is bad, in this big old house with Ivan, you’re wrong. Little girl, I will break you when it’s my turn to fuck you. I’ll

watch the men go through you one after the other, and when you take your final breath, it will be my face you see.”

“Maxim?” I breathe a sigh of relief at the sound of Ivan’s voice. I give Maxim a smug smile as he releases me. “I’ll need the car at nine,” continues Ivan. Maxim turns away from me to address his boss.

“Of course. Security?”

“Yes. Several. I’m taking Grace with me.”

Maxim leaves, and I stare open-mouthed at Ivan. “That’s it?” I ask. “He pinned me up against the door by my throat.”

“Do not antagonise my men, Grace. They’re dangerous.”

I arch my brow. “He threatened me.”

“Sit. Let’s have breakfast without drama.”

“He said he’ll rape me until I die,” I yell angrily. “He slapped me around the face.”

Ivan takes my throat, just like Maxim, only he spins me towards the table and throws me down on top of it. The air leaves my lungs, and I try to loosen his grip to allow me to breathe. “You will not antagonise my men, Grace. Am I clear?” he growls. “This is not your home, and you are not safe here.” I feel myself slipping out of consciousness, and I release my hold on his hands. My legs stop kicking and I close my eyes. If this is my time, I’m glad.

Death can take me because I’m losing all hope of ever getting out of here alive.

Cold water hits my face, and I automatically take in a sharp breath. The water shoots up my nose and into my mouth, and before I can recover, another jug is thrown over me. I sit, gasping and spluttering. “Good to have you back. Now, join me for breakfast,” says Ivan coldly.

I wipe my hands over my face and glance around. I’m still sitting on the table, which is now covered in water. “Quickly,” he snaps.

I jump down and walk quickly to where Ivan is now sat at the head of the table. My chair beside him is already pulled out, so I lower into it. “I’m not very hungry,” I mutter, reeling from what just happened.

“You will eat, Grace. We have a big day.” His words from earlier return. He’s taking me somewhere.

He piles my plate with cinnamon bread and sausages. The smell alone repulses me, but if it’s one thing I’ve learned, Ivan hates wasted food.

“What do you have planned?” I ask, but he ignores me, reminding me we’re not allowed to speak while we eat. I pick at my food until he eventually clicks his fingers and Maria appears. He slides my plate towards her and indicates for her to take it away.

“We won’t need dinner this evening, Maria,” he adds. He turns to me, placing a finger under my chin and gently tipping my head back to examine my face. “Your cheek is bruised,” he points out. “Cover it.” I nod, not trusting myself to respond.

He presses his thumb over my cheek bone, and I wince. “Maria,” he calls, “get me some ice.”

I pull my chin from his grip. “I’m fine.”

Maria returns with a bag of ice, and Ivan takes it when I don’t. “Thank you, Maria,” he mutters. When she’s gone, he tries to press it to my cheek, but I fight him, turning my head and smacking his hand away.

“You’re being childish,” he snaps, standing. He places his legs either side of mine, squeezing them together so I can’t move. He then takes my hair and tips my head back, placing the ice against my cheek. Tears fill my eyes, but I’m angry, not upset. “Maxim is dangerous,” he tells me again. “You should avoid him.”

A tear slips down my cheek. “Avoid him? In a house I can’t leave?”

“Yes. If you piss him off, he’s unpredictable.”

“As are you,” I spit, taking the ice pack and moving away from him. He allows me to, watching as I take another seat farther away and pull my knees to my chest.

“Let’s not allow that to upset our day,” he says firmly. “Go and dress. We have plans.”



I dress quickly, my mind racing with plans to try and escape Ivan today. This will be the first time I’ve been outside the

house since he took me all those months ago, and I'm excited. This could be the chance I've been waiting for.

Ivan comes to my room ten minutes later as I'm brushing my hair. He takes my chin and turns my head towards the light, checking I've covered my bruise.

"Rules," he says firmly. "You try to run and I'll kill you. If you draw attention to us to get help, I'll kill them. And it will be the very last time you leave this house, is that clear?"

"I make no promises," I say, shrugging.

He smirks. "Grace, this is not a game. What I am doing today is for you. Don't make me regret it."

"Fine. Whatever. I agree."

As if to enforce his rules, he lifts his jacket to show me his gun. "The police are not interested in you, sladost. They respect me. They will not help you. They will return you to me."

I nod, all the time wondering what planet this idiot thinks he's on. Of course, the police will help me, it's their job. "Okay, Ivan, I get it." I just need to get out of here and check out my options.



My heart is racing as we pull up outside a church. I stare out the window as Ivan's security get out of the car behind us. My door is opened, and I step out, immediately flanked by his

men. Ivan takes me by the hand, and Maxim stands the other side of me. The rest of the men space out a little, and we begin to walk through the church gates. “Why are we here?” I ask, but he ignores me.

We walk for a few minutes, until we come to the graveyard at the back of the church. One of Ivan’s men, walking ahead, stops and waves at us. Ivan leads me that way, and we stop by a grave covered in bright flowers. “Step away,” I hear Ivan tell his men.

I stare at the gravestone. It’s clean black marble with gold lettering that reads, ‘Nicolas Edgerton. Beloved son, taken too soon.’

“You said you weren’t invited to the funeral,” Ivan explains, “so I thought you could say your goodbyes now.” Tears are spilling down my cheeks, blurring the words in front of me. The fact Ivan remembered the details and went to the trouble of finding out this information has thrown me. “I’ll let you have some time,” he adds, taking a few steps back.

I take a calming breath and wipe my cheeks, wincing when I feel the bruised skin. I crouch down, taking a card from the flowers and reading the words. ‘Love always, your Kim.’ I don’t know who Kim is, so I move to the next. ‘We miss you so much, love Mum and Dad.’ That hurts my heart. I hate that they suffered because of something I did.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper. “I’m sorry for everything.” I wipe my face again. “I wish I could undo it all. I wish I never moved in with you and ruined your life. I should’ve let you be

yourself instead of trying to spice things up. And for what? Liam hates my guts now, you're gone, and your parents will never forgive me."

"What the fuck are you doing here?" A woman races towards me, and before I can fully stand, she pushes me hard and I land on my arse. Ivan stays back, indicating for his men to do the same.

"I just came to say goodbye," I mutter.

Nick's mum glares down at me. She's lost weight, and she's pale with dark circles under her eyes. "He wouldn't want you here."

"I'm sorry," I mutter again, pushing to stand and backing away.

"Don't ever come here again. You should be in that grave, not him. Why didn't you kill yourself after what you did?" Her eyes fall to Ivan, who's watching impassively. "Are you her next victim?"

"She is mine," he says dryly.

She looks back and forth between us. "Did she tell you what she did?" Ivan nods. "And you're still with her?"

"No," he says clearly.

"She doesn't deserve happiness," she snaps. "She deserves nothing but misery and pain."

My tears continue to fall, and all thoughts of escaping have left my head. Sickness bubbles in my stomach, and I take

some deep breaths. “Can we go?” I whisper, moving towards Ivan.

“Don’t you want to explain your actions?” he asks, and I shake my head. “Doesn’t she deserve the truth?”

“That she’s a whore?” she cuts in.

“That your son asked Liam to join them. It was a mutual decision,” Ivan informs her.

I take his arm and pull. “Please, let’s just go.”

“Is that what she told you?” she asks, laughing. “She played them off against one another, both trying to please her. She’s a manipulative cow, and you’re welcome to her.”

“Please,” I beg, “I want to go home.”

IVAN

I wrap my arm around her shoulder and lead her to the exit, feeling satisfied my plan worked. She had the chance to run, but she didn’t. She came to me to protect her, and she asked for me to take her home. *Home*. I smile to myself. Nick’s mother visits his grave every day around ten-thirty. It was a good first test, and Grace passed.

I lead her into the church, and she looks at me quizzically when I tell the men to wait outside. I take her to the front, where I light a candle for Lara. I don’t believe in God—if he was real, she’d still be here now. But it’s a habit I can’t seem to break.

The church is empty, and I lead Grace towards the confessional booth. She frowns when I pull open the door and bustle her inside. “Ivan,” she hisses, “what are you doing?”

I sit in the chair and pull her to sit on my lap. “Confess,” I whisper in her ear while pushing her dress up to her hips. She fights me, trying to push it back down, but my hand is already in her underwear, rubbing her wetness over her swollen clit.

“Please,” she murmurs, “not here.” But her actions don’t match her words, and I push my finger into her, causing a gasp to escape while she rocks against me.

I release my erection and move her underwear to one side. “You’re going to fuck me, Grace, and you need to be quiet.”

“Not here,” she pants as I pull her against me. I slip inside easily, and she moans.

“Move, Grace,” I tell her, watching our connection as she lifts her backside.

“When the vicar comes, you need to confess,” I whisper, moving my hands to cup her breasts.

“Vicar?” she repeats, sounding panicked.

We hear footsteps, and I clamp my hand over her mouth. “Keep moving or I’ll put a bullet in him,” I whisper.

“You can’t kill a vicar,” she hisses against my hand.

I pinch her nipple, and she yelps. “Try me.”

The door to the connecting booth opens and closes. “Good morning, how are you?” asks the vicar.

She glances back at me, her expression desperate. I grin, nodding at her to speak. “Good,” she murmurs. I take her hips and lift her from me, guiding her back down slowly.

“And why have you come to confession today?” he asks.

“I’m not sure,” she says, digging her nails into my hands as I force her to ride me.

“Is this your first confession?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Let’s start by telling me what you need forgiveness for.”

“I cheated,” she says. I clamp my hand over her mouth and use my other hand to rub circles on her clit. She moves faster.

“On your marriage?”

I remove my hand. “I wasn’t married. We lived together. I slept with his best friend.” She shudders. “Jesus,” she cries. “Shit, sorry. Oh god.” She clamps her own hand over her mouth, and I feel my cock swell. I push her from me and grab her hair, forcing her to her knees.

The vicar chuckles. “Take your time, dear. I’m here to listen and help you to heal.”

I fill her mouth with my cock, exploding down the back of her throat and holding her there until I feel her pulling back, then I release her. “Sorry,” she pants. “I’m sorry for everything.” She gets to her feet and straightens her dress. “Please, forgive me,” she says as she rushes out the booth. I snigger, tucking myself away.

“You owe me,” says Alek.

I laugh. “I do,” I admit, because that was hot.

I find Grace outside with my men. I wrap my arm around her waist, and she buries her face into my chest. “I cursed at the vicar.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll go to hell.”

I grin. “I’ll see you there, sladost.”



Next, we stop at the doctor. He works for me, and I’ve booked out time for him to check Grace over. He’s collected her medical notes, and I’m hoping it’s good news because if he tells me she can’t have children, our journey will end here, and that thought bothers me. I’m getting used to having her around.

“Everything looks fine,” he tells me.

“She can have children?”

“You could’ve just asked me,” says Grace, looking unamused.

“What about a scan?” I ask.

“I don’t need a scan,” she snaps.

“I can check the uterus,” the doctor says, shrugging. “Just remove your underwear and get on the bed,” he tells Grace.

“Absolutely not,” she says firmly.

“Grace,” I say with warning in my voice.

“I don’t need a scan.”

I stand, pulling her up too. I reach under her skirt and tug her underwear down. The doctor busies himself with his scanning machine while I lift her onto the bed. She stares up at the ceiling, anger oozing from her.

“It might feel a little uncomfortable,” says the doctor, squirting gel onto a wand. “If you could open your legs,” he adds, glancing from her to me. I sigh heavily when she doesn’t move, then I part her legs. He looks at me hesitantly but doesn’t argue. He knows better.

He inserts the scanner, and I stare at the black and white screen. “Everything looks fine. There’s no sign of pregnancy yet, but it may be too early to detect.”

“We’ve been trying for weeks. You tell me she’s healthy, and yet there’s no sign of a baby.”

“These things take time,” he reassures me. “If she only just had the contraceptive implant taken out, it could take time for her hormones to settle.” He looks at Grace. “Have you had a period yet?” She shakes her head. “Then I suggest waiting for that to happen before we begin to worry.”

GRACE

Outside the doctor’s office, there’s a pharmacy. “I should get some things,” I say, pointing in that direction.

“Things?” he repeats.

“Yah know, for my period.”

“Okay.” He goes to enter the store, and I stop him.

“Can I do this alone? It’s personal. The place is tiny, you can watch me from here.”

He reaches into his pocket and retrieves his wallet, then he hands me a bank card. “The pin is five-nine-one-two. And Grace,” I glance back, “don’t do anything stupid.”

I browse the shelves, stopping at the Tampax aisle and taking a couple boxes. I get to the counter, keeping my back to Ivan. The sales lady smiles, taking the boxes from me and scanning them. “Would you like a bag?”

“I need help,” I whisper, and before she can react, I add, “Please don’t give the game away, he’s watching. That man out there took me against my will, and now, he won’t let me leave and I need help.”

She continues to smile, taking a plastic bag and shaking it. “Okay. Shall I call the police?”

“Yes, but I’ll have to leave here with him or he might hurt us both. We’re in a black Mercedes S-Class. And we’re followed by a black four-by-four. All the windows are blacked-out on both. They’ll be able to spot us.”

She places my items in the bag. “What’s your name?”

The door opens. “Grace, what’s taking so long?” demands Ivan.

“Just coming,” I answer, keeping my tone breezy. “I need some Femidoms,” I add in a whisper. She nods, reaching behind her and grabbing paracetamol and Femidoms, placing them in the bag quickly.

“How would you like to pay?” she asks, smiling as Ivan approaches.

“What was that?” he asks, trying to take the bag.

“Paracetamol,” I snap, pulling it against my chest. “I get cramps.” I hand over his card and type in the pin number. “See, all done.”



I go straight to my room and stuff the Femidoms at the bottom of my rucksack. Then I hide that in the bottom of the wardrobe. I take two from the pack and hide those in the bathroom. The police didn't pull us over like I'd hoped, but when I glance out the window, I spot two police cars outside the gates and my heart lifts. I watch as the gates slide open and Ivan meets them on the driveway. He shakes hands and leads them inside.

I take an excited breath and head downstairs, right into Maxim's arms. He grins, turning me into the kitchen. “What have you done?” he asks, smirking.

“Nothing. Why?”

“Strange that the police are here, don't you think?”

“They are?” I ask, sounding surprised. “Why?”

“Reports of a woman being taken against her will, apparently. She described our vehicles.”

I feel a blush creep over my cheeks. “Where’s Ivan?”

“Speaking to them in the office.”

“Oh, here he is,” I say, looking past Maxim. I wait for him to turn before darting around him and rushing for the office. I shove the door so hard, it slams against the wall, causing everyone inside to turn around in surprise.

“I’m here,” I say, breathless from panic. “It’s me.”

The four police officers smile, then one moves to close the door behind me. “Grace?” he asks, and I nod. “You were the one who asked the shop assistant to call?” I nod again, avoiding Ivan’s stare.

“Please, help me. I’m not safe here.”

He pulls me to him, tucking me under his arm, and I frown in confusion. “She’s a stunner, Ivan,” he says, his hand finding my arse and squeezing.

Hope leaves me as I slump against him. I’m so exhausted, and now, I’ve blown it. Ivan’s eyes pierce my own. He’s angry but containing it. “She is.”

“Are you sure there’s no price?” he asks, tugging my head back by my hair and staring into my face. “We could pay over the odds.”

“Sorry, not right now. Maybe in a year’s time?” He pushes me towards Ivan, who catches me and shoves me into the chair. “When I’m finished with her.”

The police officers shake hands with Ivan, and he shows them out. I stay in the chair. There’s no point in trying to run—there’s no one who can help me. I cry out in frustration, waiting for Ivan to return.



CHAPTER TEN

IVAN

I'm shaking with anger. I was stupid to trust her. Pacing the hall, I come to a stop when Maxim appears. "Now, she's bringing the police to your door? In all the years, that's never happened," he says, shaking his head.

"I'll deal with her," I snap.

"Don't let her get into your head, Ivan. She'll tell you what you want to hear and slit your throat in your sleep. She cannot be trusted. She proved that today."

I growl, storming into my office and slamming the door. Grace jumps in fright. "You," I hiss, marching to her and pulling her to stand. "You defied me after everything."

"I'm sorry," she cries.

"I took you to stand at your ex's graveside. I watched you weep for him." I release her, pushing her back into the seat. "I trusted you."

“I told you I’d run given half a chance.”

I nod, glaring at her. “Yes, you did, Grace. You did. Which is why you’ll never get the chance again.”

I leave the room, telling Alek to stand guard at the door. I take the stairs two at a time and go into Lara’s room. Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes as her faint scent fills my senses. I pull a suitcase from the top of her wardrobe and open it. I stare at the many sex toys before me and reach for the chains. They’re heavy, and the padlocks are attached with their keys. I take them, leaving the case on the bed and going back downstairs.

Grace watches me approach, backing as far into the chair as she can. I snatch her ankle, and she screams, trying to pull free. I wrap the thick leather cuff around her ankle and thread the chain through the metal loops, fastening it with a padlock. I do the same to her other ankle, then I chain them together and secure it with the last padlock. “You can’t run if you’re shackled.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Deadly.”

There’s a knock at the door and I command them to come in, sighing when Maxim appears. He’s carrying a rucksack I don’t recognise. “Why have you got that?” yells Grace.

It piques my interest and I watch as Maxim places it on my desk. “Thought you might like to see these,” he tells me, reaching inside and holding up a handful of foil packets.

“What are they?” I ask.

“They’re from when I was on the streets,” she snaps.

I take one, my blood pumping faster through my veins as I realise she’s been protecting herself all along with Femidoms. I thrust it in her face. “That’s what you bought today?” I roar.

She shakes her head. “No. They gave them to me when I was on the streets,” she repeats.

“Lies!” I yell, throwing it across the room. I grab the rucksack and tip it upside down. Her belongings spread over the desk, and she jumps up to gather them. I push her away, and she falls to the floor.

My eyes fall to the pink purse and everything around me stops. The only sound is the beating of my heart as it thuds heavily against my chest wall. I reach for it, letting my fingers lightly brush the material before I grasp it. “Boss?” asks Maxim, and my eyes reach his. He stares back wide-eyed. “Is that what I think it is?”

I’m aware my hand trembles as I bring the pink purse closer. I press it to my nose and inhale, closing my eyes. I fall back into the chair and stare at it.

“That’s not mine,” says Grace.

I slowly open the first zipper, opening out one half of the purse. Inside is the ID card. Lara Morozov. Her serious face stares back at me, and I trace my finger over it, remembering taking her to have it done. It took a few attempts as she

couldn't stop smiling and she had to have a straight face. "Boss?" asks Maxim. "Is it hers?"

I open the second half. It's filled with cash and bank cards, and I frown. Why are they still there? "Whose is it?" Grace demands.

I look up at the sound of her voice. "It was you?"

"What was me?"

"It was you." I place the purse down on the desk. "You robbed her?"

She begins to shake her head as I get closer. She slides backwards, hitting the wall. "I don't know what you're talking about, Ivan."

"Lara!" I yell. "It was you all along!"

GRACE

He lifts me from the floor in one smooth motion, like I weigh nothing. I don't like the way he's looking at me. I don't recognise this look. He holds me against the wall. "Tell me everything."

"Ivan," I begin.

He pulls me away from the wall before slamming me hard against it. "Tell me!" he roars.

"I don't know what you mean. That's not mine. I've never seen it before."

He drags me to the desk and grabs my hair, forcing my face closer to the purse. “Why do you have her purse in your bag?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen it there before.”

“Then how the fuck did it get in there?”

“I have no idea,” I say, trying to stay calm. “I swear, it wasn’t in there before.” My mind races. *Was it there before?* I don’t remember seeing it, but Danny often stashed things in my bag.

“Fine. We’ll do this the hard way,” he growls, pulling me to the door. I can only take small steps because of my ankles being shackled, but he strides, causing me to stumble behind. He pulls open the basement door.

“Please,” I whisper, trying to pull back.

“You won’t eat, drink, sleep, or leave this basement until I know what happened to my wife.” He shoves me forwards, and I lose my balance, crashing onto my side and bouncing down the concrete steps. I hit the bottom with a thud and lay there, staring up at Ivan. He sneers before slamming the door closed.



Hours pass, and I’m so cold, I can’t think straight. I find myself drifting into a dream-like state where I remember what life was like before all this. When it was me and Nick and we were happy.

I'm aware the door opens and footsteps slowly descend the stairs, stopping beside me. "Are you ready to tell me?" asks Ivan.

"I have nothing to tell you," I mutter.

"Please, sladost, don't make me drag it from you. It will hurt us both."

I stare up at him. "There is nothing to drag from me, Ivan. I don't know where it came from."

He shakes his head sadly. "Have it your way." He looks towards the door, where Maxim watches us. He grins and heads down the stairs, passing Ivan on his way back up. "Call me when you have my answers."

"That's it?" I snap, and he pauses, turning back to look at me. "You're not even going to wait around and watch?" I know it's tearing him apart, but he doesn't just get to walk away and pretend I don't exist. "What kind of man gives the order but doesn't wait around for the results?" Maxim arches a brow and glances at Ivan. "A real man would do it himself instead of asking his monkey to do the hard part."

Ivan laughs, and it's cold and empty as he descends the steps again. "Very well." He takes a chair from the corner of the room and slams it down in the middle. "Get up."

It's my turn to laugh. "You think I'm going to make it easy on you? Make me."

He sighs impatiently and speaks in Russian to Maxim, who sweeps down and takes me by the arm and pulls me up. He

shoves me hard, and I land on the chair. My hip and back are already painful from my tumble down the steps, and I cry out in discomfort. Ivan clenches his fists, and I can see in his eyes that he wants to come to me.

Maxim pulls my arms behind my back and ties my wrists together with some rope. “Pathetic,” I mutter.

“Just tell me what I need to know and you can get out of here,” hisses Ivan.

“How many times?” I snap. “I don’t have the information. I have never laid eyes on your wife, and I didn’t take that purse.”

“Hard to prove when we met in similar circumstances,” says Maxim, pulling the rope tighter and burning my skin.

“I admit it doesn’t look good,” I begin.

“Enough,” Ivan snaps angrily. “No more bullshit. You will tell me everything, Grace.” Maxim places a black sack over my head. “Because if you don’t, it’s going to be a long night.”

IVAN

I nod to Maxim, who pulls her head back and begins to tip water from a bottle over Grace’s face. It’s a cruel form of torture, one that often works on women better than men. She splutters, coughing violently, and I turn my back, clenching my hands into fists to stop me ripping Maxim away from her.

The water stops and I turn back as Maxim removes the cloth hood. Grace leans to the side and vomits violently. Maxim re-

covers her head in disgust and begins the procedure again. It takes three attempts before she nods her head, and I hold up my hand for Maxim to stop.

“Okay,” she pants. I hold my breath, waiting for her words. Waiting for her to end my nightmare. “Maybe it was one of your men.”

I growl in frustration. “Again,” I order, and Maxim covers her head.

“They hate you,” she continues. “I heard them mocking you before.”

I hold up my hand again, and Maxim hesitates. “She’s trying to distract you,” he snaps.

“Continue,” I mutter, standing and heading up the steps. He’s right, and I can’t ignore the evidence. I’ve had men looking for Lara’s belongings for nine months and her purse turns up in the same bag Grace is hiding Femidoms from me. Rage fills me. And then, like a bright light, something inside me clicks and I rush back down the steps.

“Stop,” I order. I pull the bag from her head, and she continues to cough. “This is what you want,” I sneer, “but you’re not getting off so easily.” I untie the ropes around her wrists. “There is no escape, Grace. You’ll give me what I want, and you’ll tell me what happened to Lara. And until you do, you’re not going anywhere.”

GRACE

Maxim frowns. “Boss?”

Ivan pulls me to stand, but my legs give way, I’m so exhausted. He sighs heavily, lifting me into his arms and carrying me. He doesn’t stop until I’m in the bedroom. His bedroom. He dumps me to stand in the middle of the floor and begins removing my wet clothes, tearing my shorts rather than unfastening the ankle cuffs. I shiver violently. He leaves the room briefly, returning with more chains.

“You’re chaining me like a damn dog?” I snap as he connects the end to my ankle chains with a padlock. He then proceeds to chain the other end to the bed.

“There’s enough for you to go to the bathroom and stay in this bed.”

“Are you seriously going ahead with your stupid plan, Ivan? You think I killed your wife and you’re still going to have a child with me?”

“You can replace what you stole,” he snaps, pushing me onto the bed.

“Then you’ll take it by force because I’m not having sex with you again.”

He grins. “We’ll see, sladost. Whether you like it or not, your body reacts to my touch.”

I scoff. “You’re not special to me. My body reacts like that because I like sex. I’m not ashamed of that.”

“You’ll beg me to fuck you.”

I pull the sheets over my body. “You’re wrong.”



Days pass and we’re back to how we were in the beginning. Ivan is hardly around, occasionally returning to his room to shower before changing and leaving. He doesn’t acknowledge me, and he hasn’t even tried to touch me.

Maria leaves my food just inside the door, after Ivan clearly told her, in front of me, the rules he was putting in place.

And I hate it. I hate being ignored, and I hate not having anyone to speak to, even if he’s ruining my life. At least when we were talking, I didn’t feel so alone.

It’s night when Ivan enters the room. He makes too much noise to ignore, and when I sit up, he gives a drunken smile. “Sladost,” he slurs. I flop back down, ignoring him. He eventually crawls into bed, moving close. I shift to the edge of the bed, doing my best to avoid him, but he’s soon pulling me back and pressing himself against me. “We can’t make a child if we don’t touch,” he whispers.

“The doctor said we should wait until I have a period,” I remind him. He runs his hand along my side, and I shrug him away. “I told you, we’re not having sex.”

He laughs, rolling onto his back. “We’ll see.”



The next night is the same, only this time, he isn't alone. Heels click across the floor, and I push to sit up, catching sight of Ivan as he pulls a leggy blonde towards him. She giggles, placing her arms around his neck and kissing him.

Jealousy burns me, and then I get angry at myself because that's the last thing I should feel. Ivan sits on the chair in the corner of the room, and the woman begins to slowly sway, removing her clothes as she does. "Excuse me?" I snap, and she jumps in fright. "I'm trying to sleep."

She tries to grab her dress, but Ivan beats her to it, kicking it from her. "Ignore her, she's not important."

"Ivan, this is—" the woman begins, but he pulls her close, capturing her lips before she can finish.

"Hot," he whispers against her mouth. In one swift move, he spins her around and bends her over the foot of the bed, pushing her face into the mattress. His eyes connect with my own. "Keep quiet, or this won't end well for her," he warns me.

I roll my eyes. I thought I hated him with everything I have, but as he removes her knickers and rips a condom open with his teeth, the feeling is so much more than hate. He repulses me. I watch as he slowly enters her, unable to look away, because despite everything I feel right now, I'm turned on.

Watching his masculine body cover hers as he takes what he wants ignites something in me I didn't know existed. His eyes never leave mine, which only adds to the intensity of the situation, and as she begins to writhe around, whimpering in pleasure, he pulls from her and pushes her to her knees. She takes his length with enthusiasm, yet still he watches me. It's seconds before he's groaning aloud, thrusting so hard that she gags.

I lay silent as they make plans to see each other again, and then he walks her downstairs to see her out. When I hear him returning, I roll over, keeping my back to him, and squeeze my eyes shut. The last thing I want to do is talk to him.

He goes straight into the shower, taking time to wash his body. "Do you have anything to tell me yet, suka?" His new nickname for me, 'bitch', has replaced *sladost*.

"Nothing has changed, Ivan. I have no idea about your wife," I say with a bored tone.

"Maxim thinks I should kill you," he states.

"Maxim is a cunt," I say clearly. I hate the word, but it seems perfect for him. "Maybe he placed it in my bag."

"Yes, of course, why didn't I think of that?" he asks with an empty laugh. The shower turns off, and I hear him step out. "My friend, the man I've known since I was a child, killed my wife and waited all this time to frame you."

"He's not a good friend," I tell him.

"And I should take the word of a suka?"

“Take the word of an outsider looking in. I heard your men disrespecting you, and he joined in.”

“Of course, you did.”

“Where do you think I heard it?” I snap, half sitting to look at him. It’s a mistake because he’s completely naked and drying off with a small towel. He catches me watching and smirks. I growl, flopping back down and staring up at the ceiling. “I need you. I love you.” I repeat their words, mocking him as they did. “They were taking the piss out of you when you visited her grave and I was in the car.”

“Excuse me if I don’t believe you, suka. Maybe he’s right. Maybe you’re not worth the trouble.” He grabs a pillow from the bed and stomps around to my side, dropping the pillow beside the bed. “You will lay there from now on.”

I frown. “You want me to lie on the floor?”

“Yes.” He pulls me by the arm, and I land with a thump. “Goodnight, suka.” He proceeds to climb into bed. I sigh, straightening the pillow like that will somehow make the hard tiles more comfortable, and I lie down. I’ve slept in worse places.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

IVAN

I've been fucking up business meetings all day, and as we leave the last one for the day, Maxim turns on me. "You need to get rid of her," he snaps. "She's taking too much of your head space and business is suffering."

"I know," I mutter.

"So, what's stopping you?"

I shrug. I don't have the answers he wants to hear. The truth is, I like her. I live for the way she backchats me, how she pokes me for a rise. She reminds me so much of Lara, it's like I have her back, and I hate the thought of not having that feeling, that kick of energy she provides.

I scrub my hands over my face. Before Lara, before love, I wouldn't have thought twice about slitting Grace's throat the second I found her in that alleyway with her thieving friend. She wouldn't have had a chance to speak my name never mind

sleep on my bedroom floor. “She told me she heard you laughing about me with the men.”

He laughs angrily. “Jesus, Ivan, she’s in your head. Listen to yourself. Now, you’re taking her word over mine, your friend? I’ve been by your side from the beginning. This girl was a nobody, some tramp on the street. She’s made her way into your home, your bed, and now, she’s trying to rip the organisation apart.”

I sigh. “I know you’re right. I’ll deal with her.”

He shakes his head. “No, let me.”

“I should do it,” I mutter, frowning as my heart twists. This day was always going to come. And now I know the truth, I shouldn’t prolong it. “I want her to pay,” I say firmly. “For killing Lara. That’s why I’ve kept her around.”

“I want to believe you, boss, but I’ve seen this before with Lara. You’ve got that look in your eye.”

“I was confused,” I snap, “missing Lara. Grace is nothing to me. We’ll make her suffer and send her away. I know men who would pay a fortune for her.” My heart slams painfully in my chest with each word.

“So, no baby?” he asks.

I shake my head. Grace has made it clear she won’t have sex with me unless I force it. A few years ago, I would have taken her up on the challenge, but each time I build myself up to do it, I talk myself out of it.

“Go away for the weekend, Ivan. Let me deal with her. When you return, we can put her on the boat together. Show her and the men you’re not a fool.”



Grace looks alarmed as she watches me pack a bag. “Please, Ivan, don’t leave me here with Maxim.”

“I have business to attend to.”

“He’s going to hurt me.”

“You killed Lara.”

She cries in frustration. “I didn’t! I don’t know how many ways you need me to say it, but that purse was planted in my bag.”

“Not this again.”

“Don’t you think it a little odd that you’ve spent almost a year trying to find out the truth, and I end up here, in your house, with her purse? That’s a pretty fucking amazing coincidence.”

“Stop talking,” I mutter, throwing more clothes into the bag.

Grace begins to pull them out. “You know I’m talking sense.”

“Grace,” I say, my tone warning.

“Maxim will rape me,” she yells, throwing my clothes out onto the floor. “Is that what you want?”

“I don’t care,” I say.

“You do care.” She tries to take more clothes from the bed, but this time, I stop her. She fights me, twisting and turning until her back is to my front. I wrap my arms around her, pinning her to me.

“I don’t care,” I whisper angrily. “You’re nothing to me.”

“Liar,” she hisses. “I told myself the same thing, but I do care. I care about you, and if you leave me here, it will haunt you forever. You’ll keep thinking about it, just like you think about Lara.”

“I loved her,” I growl. “You don’t compare to Lara.”

“Please, Ivan,” she says desperately, turning in my arms and placing her cuffed hands on my cheeks. “I know you’re angry, but I swear, that purse was not in my bag. Someone put it there, and that someone had to be in your home already.” She stands on her tiptoes and places a gentle kiss to my mouth. I don’t move. “When I die,” she whispers, kissing me again, “whoever is out to hurt you will still be here.” She runs her lips across my jaw. “And they’ll ruin you. You’ll think back to this moment and realise I was right and that you left me here to die.” Our mouths collide in a hungry kiss.

She tugs at my clothing, and I know I should stop her, but something inside me takes control and I pull at her clothes too. It’s impossible to get her naked with the cuffs in place, so I fumble for the key, unlocking the padlock securing her wrists and ankles. It’s not like she can run now anyway. These will be her final hours.

I sit on the bed and pull her onto my lap. I line myself up at her entrance and rest back on my hands, watching as she sinks onto my erection. My head falls back, and I squeeze my eyes, relaxing as she begins to move. Being with her feels like home. Even more than it did with Lara. And I hate that.

GRACE

I fuck him with everything I have, making all the right noises and tightening my core until he comes hard. I need him to stay, or I won't make it out of here alive. He digs his fingers into my thighs as he thrusts up. His breathing is heavy as he comes down from his high. He throws an arm over his eyes, and I can already feel him shutting down. I lean down, kissing his jaw like some desperate whore. And I am ... desperate, that is.

His hands go to my waist, and he lifts me from him effortlessly, avoiding eye contact. I remain silent, tucking my knees to my chest as he puts himself away, not mentioning the fact I didn't come, which is something that usually bothers him. "I'm sorry it has to end like this," he mutters, beginning to collect the clothes I've thrown from his bag, "but it does have to end, Grace."

My heart squeezes in my chest. Why do I care? It's not like I have this amazing life waiting for me. Maybe death will free me? "What if I'm pregnant?" I ask.

He scoffs. "It doesn't matter."

"You must really hate me," I mutter.

“You have the answers I’ve been looking for, for months.”

I sigh. What’s the point in repeating my innocence when he’s convinced himself I’m lying? “I told you the answer, but you don’t want to believe it.”

He zips his bag. “You should dress,” he mutters, grabbing his own shirt and pulling it on.

“What’s the point?” I ask, shrugging. “We both know what Maxim will do the second you leave here.”

“He won’t do that,” he mutters, lifting the bag over his shoulder. “I’ll tell him.”

I scoff. “Because you hold all the power?”

“Yes.”

I smirk. “You really believe that, don’t you? If you think you can trust him one hundred percent, leave and don’t look back. But if a small part of you, just any small part, thinks I could be right, return here within the hour and see if he’s followed your orders.”

“I’m not here to play games, Grace.”

“It’s my life,” I whisper. “You’re about to take my life, can’t you at least prove me wrong?”

“Get dressed, Grace.” He heads for the exit and my heart hammers hard in my chest. “Goodbye,” he adds before walking out the door.

I rush to pull on my clothes and then press my ear to the door. When I don’t hear anything, I creep out and head

towards Lara's room. I'm not sure why, maybe because I want to taint everything he holds dear, or maybe because Maxim will take longer to find me. Either way, as I push the door open, I feel a sense of 'fuck you'.

It's petty, but I won't be around to face the consequences, so the first thing I do is move her dresses from the bed. They're discarded carelessly, like she was in a rush. I lift the torn one, holding it up to exam it, then I drop it in the waste bin beside the bed. "Why did you have separate rooms?" I ask aloud. "Did he treat you like he treated me? Did you need space away from him?"

I move over the bedside drawers. The first is full of sex toys, which doesn't surprise me. The second is random things like makeup, jewellery, and hair ties. I sigh heavily. I'm not sure what I expected to find. A weapon? A Gun? I go around to the other bedside cabinet and open the drawers. It's stuffed with underwear. I move it around, feeling for anything that could help, but instead, I pull out a notebook. It's tatty, and when I open it, a photograph of her and Ivan falls out. I stare at it. They look ... happy. She's staring up at him with a sickening sweet smile.

I flip through the pages full of writing. This is Lara's diary. She kept a diary. I stop on a middle page dated a year ago.

I hate him. Why is he so controlling all the goddamn time? I can't breathe, yet when he's close, he gives me life. I'm so confused. He covers his anger and jealousy with sex, and I can't seem to say no. Why can't I say no? I miss my life. I miss

my family. I miss the woman I was before he came along and changed everything. I want to die. I want peace.

My eyes fill with tears. She sounds so desperately unhappy, it's heartbreaking. As I flick through, stopping on random pages, they all say the same thing.

I hear footsteps and panic, shoving the diary up my shirt. Dropping to the floor, I slide carefully under the bed.

IVAN

“Here's your flight information,” says Maxim, passing me the paperwork. “Alek will be with you. He's waiting outside.”

“Maybe you should join me, Maxim,” I suggest. “We have other men here to take care of business.”

“This needs to be handled right, Ivan. She's seen too much.”

“And you don't trust our men to get it right?” I query.

He frowns, irritated by my questions. “Is everything okay?”

“Of course. I just thought it would be nice for my Derzhatel to be with me. After all, you've been working hard too.”

“It's because I'm your second in command that I should be here to handle business. Go, enjoy yourself. I'll handle everything on this end until you return.” He walks me towards the door.

“Make it quick,” I say, fixing him with a hard stare. “I know I said she should pay, but ... forget trying to get answers. Lara

is in the past. I'm moving on. So, don't ... torture her and don't ... no rape."

"Okay," he says slowly. "Quick and painless, I hear you."

"That's a direct order," I add. "I don't want her to suffer."

He pats me on the back. "Of course. Go. Rest. Come back stronger and focussed."

I get into the waiting car, and Alek glances at me through the mirror. "All ready?"

I nod, and he pulls away from the house. As we turn onto the road and into traffic, I ask, "Alek, can I trust my men?"

He frowns, glancing at me again. "Pakhan?"

"Do they still see me as their Pakhan? I mean, they call me 'boss' and show respect, but behind my back, are they the same?"

"I'm not sure what you're asking me."

"I chose you because you were quiet," I say thoughtfully. "You watch and take things in, but you don't involve yourself."

"My mother taught me the ways," he says with a smile. "The best secrets are told when people think you're not paying attention."

"Exactly. So, what do they say about me when I'm not around?"

"You've been through a tough time, sir. Ignore the idiots. You're our leader, and we all serve you, whether some like it

or not.”

“Who? Who doesn’t like it?” He hesitates. “Maxim?” I ask, and his eyes meet mine in the reflection of the mirror. “Maxim?” I repeat, my heart slamming hard. He gives a nod. “What does he say?”

“It’s not what he says,” he begins, “but how he acts. He undermines your orders and gives his own. He laughs when other men make comments about you. He doesn’t correct them. He doesn’t threaten to kill them for being disrespectful to our Pakhan. And he should. It’s about respect.”

“What comments are being made?”

He shrugs. “That you’re not in charge anymore. That you’re losing your mind. That having the woman around made you weak.”

“Turn the car around,” I order.

“Sir, we’ll miss the flight.”

“Turn the car around, Alek. You are my new Derzhatel.”

He looks surprised. “I am?”

“Yes. I just have to tell the old one first.”



CHAPTER TWELVE

GRACE

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” Maxim sings. I hold my breath as the door opens.

“She won’t be in here,” comes Lev’s voice.

“She didn’t come downstairs. This is the only place she can be.”

Two sets of boots step into the room. I slowly release a breath and take another. “Grace?” shouts Lev, and I jump in fright. “See, she’s not here.”

“The wardrobe is open and clothes are pulled out,” Maxim replies. “She’s been in here. Ivan will know she’s been in here too. He knows every item in here and its place.”

“He won’t be happy.”

Maxim laughs. “I’ve told you, by the time he returns, I will have full power.”

“A week is not long enough to convince our associates you’re a better fit.”

“You worry too much. I’ve already set the wheels in motion. Besides, I’ve arranged for a beauty to tend to his every need. She’ll be meeting him off the flight in Italy. He won’t rush to come home. I’m certain I’ll have a few weeks.”

Lev laughs. “You have big dreams and even bigger balls. If he gets a sniff of your plan, he’ll be back here and he’ll slit your damn throat.”

“I’m like his brother. He couldn’t kill me.”

In one swift move, Maxim bends, reaching under the bed and grabbing my ankle. I scream as he pulls me out. The diary slides along the floor, hitting the wall. He grabs me by the hair and pulls me to my feet. “I hate hide and seek,” he murmurs, his smile cruel. “I prefer other games.”

“Like knee the asshole in the balls?” I ask, lifting my knee and connecting it between his legs. He groans but doesn’t release me. Instead, he grips my hair tighter.

“You fucking bitch,” he hisses, slapping me across the face. He grabs my neck and applies enough pressure to make me gasp for air. “I was going to go easy, but since you’re in such an accommodating mood, I’ll invite Lev to join us.”

I sneer towards Lev, ignoring the pain in my cheek. “Does he even have a cock? It’s always up Ivan’s arse.” Maxim laughs loud, and Lev narrows his eyes.

“Let’s get this done,” he hisses, unbuckling his trousers.

Maxim shoves me onto the bed, and I get a whiff of Lara's scent. I close my eyes and try to find comfort in it. I'm sure the last time she was in this room, she felt pain and suffering, maybe at the hands of these men or maybe because of Ivan, but somehow, her scent brings me peace.

I don't flinch as my underwear is removed. Instead, I look into Lev's eyes. I want him to see I'm not scared, because sex is just that, sex. "Did you kill her?" I ask. "Lara?"

He sniggers, pressing himself at my entrance. "We're not here for pillow talk."

"Good, because you'd be awful at it. Imagine being the woman who wakes up to your face," I mutter in disgust.

He enters me, and I wince at the stinging sensation. "Fill her fucking mouth," he orders Maxim.

Maxim climbs onto the bed and unfastens his trousers. "We're gonna have hours of fun with you, thief." He produces a blade, and for a second, I'm confused. But then he carefully presses it to my neck, nicking the skin enough to cause a second of pain. He grins. "And then we'll watch you die slowly." He does the same again, this time cutting my arm. He uses the blade to remove my top and bra, swiftly slicing the material in two. Leaning closer, he brings his teeth to my breast and bites until I cry out.

"You can try and put a brave face on, but we know you're scared, suka." He bites my arm where the blade cut me, then moves lower, sinking his teeth into my upper thigh. I squeeze my eyes shut and try hard to picture happier times. Times with

Nick before I fucked it up. Times with Liam, when I was truly happy. I've spent so long blocking them out, I find myself smiling through tears.

Maxim replaces Lev between my legs, passing him the blade. Lev continues to make small incisions across my body, but my adrenaline is pumping so hard, I don't feel any of it.

A loud thumping sound causes me to turn my head towards the door. Someone is banging on the other side. Maxim grins. "We have more men to join the party," he tells me, nodding to Lev to open the door.

When he does, I almost laugh out loud. Ivan fills the doorway, and somehow, he looks bigger and scarier than he ever did before. Maxim's smile fades, as does his thrusting.

"Did you mean to invite him?" I ask, smirking.

Maxim moves from me. "Ivan," he murmurs, looking uneasy.

"Pakhan," roars Ivan. "You will address me as your Pakhan."

"She fought," Maxim rushes to tell him. "We got carried away."

"In this room?" Ivan asks calmly. "You went against my orders and in this room?"

"She was hiding in here," Lev rushes to explain.

Ivan pulls a gun from his trousers and points it between Lev's legs. Lev automatically covers the area with his hands. "Did you rape her?" Ivan demands to know.

“Yes,” I say firmly. “He was first to have his turn.”

Ivan pulls the trigger, and I scream in fright. Blood splatters my legs and I crawl backwards as Lev falls to his knees, crying out in pain. Alek appears, taking Lev by his collar and stuffing a cloth into his mouth to dull the painful sobs.

Maxim holds up his hands. “Ivan, you’re not thinking clearly. She’s poisoned you.”

“She tried to warn me,” Ivan spits, “and I didn’t believe her.”

“She’s gotten inside your head. You know me. We’re like brothers.”

“Did you kill her?” Ivan asks, holding his voice steady. “Did you kill Lara?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, she was robbed.”

“Did you set it up?” I ask, grabbing a shirt from the clothes on the bed and pulling it on. Ivan watches, his eyes fixed on the shirt. It’s all the distraction Maxim needs, and he charges at Ivan, knocking him off his feet. They all begin to scuffle around, and I carefully stand, slowly moving towards the door.

“Don’t run,” snaps Ivan as he struggles to get a hold on his gun. “Please, Grace, don’t run.”

I snatch the diary from the floor and break for it. I don’t owe them anything, and I can’t risk staying here with the men who just attacked me.

I almost trip as I rush down the stairs, crying with joy when I spot the front door wide open. I break out into the fresh air and

stop at the sight of Maria. She freezes, glancing behind me. “Don’t get in my way,” I say, almost begging. She bites her lower lip, then gives a nod and throws a set of keys at me. She points to a small car. “Go,” she whispers. “Quick.”

A gunshot rings out, followed by another, and I take off towards the car, opening the door and throwing the diary onto the passenger seat. I haven’t driven in over a year, but it comes flooding back to me as I put the keys in the ignition. Maria must’ve opened the gates because as I drive towards them, they slide across and I cry with relief. I fucking did it. I got out alive.

IVAN

Lev gurgles on his own blood as I place my hands around his neck and squeeze hard. I whisper words of hatred as he takes his last breath. Maxim lays still beside him, his eyes open but lifeless and cold. I take his blade and puncture each eyeball. If there is an afterlife, he should spend it blind.

Alek appears in the doorway, out of breath. “She’s gone. She took Maria’s car.”

I growl in frustration. She was right all along, and I hurt her. “We need to stop her, Alek. She’s hurt and she’s seen too much. Have men sent to the police stations. I’ll call our associates and see that she’s returned.”

“She can’t get far with no money or a passport.”

I nod in agreement. “Find her.”

Maria is in the kitchen. “Are you okay?” I ask, and she nods, busying herself with stirring a pot of something hot. “Only you don’t look upset.”

“Sorry?”

“I’m assuming Grace took your car by force, because you wouldn’t have given it to her willingly.”

“Of course not,” she says, frowning. “She took me by surprise. By the time I realised what had happened, she’d gotten my keys and was running away.”

She’s lying, I’m pretty sure. I sigh heavily. “We’ll find her, Maria. Let’s hope she tells the same story.”

As I turn to walk away, she clears her throat. “You should know,” she begins, and I turn back to her, “there was money in the back of the car.”

I arch a brow. “Money?” I repeat.

“A lot of money. Maxim asked me to collect it. He told me not to look in the bag, but I’m too nosy.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “And where is it now, Maria?”

“Still in the car,” she mutters, “with Grace.”

GRACE

My breathing begins to slow down as the adrenaline leaves my body. Sickness takes its place, and when I glance at myself in the mirror and see smeared blood, I almost vomit. I’m sure

no one has followed me, but I need to dump this car because Maria would've told Ivan by now, or Maxim, depending on who that bullet hit.

Thinking of Ivan lying there dead doesn't make me happy like it should. Instead, it sends a painful twist to my heart. A stray tear slides down my cheek.

I find a parking spot two streets away from the hotel where I was last before Ivan took me. I grab the diary and step out the car, aware that I look a mess with blood all down my body, bite marks, and no shoes.

I go to the boot and find a rain jacket and some rain boots, which I pull on, despite the warm weather. The boots are too big, but they'll do until I can get to the hotel. As I lock the car, I see a bag on the back seat. I reach in and pull it out, unzip it, and gasp. There are stacks of bank notes inside, banded together in neat piles. "Holy shit," I whisper, taking out a bundle and stuffing it in my pocket. I zip the bag and take it with me, locking the car and throwing the key across the car park before heading in the direction of the hotel.

Lenny is behind the desk, and when he looks up and sees me, his mouth falls open and he rushes around the desk to me. "Oh, Grace, I've been so worried about you. Where have you been all these weeks?" he whispers, holding me at arm's length and looking me up and down. "What happened?"

Tears fall again. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you, Lenny. I need help."

He nods. "Anything."

“I have money. I need a room.”

“Of course. And forget the money.”

I shake my head, pulling the bundle from my pocket. “No, I insist. But no one can know I’m here, Lenny. No one at all.”

He nods, moving back around the desk and tapping away on his computer. “Room 108 is free.” He slides a key towards me.

“And I need some clothes. And maybe a cap? Something to hide my face.”

“I can arrange that.”

I place the cash on the desk. “And trainers. Size five.”

“Of course ... And Mr. Danny? Is he okay?” he asks.

A sob escapes me, and he eyes with concern. I give my head a shake before taking the key from the desktop and heading for the elevator.

I make sure to keep my head down so the security cameras don’t see me. Ivan has used this hotel before, and I don’t know who I can trust.

I get to my room and hide the money under the bed, then I shower. As I step from the warmth of the water, I catch sight of my bruised body in the mirror and gasp. Although my figure is fuller now than it was a few weeks ago, and I like how I look, I hate the marks left on my skin. They’re a reminder of everything that’s happened to me recently. I take the hotel robe and wrap myself in it, happy to hide the evidence. The softness of the material against my skin is a

comfort, and I suddenly feel very tired. I call room service and order a steak sandwich, hoping food will ease the sickness and wake me up a little. I need to come up with a plan.

An hour later, I've eaten and I'm going through the bag of clothes Lenny had sent up to me. There are jeans, a shirt, some trainers, and a cap. I go back to the bathroom and pull my hair up onto my head, placing the cap over it. At least it will hide my face. Next, I dress and take some more money from the bag. If I want to make it out of here, I need a passport, and I know people on the streets who can help with that.



I go to the nearest clothes store and purchase underwear, a hooded sweater, and some toiletries. I'm on constant alert, expecting Ivan or one of his twisted men to pop up any second.

I walk half an hour to one of my old hangouts. It's been a few months since I was last here, and now Danny's no longer with me, it brings painful memories.

Some of the faces are new, but as I make my way towards the back of the abandoned garage, I see who I'm looking for huddled over an old oil can full of wood that burns to give him some heat, despite it not really being that cold. He glances up suspiciously, and I smile. "Gracie, is that you?" he asks, squinting.

I nod. "Hey, Mike, great to see you."

“You scrub up well,” he says, winking. “I wondered what happened to you when you stopped hanging around here.”

“I need a passport,” I explain, wanting to avoid any conversations about Danny.

“You planning on leaving the country?”

I give a sad smile. “Something like that.”

“It’s not cheap,” he says, stuffing his dirty hands in his pockets. “But I can give you a name.”

“The thing is, it has to be discreet. People are looking for me ... bad people.”

“Darlin’, I can get you a name, but what they do with your information is out of my control. These men will do anything for money. Give them a false name and buy a damn wig. That’s the best you can do.”



I watch the house from across the street. The name led me to this address, and I can’t help the nerves. This is out of my comfort zone completely. Danny was the one who knew contacts for everything. *God, I miss him.*

I take a deep breath and head across the street, knocking on the door. A man pulls it open and eyes me suspiciously. “What?”

“I called about a passport.”

He nods, glancing out into the street nervously before opening the door wider for me to go inside. I follow him to a room with a computer. There's a machine connected to it and a stack of passports on the side. "Cash," he mutters, taking a seat. I pull out two thousand and place it on his desk. He snatches it up and flicks through it. "Name?"

"Lara," I reply. "Lara Morozov." Ivan wouldn't think of searching for this name. Not now he has his answers.

I wait patiently while the guy taps away. "Picture," he mutters, nodding to a camera set up in the corner.

I nod, removing my cap and shaking out the blonde wig I purchased. He snaps my picture, and it uploads to his computer. "What happens to that now?" I ask. "I mean the picture."

He shrugs. "You on the run or something?" I nod. "I can delete it," he says, pressing a button to remove it from his camera, and I relax a little.

He fiddles with the machine and, minutes later, hands me a fresh passport. I open it and smile. "It looks good."

"You pay the best money for the best goods."

IVAN

I press the mobile to my ear. "We've found the car," says Alek. "It's on Rider Street, abandoned. No sign of her or the keys."

"Okay, watch from a distance. She might return to it."

“I doubt it, boss. There are two parking tickets on the screen.”

“Fuck,” I mutter. “Ask around the area. Someone must have seen her. I’ll be there soon.”



I stare up at The Lodge Hotel. The place where it all began, and the place I know she would have returned to because she had a contact here who helped her.

I’ve spent the last three days upgrading my security, hiring new men, and getting rid of anyone who I thought might have been following Maxim. As I stride into the hotel with my men flanking me, I feel powerful. All I need now is Grace by my side.

The older-looking man at the desk smiles as I take in his name badge. Lenard. That’s her contact. I remember the way she smiled when she told me his name, Lenny. She’s fond of him. “Good evening. A room?”

“No. I’m looking for someone,” I say. “Grace Parker.”

He glances towards the lift, suddenly on edge. “I don’t recognise the name, and I can’t give out guest’s details.”

Alek steps forward and slides cash across the desk. “Of course, you can, old man. Just do as you’re told, and everyone can stay relaxed.”

He sighs, tapping away on his computer. “Sorry, there’s no guest by that name.”

Alek places a picture of her on the desk. It’s one we took when we first discussed sending her on the boat. She looks thin, tired, and dirty. Lenard looks at it, shaking his head. “No, she doesn’t look familiar.”

“Listen,” I say, leaning closer, “I’m fresh out of patience today. I know you used to help her, Lenny.” He bristles at my words. “And I know she came running to you for help. Now, I need to know where she is, and if you don’t tell me, I’ll start causing a scene.”

He glances at my men, probably weighing up his options. When he realises there are none, he says, “She came here a few days ago. Stayed one night and left. I have no idea where she is now.”

“Was she alone?”

“Yes.”

He’s telling me the truth. I see it in his eyes. “Lucky for you, Lenny, I believe you. But if I find out you’re lying to me, I will kill you.” I smile tightly and turn towards the exit.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GRACE

Ireland is beautiful. I landed here two weeks ago, arriving at Dublin airport and hiring a car to head straight for Portmarnock. I chose somewhere coastal, and I plan to move along the coastline as the weeks pass. I don't think I'll ever be able to stay in one place and settle, just in case Ivan should start looking for me. I have no way of knowing if he'll do that, but my gut tells me he will.

I found a small holiday cottage to rent which is just a short walk from the beach, and I've fallen in love. If I could choose the ideal place to settle for the rest of my life, it would be here.

I step out onto the porch and settle on the swing chair. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, relaxing for the first time in months.

My mind wanders to Ivan. I hate not knowing if he's dead or alive. I've purchased a newspaper every day just in case his death is reported, and as I open it now, flicking through the

pages, disappointment creep in. There's nothing here again, and I'm back to not knowing. That feeling is quickly replaced with anger. Anger at myself for even caring if he's dead or alive. Anger that a large part of me is relieved there's no headline to report his death. Because that means he's probably still alive, and my heart jumps at the thought. My traitorous heart is a fool.



I walk over to the payphone across the street. It's such a busy seaside town, people don't pay any attention to me as I skulk around with my hood up.

I put my coin in the pay slot and straighten out the crumpled piece of paper with the phone number Lenny gave me. I dial, and he answers on the second ring. "Grace?" he asks urgently.

"Lenny," I say, unable to stop my smile. I needed a friendly, familiar voice. "I just wanted to tell you I've—"

"Don't tell me," he cuts in, and the words die on my tongue. "Don't tell me where you are. There're people looking for you. Bad people."

I feel the blood drain from my face. "Are you okay?" I'd never forgive myself if they hurt Lenny.

"I'm fine. I had to tell them you came to see me. I told them I didn't know where you'd gone to, that's why I don't want you to tell me."

“Thank you.”

“They’ve been back every day.”

“And they haven’t hurt you?”

“No. Not yet.”

A sob escapes me. “Oh, Lenny, I’m so sorry. I’ve dragged you into it, and now, you’re in danger.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine. But you can’t call me again, Grace. Not for some time.”

I nod, even though he can’t see me. “Was he Russian?” I ask. “One of the men looking for me?”

“Ivan Morozov. He left me his card. I’m supposed to call if you get in touch.” My breath catches in my throat, and my heart swells. I quickly shut it down because I have no business feeling like. But at least I know he’s alive.

“You should call him, Lenny. Tell him to stop following me because I’ll just keep running.”

I disconnect, noticing my hands are shaking. A part of me is relieved to know he’s okay. The other part is sick with worry. Knowing he’s looking for me, having it confirmed, scares the hell out of me because now I know I have to keep moving.



I’m on the porch of the pretty little cottage, drinking tea and looking at a map. I’m trying to work out my next stop when

the telephone rings inside. I don't think too much of it, assuming it'll probably be the owner, so when I answer it, I'm not expecting to hear his voice. "Grace." It rumbles, and I briefly close my eyes as pain stabs at my heart.

"Ivan." And then I wince at how stupid I'm being to confirm it's me. I should hang up, but instead, I wait for his response.

"Come home. It's where you belong."

"Being tortured and attacked? I'd rather not."

"That won't happen again. Maxim is gone."

"I don't care. You've got to stop following me. And stop harassing Lenny. He's sweet and kind and he doesn't deserve you putting the fear of God into him."

"You care about the old man?"

"How did you get this number? How did you find out where I am?"

"Grace, come home, or I will come and take you ... again." The line goes dead, and I stare at the telephone in shock. How the hell did he find me? I only spoke to Lenny a few hours ago and he didn't know. I groan aloud. Men like Ivan have contacts, I know that, but I've done everything in my power to disguise my identity.

IVAN

I tap the pen against my desk impatiently. The local police in Ireland were supposed to go to the cottage and arrest Grace. I

have men flying out there right now to bring her home. Yet I haven't heard anything from either side.

My men spent hours looking at CCTV of passengers leaving the country by boat. And although she was wearing a blonde wig, she stood out a mile just by the way she tried too hard to hide her face and how she glanced around constantly, like she was nervous.

Alek barges in, and I let it slide seeing as he's holding out his mobile phone to me. I take it, pressing it to my ear. "Boss, she's gone."

I pinch the bridge of my nose and stand. "What do you mean?"

"She must've left soon after she put down the telephone to you," says Cameron.

I growl, throwing the mobile at the opposite wall, where it smashes before falling to the ground. "She can't have gone far," I tell Alek. "Call him back, tell him to keep looking." I knew I was taking a risk when I called her, but I had to hear her voice.

"We have a meeting in an hour," says Alek carefully.

"I know," I mutter. "I'm very aware. Call him back and deal with that. I'll prepare to be grilled by my associates."



“What kind of shit-show are you running?” Dmitry barks angrily.

I arch a brow. “I think you’re forgetting who you’re talking to,” I murmur dangerously low.

He swallows and sits straighter. “Maxim and Lev died at your hands, and we still have no explanation as to why.”

“Maxim was moving against me. It was a shock, but I took care of it. Lev got caught up in the crossfire.” I can’t tell them both men were in on the plan to take over my organisation. They can’t know how deep it ran. “Since then, I’ve made my circle tight. Alek is my second in command.” All eyes fall to Alek, and he stands straighter.

“Does he still feed from his mother?” quips one of the men from around the table.

“He’s young and trustworthy. That’s what I need. Don’t you trust me to know what I need?”

“We trusted you to keep your organisation in check,” mutters Dmitry.

“And I have. Hence this meeting to discuss things,” I say through gritted teeth. The truth is, these men pay good money for a service I provide. They have contacts all over the world waiting to make a purchase. But I can find many more men just like them, so I don’t need them as much as they need me.

“Maxim made sure the boats were full each week. Now, we’re carrying nothing,” Vadim says.

“Give me one week. The boat will be full again.”

“So, we can call our contacts and tell them business as usual?” asks Vadim.

I nod once and stand, indicating the meeting is at an end. “I’ll be in touch,” I tell them as I shake hands and watch them leave. The door closes, and I sit back down. “Fucking vultures,” I murmur.

“We found out where she got the passport from,” Alek tells me, and I stand again, the news bringing me hope. If I have her fake name, I have a better chance at tracing her.

“Bring him to me.”



The thin man fidgets nervously in the chair before me. I circle him, wondering how my Grace knows him. What circumstance led her to go to him for help? “Look, Mr. Morozov—”

Alek slams his hand hard onto the man’s bony shoulder, and he immediately closes his mouth and winces. “Do not address Mr. Morozov until he asks you to,” Alek barks.

I stop in front of him. “How do you know Grace Parker?”

“I don’t.” I glance at Alek, who hits the man around the head. “I swear it,” he yells, ducking to avoid another hit.

Alek produces the crumpled picture of Grace, and the man scans it. “Oh, yeah, I know her,” he says, nodding. “She came to me for a passport, right?” I don’t reply, waiting for him to

spill everything he knows. “She paid cash. I don’t know what else you want me to say. These people come to me because they’re desperate, and she looked it. She was nervous as hell and jumpy.”

“Did she say where she planned to go?” asks Alek.

He shakes his head. “I never ask questions. She told me bad men were looking for her and she needed it urgently. She paid extra. Her name wasn’t Grace. At least, that’s not the name she gave me.”

“Go on,” I say.

“Lara Morozov.”

I almost smile. “Clever,” I mutter, because no one would be looking for a dead woman. Especially not me.

“I hear you aren’t as stupid as you look,” says Alek. “The word is, you track the passports you make.”

The man almost looks smug but doesn’t answer, which only pisses Alek off. He hits him for a second time. “Fuck,” the guy spits, shaking his head. “Yes. Yes, I track the fucking passports, okay. But you have to pay for that kind of information.” Alek goes to hit him again, but I place my hand on his shoulder and shake my head.

“Name your price,” I say.

Minutes later, I have an app on my mobile phone showing a map of Ireland and a flashing green light, telling me exactly where Grace is right now. I smile to myself, tucking my phone

away in my pocket. “You want me to take care of him?” asks Alek, tipping his head in the direction of our passport guy.

“No,” I mutter. “Pay the man his money and send him on his way. He’s clever, and we could use his services in the future. We need to pay the old man a visit. Did you get his home address?”

Alek nods. “He never knows anything useful, though. Are you hoping he’s got something?”

I snigger. “No, we’re going to give her a reason to come home.”



Lenny doesn’t look surprised to see us standing in his kitchen when he opens the door. He places his work jacket on the back of the chair before rolling up his sleeves and grabbing the kettle. “Drink?” he asks.

“Sit down,” I say firmly.

He pulls out the stool at his kitchen table and takes a seat. “I haven’t seen or heard from her.”

“I’ve spoken to Grace,” I confirm.

He looks surprised. “Good. Is she okay?”

“You know she is because you’ve also spoken to her. Now, what were her words again?” I rub my chin before adding,

“Stay away from Lenny. She knows we’ve been visiting you. How does she know that?”

He presses his lips into a firm line. “She called once, just to say she was fine. But she never told me where she was.”

“Because you asked her not to, no?”

“She’s my friend. I care for her. She’s been through a lot of shit. And it’s funny, because the last time I saw her, she was with Danny, yet there’s no sign of him at all, and then you guys show up looking for her ... so, I’m wondering, what happened to him? And I bet my life you know. Maybe the police would be interested to hear why you’re so keen to find Grace, and why the hell she’s terrified, running for her life.”

I grin. “Never bet your life, Lenny.”

I give Alek the nod, and he places a plastic bag over the old man’s head, pulling it tight until there’s no air left and it clings to his face. He struggles, his legs kicking out desperately, his fingers trying to claw the tight plastic from around his neck. He eventually stills, giving in as his lungs run out of air, and his old, tired body gives up, slumping to one side.

I pull up the app on my mobile and stare at the flashing dot, indicating that Grace is now crossing the Atlantic Ocean. “She’s heading for France,” I mutter. “How fucking original. Have someone meet her from the boat. She should know the old man is dead. And then get us flights to France.”

GRACE

I step from the boat and an official-looking man greets me. “Ms. Morozov?” he asks. I nod, panic gripping my chest in case they’ve discovered my fake passport. “Please follow me.”

“Have I done something wrong?” I ask, rushing to keep up as he marches ahead.

He smiles. “Not at all. We have some news for you.”

I frown. News? Who would have any news for me? Unless ... I pause, coming to a stop. The man turns back and also stops, giving me a quizzical look. “Are you okay?”

“Is he in there?”

“Who?”

“Ivan?” I shout. “Is he there waiting for me?”

The man looks confused. “No, madam. I told you, we have some news.” He pauses before adding in a quieter tone, “It’s a little delicate.”

“Just tell me here,” I snap.

“I think we should go to the office. You might need to sit down for this.”

“*I said* tell me here.”

He takes a large swallow, glancing around. I do the same in case this is a trick and Ivan is about to pounce.

“We had a call from the local authorities in England. Your relative, Lenny ...” I frown. *Relative?* “He was found dead in his home last night.”

I stare down at the ground, my vision blurring through tears.
“The police called you?” I ask.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Did they leave a name or a contact number?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

I slowly nod. “Thanks for letting me know.”

“We can help to arrange a flight to England,” he suggests, a look of empathy on his face.

I shake my head. “No, thank you. I can sort that myself.”



I wander the streets of France with my heart torn into a thousand pieces. Ivan made that call, which means he still knows where I am. It also begs the question why he hasn't had me returned to him. He hurt Lenny, probably thinking I'd rush home, but I can't, despite how much I want to. It's a trap. Lenny would understand that.

People pass me by in a blur, and when I finally come to a stop, it's beside a luxurious-looking hotel. I head inside, and the concierge smiles brightly. Her French accent is thick as she greets me, and I smile weakly.

“A room for the night?” I ask, and she taps away on her computer.

“There are only two rooms available. Both are executive suites. It’s a private floor which only you can access with the key card.”

I nod, reaching into my bag and grabbing a handful of cash. “Do you take cash?”

She stares at the pile with an arched brow. “Of course, madam.”

The room is stunning. It’s almost like a small apartment rather than a hotel. I go straight for the window and push it open, staring down into the busy street below.

A few minutes later, room service arrives with the lunch I ordered, plus some items I requested from the pharmacy. He hands me the bag with an awkward smile, and I tip him.

Once he’s gone, I sit on the bed cross-legged and empty the contents. I sift through the soap, shampoo, and hair ties, and pick out the pregnancy test. I’ve been praying that my period is absent because of stress. Often, when I was on the streets, it wouldn’t come every month because my body was too malnourished. But now, I’m late for the third time, and that can’t be a coincidence.

I put it to one side, deciding it can wait another few hours, and reach into my bag, pulling out Lara’s diary. I open it and take a bite of my sandwich.

The diary started off well. She seemed happy and madly in love. But I’m starting to feel her happiness deplete.

Dear Diary,

Today we fought. Not like before, where Ivan yells and I stay quiet. This time, I yelled back, and it surprised him. It also angered him. He was so angry, he smashed things in the house. That seems to be his go-to whenever he doesn't like what I have to say. And it was all over something so pointless. I didn't tell my boss I was leaving. Ivan doesn't understand why I'm reluctant to stop work, but I love my job, and it doesn't matter how many times we discuss it, he just can't seem to grasp that I'm not going to leave. So, we fought. Hours of yelling and screaming until I eventually got so tired, I locked myself in the spare room to sleep. He hates when he can't be near me. I swear, if I stop work, he'll be glued to my side.

I quite like it in this room. I might have it decorated so I can come here when I need to breathe. We hardly ever visit our smaller home. Ivan says it's because his business is conducted from his office here, but he could easily make an office there too.

Love, Lara.

I finish my sandwich and grab the pregnancy test. I have to put my mind at rest, or I'll never sleep.

I go to the bathroom and pee into the plastic cup, then I dip the test and lay it flat on the side. The telephone rings, distracting me, and I sigh. I already know it's going to be him, or someone with more news.

I sit on the bed and pick up the receiver. "Hello, Ms. Morozov. It's reception. We have a call for you from your

husband.”

I roll my eyes. *He knows I'm using Lara's name.* “Thank you. Put it through.”

The line goes silent for a second before I hear the reconnection. “Ivan,” I say, my tone bored, “you found me again.”

“We’re giving your old friend a funeral. Would you like to say any words?”

I bite my lower lip, thinking over my words very carefully. “Yes, please. Lenny, my good friend, you were a legend, always happy to help, and the only man who was ever kind to me. I’ll forever remember you. And I’ll make your killer pay. I promise you.”

Ivan chuckles. “And how do you suppose you’ll do that, Grace, when you’re so far away in France?”

“Aren’t you bored?” I ask with a sigh. “You’re letting me consume your thoughts instead of getting on with your life.”

“Apparently, you’re my wife, Grace. Or should I call you Lara?”

“You wanted me to be just like her at one point, Ivan. I thought you’d be pleased.”

“I’ve spent a lot of time wondering why you ran when I was offering you so much.”

I scoff. “You really believe that, don’t you?”

“Didn’t we have it good?” he asks. “Before Maxim tried to tear us apart?”

“Speaking of Maxim,” I say, grabbing Lara’s diary, “I have something to read to you.”

“I’m all ears, my wife.”

“Dear Diary,” I read. “Today, I realised two things. One, it doesn’t matter what Maxim does, Ivan is blind to it. And two, Maxim is very aware of this. Today, he told me how he pictured me naked in his bed. Naked in his bed! He makes my skin crawl. When I said I’d tell Ivan, he laughed and told me exactly what would happen to me if I try.

“When Ivan returned home, I tried to tell him I was uncomfortable being around Maxim, and Ivan laughed. He told me that his childhood friend was practically his brother, and I should basically suck it up because Max wasn’t going anywhere. Do I risk telling him how his friend feels about me? Would he believe me?”

“Where are you reading that from?” snaps Ivan.

“Didn’t you know? Lara kept a diary.”

“What?”

“It’s heartbreaking stuff, Ivan. Like, a real tearjerker. Do you know she hated you in the end?”

“I want that diary,” he barks.

“And I want you to stay the fuck away from me, you psychopath.”

“I can’t do that, Grace.”

I let out a frustrated growl. “You can. Just walk away. I won’t tell anyone. I just want to get on with my life and forget you ever existed.”

“I can’t do that, Grace, because I’m in love with you.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GRACE

It takes a few minutes for me to stop shaking after I slammed the phone down, ending the call with Ivan. *He loves me.* He said the words, and I wasn't angry. But I should be because he's lost his mind. He's not a well man, and he's clearly obsessed. Forcing me to shower in his dead wife's scents so he can smell her again is crazy. It's crazy. So, why the fuck did I want to say the words back?

I go into the bathroom and stare at the pregnancy test, which is still face down like I left it. My hand hovers over the plastic stick, but I can't quite find the courage to turn it over. I growl out loud and storm from the bathroom, throwing myself on the bed. I need sleep. My mind is doing crazy shit because I'm exhausted.

I must drift in and out of sleep for a few hours. Dreams of Ivan standing over me, holding a child, wake me more than once until I finally jump from the bed in frustration and go back into the bathroom.

I turn the stick before I can talk myself out of it. The two lines stare back at me like they're mocking me. "No, no, no," I whisper, grabbing the box and checking the instructions again. Two lines confirm pregnancy. I scream angrily, throwing the kit in the bin.

IVAN

An angry scream wakes me from my light sleeping. I lay still, waiting to hear her again. When nothing comes, I sit up and call down to reception, asking them to transfer my call to her room again.

"It's the middle on the night," says Grace when I'm finally transferred to her.

"You don't sound like you've been asleep," I point out.

"I can't stop thinking about all the shit you've done," she says bitterly. "And how much I hate you."

I grin. "I don't think you hate me at all, Grace. In fact, you love me, and you hate that you do."

"Why are you calling?"

"To hear your voice."

"That has to stop," she snaps. "It creeps me out."

"That I love you so much, I need to hear your voice?"

"You wanted me dead, Ivan. You left me to die at the hands of your freaky friends. I don't know what pisses me off more,

that you left so easily or that you didn't have the balls to do it yourself."

"I came back, didn't I?"

"I was raped," she screams, and I hear her through the wall.

I place my hand against it. "They paid the price for touching what's mine."

"No," she hisses. "No, they didn't pay, Ivan. Prison would have made me happier. That's where you all belong."

"Read me some more," I whisper. "Of the diary." It's painful to know Lara wrote her words into a book and I never knew. Not only that, but she was suffering at the hands of my men when they were meant to protect her. I can never tell her how sorry I am.

I hear some rustling and then her voice returns. "Fine. I'll find some of the worst bits."

"I wouldn't expect anything different," I say, and I mean it. I deserve to hear the truth.

"Dear Diary, today was the worst day of my life. Igor attacked me. Ivan is away for a few days, and I let my guard down. I was taking an afternoon nap and forgot to lock the bedroom door. I can't stop crying and shaking. I feel sick. He held a knife to my throat and did the worst things. So bad, I don't even want to mark these pages with the details.

"The worst thing is, I think Maxim knows. I'm pretty sure I heard him outside the bedroom door. Igor told me if I tell Ivan, he'll kill us both. Part of me thinks that option would be best.

Now, I'm trapped in this hell, and I can't leave the room in case it happens again."

"Stop," I bark, taking deep, calming breaths. "Stop. I can't hear any more."

Grace laughs. "You called me, Ivan. We haven't gotten to the best part yet." I hear the page turn, and she continues. "Dear Diary, Maxim knows. He gave the order. Why would he do that when he claims to be so in love with me? He gave me a choice. I stand with him and help him take over the organisation, or Igor will visit me every time Ivan is away.

"I'm going to tell Ivan everything. He'll never let Maxim take over. He's worked too hard to be where he is. But what if he doesn't believe me? What if it drives us apart and gives Igor and Maxim an opportunity to hurt me more?"

"She tried to warn me," I cut in, and Grace pauses. "I came home from my trip, and she was sick. I found her in her own room. She'd turned that spare room into her own and refused to come back into our bedroom. I thought she was being a brat. I yelled." The memory makes me sick to my stomach. "Told her that as my wife, she would take her place in our bed."

"You forced her to go back in there?"

"It was a constant battle between us for the final few weeks of her life."

"Did she tell you about what happened?"

I scan the memories flooding my mind. “I knew she was wary of the men, but they put the fear in most people. That was their job. I just thought ... I thought she was overreacting. I never thought Maxim could turn against me.”

“Would you have believed her, if she’d have told you what Igor did?”

Shame washes over me. “No, probably not.”

“Just like you didn’t believe me.”

“Maxim was like a brother to me. You don’t understand the bond we had,” I explain. “Greed got to him. He wasn’t power hungry in the beginning.”

“He killed your wife, Ivan. How didn’t you see what was going on?”

“Things were bad between us,” I admit. “In the end. She was behaving odd, and I never knew the reasons. Now, I do ...”

“Now, you can live with that.”

She disconnects the call, and I stare at the phone receiver for a few moments, before hanging up.

I booked the room next to Grace’s. It was lucky because I almost lost out to a man in front of me. I paid a heavy amount for his room key, but it was worth it because knowing she’s safe, right next door, brings me comfort.

Alek steps from his room looking freshly shaven and ready for the day. He takes one look at me and winces. “Bad night?”

“I’m learning more and more things about my men,” I say.
“Things I should have seen and didn’t.”

Alek shifts uncomfortably. “You weren’t to see things that were purposely hidden.”

“Did you know Igor raped my wife?”

His eyes widen. “No, boss. Fuck.”

“Maxim knew.”

“Shit, boss, I’m so fucking sorry. They were so tight, they didn’t let any of us runners know what they were up to.”

“I don’t know who I can trust.”

“I wouldn’t worry, boss. You sent a clear message out to the other men when you killed Igor, Maxim, and Lev.”

“From now on, none of my men will stay in my home. We’ll have a separate building, and they will not have access to my home. That includes Maria.”

Alek nods. “Of course.” He pauses before adding, “You know, Viktor would make a great advisor.”

I frown. Viktor oversees the finances, but he’s always been quiet. He’s been on my payroll since he was young, and his father worked for me before his death a few years back. “He’s too quiet.”

“I don’t want to speak out of turn, but he’s actually a bit of a psycho. Like a deadly pitbull with the grace of a ballerina.”

I smirk. “How would you know this?”

“We’ve been friends a long time. There’s a small group of us who have worked for you under the radar for some time. None of us liked Maxim or how he ran things, but we stuck around because of you, boss. I know they’d all cut off their own hand to work directly for you.”

I sigh, shrugging. “You’re my Derzhatel, Alek, and as the second in command, I trust your judgement. Let’s face it, mine’s nothing to go by recently, and I have associates relying on the organisation to provide the goods. Set things in motion, and when we arrive back in England, I’ll make it official.” Something about Alek makes me trust him. He’s so eager to please and willing to get his hands dirty that I don’t find myself doubting his loyalty.

He nods, giving a small smile and disappearing back into his room to make the calls.

I hear a knock on Grace’s door and smile to myself before picking up the phone and asking reception to transfer me to her room. “You think flowers make up for what you’ve done to me?” she snaps the second she answers.

“No. They’re a gesture of love.”

“Stick your love up your arse,” she snaps, slamming the phone down.

I grin to myself. I think it’s working.

GRACE

I fling open the windows to my room and begin pulling the flowers from the bouquet, dropping them to the ground below. People look up, smiling and gathering the thorny roses. Only Ivan would have roses delivered with the thorns still in place.

Once each flower has been discarded, I close the windows and sit by them, grabbing the diary.

Lara's final days weren't nice, and her words have brought tears to my eyes several times. She found out she was pregnant but wasn't sure who had fathered her child, Igor or Ivan. It was another thing that Maxim held over her, and I know she must have been terrified he'd tell Ivan she'd been willingly cheating.

Dear Diary,

Sex with Maxim is so much worse than I imagined. But what choice do I have? It's like I'm stuck in this vicious circle of threats and pain, and I have no idea how to make it all stop. Ivan is away working for a week next month. A whole week. My life won't be worth living. Maxim visits me most days and demands sex, sometimes with Igor, other times without. I've begged Ivan to take me away with him, but he's made it clear he can't. Maxim tells me it's because Ivan has a woman in Russia that he visits. She's some ex of his apparently, and they still have something going on. I asked Ivan if he's ever

cheated, and it ended in a huge fight. I see the guilt written all over his face. Maxim's telling the truth.

Tonight, after he raped me, he happily showed me pictures of Ivan and the other woman together. They look happy, and she's gorgeous. Really stunning. My heart is broken. I'll never recover from any of this. I must find a way to leave.

When Ivan next calls me, I'm waiting. "You were cheating on Lara?" I accuse. He doesn't immediately answer, which tells me I'm right. "You piece of shit. You made out you were so happy and in love, but it was all a lie."

"I told you, things were not good at the end."

"So, you thought cheating would help? Christ, why didn't you just be a better man?" I yell.

"She knew and she wrote about it?"

"She wrote about everything," I snap. "The constant rapes, the threats they made to keep her compliant. You know he showed her photographs of you and another woman? It broke Lara's heart. You broke her heart. She was pregnant, and she was so broken because of you and your men."

"I wish I could go back and change it," he mutters.

"But you can't. She died knowing you didn't really love her."

"I did love her," he snaps, suddenly sounding angry. "She knew I loved her."

“No, Ivan, she died thinking you hated her enough to fuck around. The worst thing is ...” A sob escapes me, and I slam my hand over my mouth while tears wet my cheeks for a woman I didn’t even know. “While you were posing for pictures with another woman, she was being raped by your men. She was pregnant and having that happen to her every time you were away, and sometimes when you weren’t. You know Igor raped her in the kitchen while you were in your office one time? He liked the excitement.”

“Please,” Ivan mutters, “stop.”

“No,” I snap. “No, I won’t stop until you know every detail of her suffering.”

“I don’t want to know,” he yells, and I freeze. He sounded way closer than just over the telephone. I heard him through the wall.

I pick up the phone and pull the wire so I can move closer to the wall. “Is the guilt eating you alive?”

“Yes. Is that what you want, Grace, for me to suffer? Because I have suffered. She died alone, taking my child with her.”

“You don’t know if it was your child,” I say, pressing my ear to the wall. “She didn’t even know. And she lived with the extra fear that Maxim would tell you she was having an affair with Igor.”

“It was my child,” he snaps, and I almost gasp. *He’s in the next room.* My heart pounds hard in my chest.

I begin to grab my belongings, holding the telephone between my head and shoulder. “You should know I ripped your roses apart and threw them from my hotel window.”

“It doesn’t change the fact I love you.”

I scoff, shoving clothes into my bag. “You have no idea what love is. Obsession and love are not the same thing.”

“Then show me,” he says. “Show me how to love.”

“Some people are incapable.”

“Grace, you felt it just like I did. I know you did. And I let Maxim ruin what we had, but I won’t let him ruin another second. We can work through this.”

I laugh. “No, Ivan, we can’t. Everything I did, every smile, every kiss, every lame fuck, was because I wanted to gain your trust so I could get the hell away from you. It was all a lie, a way for me to escape.”

“That’s not true,” he hisses, and for the first time, he doesn’t sound so confident.

I smile, even though he can’t see it. “I used to scrub you from my skin after every time. You made me sick. I could never love a man like you.”

“Grace,” he murmurs.

“Give up, Ivan. It’ll never happen.”

I disconnect and shove my feet into my trainers. Grabbing my jacket and bag, I pull up my hood and carefully open the door to my room, peering out into the corridor. It’s quiet. I

creep to the lift and press the call button before rushing back to my room and pressing myself against the door just in case he hears it and looks out his peephole.

When it pings open, I dash into it, pressing myself to the side of the lift wall, hoping that if he does look out, he doesn't see me. I scan my card and press for the ground floor several times before the door finally closes and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I place my keycard in the checkout box, and the receptionist glances up. "I can check you out," she says.

I shake my head. "I'm in a rush." I break out onto the street and run towards a taxi, shoving a man out of the way and slamming the door. "I need to go to the bus station," I snap, pulling on my seatbelt. "As quick as you can."

I arrive at the bus station five minutes later and head right for the ticket box. I glance at the information board. "When's the next bus leaving?"

"For?" asks the man behind the counter.

"Anywhere. I'm in a hurry to leave."

He glances at his computer screen. "There's a bus to Paris in ten minutes."

I nod, shoving some money towards him. He takes what he needs before printing me a ticket and handing it over.

I'm speed walking across the station when I spot him. He's getting out of a taxi, and for a second, I stop and stare. The rush of feelings I have returns the second he places his shades over his eyes and glances around. My body is a traitor.

I duck down behind the rubbish bin, taking a breath and pulling my hood up before standing and marching towards my bus without glancing back.

Luckily, passengers are already climbing aboard. I keep my bag with me and climb the steps, moving towards the back to sit in a window seat. The windows are tinted, and Ivan won't be able to see inside. A woman sits beside me, and I stare out the window. There's no sign of Ivan, and relief floods me when the engine roars to life.

The bus begins to pull away just as Ivan comes into view. I smile to myself, and as it passes him, he grins too, staring directly at me. He gives a small wave, and I frown in confusion. The woman rummages into her bag and pulls out a mobile phone. She smiles at me. "You're Grace?" she asks, and I nod. "This is from your husband," she says, handing it to me. The sick feeling returns when the mobile buzzes to life. I take it, smiling weakly as I press to answer and put it to my ear.

"See you in the City of Love, my love."



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IVAN

The hotel receptionist was paid highly to give me the heads up when Grace checked out from the hotel. Within five minutes of her leaving, we were right behind her. And now, as I watch the tracker heading to Paris, I'm satisfied she can't get away from me. I just have to convince her I'm not giving up.

“Why don't we just stop the bus and take her?” asks Alek, handing me a coffee.

“Because she needs to come back to me of her own free will. Forcing her will only anger her more.”

“How long will that take?”

“For once, Alek, I am trying to be patient. Once we get to Paris, I'll up the pressure.”



We arrive in Paris an hour behind Grace. She's checked into a hotel just a short walk away from Eiffel Tower. Once we get a room on the same floor as hers, I call her.

"How did you convince that woman to give me a phone?" she asks.

"Money buys anything," I reply, loosening my tie.

"I checked both rooms beside me were occupied," she says.

"Clever girl," I whisper, opening the balcony doors and stepping out. "You have expensive taste, zhena."

"That's a new one on me, Ivan. Translate," she orders.

"Zhena is wife."

"Which I am not."

"While you use my wife's name, you are."

"She was planning to leave you."

"She was?" I'm not surprised. I'd suspected as much when things began getting worse between us. Weeks before she died, she wouldn't even let me touch her.

"Shall I read it?"

My heart sinks. I hate the guilt the diary entries bring me. It's something I'm not used to feeling. "If you must."

I pull up the rattan chair and lower into it. "Dear Diary," she begins. "I have a plan. The one good thing that's come from all the bad is I'm learning to be as cunning as all the men who surround me. I've told Maxim I love him. His eyes lit up like all his Christmases had arrived at once. Idiot. I told him I'm

planning to leave Ivan for him but I need money and a safe place to stay. He's agreed to help me. Once I get that money, I'm taking off. I'll move across to the other side of the world if I must, but those monsters will never see me or my baby ever again. Finally, there's a light at the end of the tunnel.

"Her name is Galina. The woman Ivan spends time with, in Russia. Maxim told me he's been seeing her for over a year. My heart is forever broken, and I'll never recover from his betrayal. He keeps me here in his ivory tower for his men to use as a plaything, and he's so wrapped up in himself and her, he can't see what's right under his nose. I love him so much. I'm a fool.

"On the day I leave, I'll write him a letter so he knows the truth about it all. He should suffer knowing what happened to me because of him." She pauses before asking, "Did she write a letter?"

"I never received one."

"Maybe she changed her mind. What happened to you and Galina?"

"After Lara died, I couldn't bring myself to see her. The guilt was too much."

"Pity you didn't feel like that when she was alive. None of this would have happened."

"You're carrying out her last wishes," I point out. "Making me suffer."

“You think this is suffering?” she asks, sounding amused.
“Some diary entries?”

“She was my wife, the love of my life. I didn’t understand why she’d grown distant. Now, I know the truth.”

“You feel bad because of the guilt. You can never understand how she felt, what she went through, because you’re a man, and we feel so differently. You’ve never had a man hold you down and force himself on you, Ivan. That feeling of being utterly alone and powerless and not having the fucking strength to fight him off because you’re a woman and he’s a man.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I can only try to understand.”

“Those women you take,” she says, and I wince, “they feel too. Just because you drug them doesn’t mean they don’t feel.”

“It’s business, Grace.”

“It’s real life for those women, Ivan. You’re destroying lives for men’s pleasure. If you really want to begin to make up for all the things you’ve done, stop trading women like fucking animals.”

“Grace,” I mutter, rubbing at my forehead, “it’s not that simple.”

“Just say the words and it all stops. You have the power, don’t you?”

“If it wasn’t me, it’d be someone else.”

“But it is you.”

“You don’t understand,” I say quietly. “There are too many associates relying on me.”

“Excuses. Stop calling me. I’ll smash the phone up.”

“I’ll send you another.”

She disconnects, and I’m left with a heavy weight in my heart. It’s a feeling I’ve only begun to experience since Grace began pointing out all the things I’ve fucked up. The things I never saw as wrong before her.

Alek is in the next room to me, so when he comes out onto the balcony, he takes a seat and produces a bottle of vodka and two glasses. “Drink?” I nod and take a glass.

“I want to run something by you. It’s only an idea, but what if we dropped the sex trade?”

He frowns, filling my glass. “Can you do that?”

“It’ll upset a few people for sure, but something strange happened.”

“Boss?”

“I grew a fucking conscience.”

He smirks. “Grace?”

I nod. “She won’t stay if I continue to be this man.”

“You want her more than the money and power?”

I nod, knocking back my drink and holding out the glass for a top-up. “Maybe Maxim was right. Maybe I’m not cut out to rule.”

“Bullshit,” spits Alek, and I arch a brow at the venom in his words. “I’ve seen you work, boss. There’s no one I’m prouder to stand beside. You’ll make new deals, rule in other worlds. Maxim and his animals loved trading women because it made them feel powerful, but having power over women doesn’t make you a bigger man. They were weak. You make the decision, and I’ll make sure it happens.”

I give a nod. It was Maxim who got us into this world, and he’s gone, so maybe it’s time for a change. “Set up a meeting with Andrei.” He’s already running the sex trade out of Holland, and passing it on to someone else would appease my associates.

GRACE

There’s a knock on my door and I peep through the spy-hole to see a man with a trolley. “Room service,” he says through the door.

“I didn’t order room service,” I reply.

“It was sent by another guest.”

I groan, unlocking the door. “Of course, it was.” He smiles awkwardly and pushes the trolley inside.

“May I set up for you on the balcony?” he asks politely.

“Is that where you were told to set it up?” He nods. “Then go ahead.”

The mobile phone rings and I answer with a heavy sigh. “It’s a beautiful view of the tower. I thought we could watch the

sunset together.” I watch the waiter set up the table for one and am relieved Ivan isn’t joining me. “I’m also on my balcony eating dinner.”

“I’m not hungry,” I lie, ignoring the protest of my stomach.

“Then just sit and watch the sunset.”

The waiter pulls out my chair, and I reluctantly lower into it. He goes to pour some wine and I shake my head. He nods and removes the dome covering my plate before taking his trolley and leaving.

“Pasta,” he says. “Your favourite.”

I scowl, hating that he knows those things about me. “When will you get bored, Ivan?”

“Of you? Never.”

“Of waiting,” I say. “When will you decide you’ve had enough playing the nice guy and you’ll force me back to England with you?”

“I don’t plan on ever forcing you again, Grace.” His words sound sincere, but I know deep down I can’t trust him. “We’ll move at your pace.”

“My pace is moving towards never gonna happen, so stop wasting your time.”

“I’m working on becoming better,” he says. “For you.”

I roll my eyes. “How?”

“You want a list?”

“Yes.”

He laughs. “Name the things I should change, and we’ll start there.”

“Stalking,” I throw out, and he laughs again. “Obsessive behaviours. Forcing me to have dinner on a balcony while listening to you talk crap on the telephone.”

“You don’t like the pasta?”

“I don’t like the company.”

“Lies, Grace. I was there, and you can’t deny the spark we had. You can keep lying and telling me how you hate me, but we both know the truth.”

“That’s another thing. Telling me how I feel, what I’m thinking ... you don’t even know me, not really. You spent the first few weeks trying to make me be exactly like her,” I snap.

“You sound jealous.”

I scoff. “Of your dead wife? She suffered, and I don’t plan to.”

“Do we always have to fight?” he asks, sighing heavily. “It’s thrilling, but sometimes, we should just talk.”

“About what?”

“Our future.”

“We don’t have one.”

“Our child?” I pause, letting his words sink in. “You left in such a hurry, you forgot to hide the evidence.”

“You went through the waste bin at the hotel? That’s stalkerish.”

“We have a connection.”

“You forced this on me. I never wanted a child with you. You’re so fucking delusional.”

“So, why haven’t you taken care of it?” he asks, and I place a protective hand over my stomach. I must be at least twelve weeks, but there’s still no sign of a bump. I’ve thought about abortion, of course I have, but the second the thought enters my head, I quash it. It’s not this innocent child’s fault, and I refuse to rush into such a huge decision when I owe it to this baby to give it a chance.

“You’d be a terrible father,” I say.

“I want it so badly,” he admits.

I laugh bitterly. “So you can fuck it’s head up, make a mini version of you?”

“So I can make my life complete. Having a family is something I’ve wanted for such a long time.”

“You told me you wanted a kid to take over your business. That’s never going to happen with my child.”

“*Our* child.”

“*My* child,” I snap, possessiveness taking hold. “You will never get a chance to mess it up so badly.”

“My father was a terrible man too,” he says quietly. “He would beat me until my skin blistered and bled.” I hear her gasp. “He wanted me to be as cold as him.”

“It worked.”

“I don’t want to be like him, Grace. Help me to be better.”

I go inside and grab Lara’s diary from my bedside and take it back outside. I open it and take a bite of my pasta before reading. “Dear Diary ...”

“Can’t we have one night of peace?” asks Ivan patiently.

“If you don’t want to listen, hang up,” I retort, continuing. “I have the money and my bags are packed. I went out to dinner with Ivan this evening. It ended in tears. Again. His jealousy is ridiculous seeing as he’s the one cheating on me. When we got home, we fought so hard that he ripped my dress from me. He insisted I sleep in our bedroom, but there was no way I was going to, not after what happened to me in there. And knowing he’s got someone else. Of course, I couldn’t tell him any of that—”

“She taunted me,” says Ivan, and I fall silent. “She told me she wasn’t in love with me anymore and that she’d fucked most of my men. I thought she was trying to make me jealous. I wish I’d have killed them all. Maybe then she’d have told me the truth instead of me hearing like this, like she’s speaking from beyond the damn grave.”

I wait for him to finish before continuing. “Because he’d say I was lying, just like he always does. Yet he’s the liar. Not me. I tested the waters, told him I’d fucked half his men. He smashed things, yelled, called me a lying whore. Then he left. Tomorrow, he’ll tell me he’s sorry. He’ll buy me flowers and promise me a weekend away, just the two of us. Only it never is because Maxim somehow always appears. But I’ll take full

advantage. I'll take his guilt money and tell him I'm shopping, then I'll leave. For good."

"She did leave," he says. "For good."

"But not in the way she'd planned. Do you think Maxim discovered her plan?"

"Maybe. It would explain a lot."

"Or maybe he always wanted her out the way. Maybe he needed to get rid of her to make you weaker?"

He gives an empty laugh. "It worked. I took my eye off the ball."

"You became so obsessed trying to find her killer, yet he was right under your nose."

"I have to live with that forever," he replies.

"Good."

"Do you think you'll ever forgive me, Grace?"

I disconnect. It's easier than telling him the truth.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IVAN

I refuse to leave Paris to meet with my associates and instead invite them here to settle their unease. Andrei sits to my right as my associates file into the boardroom I hired at the hotel. Most of them know Andrei Lebedev because of his dealings in the trafficking trade. But most won't trust him if they've never had dealings with him, and I'm not sure if my word will be enough to console them.

I wait for everyone to settle before sitting forward and placing my clasped hands on the table, a sign I'm relaxed. "Thank you all for coming. Most of you know Andrei already, so I'll skip the introductions."

"Get to the part where you tell us you're pulling out of the deals we've made," snaps Vadim.

I fix him with an annoyed glare before continuing. "First of all, let me say that nothing will change. Everything will run exactly as it has for the last ten years."

“But?” Otto pipes up.

“But I am unable to give the project my full attention.”

“I knew this would happen the second we were told Maxim was dead,” Dmitry spits.

“Maybe his doubts in you were correct,” another mutters, and I turn my full attention to him. He shrinks slightly in his chair, and the others glance at one another nervously.

“Maxim’s doubts were unfounded. If any of you are unhappy with how I run things, please feel free to speak now.” I stare at each and every one of them. “Maxim went behind my back and he paid the price. I will not tolerate men I cannot trust. Don’t give me a reason to doubt any of you.”

“So, what exactly are you proposing?” asks Vadim.

“Like I said, everything stays the same. The only difference is, instead of me running the project, Andrei will be taking over.”

“Just like that?” he asks.

I nod. “I’ll spend my time on the other projects.” Shipping weapons and drugs to their countries brings me enough income to continue to live my comfortable lifestyle. I’ve never really needed the trafficking side of things.

“If the decision is made, then no more discussion is needed,” Vadim says, standing. “The bar is calling.”

Alek hands me a drink the second I enter the bar. “Everything good?” he asks in a low voice.

I nod. “Grace?” I’d asked him to watch her room in case she decided to go anywhere.

“She’s not left the building.”

“Good. Let me know if anything changes,” I say before turning my attention to the men.



Alek reappears an hour later. “Boss, she’s left her room,” he whispers.

I hate the thought of her being out alone in a place she doesn’t know, so I immediately stand. “Gentlemen, I have to excuse myself. Could you ...” My words trail off when Grace enters the bar.

Seeing her properly for the first time in weeks stuns me, and I stare at her with my mouth half open. Alek nudges me, bringing me back to the situation. “Actually, forget it. Anyone need a top-up?”

Grace wanders to the bar, and I slide into the booth so I’m less visible. She’s too far away for me to hear her voice, but the bartender smiles and sets about pouring her an orange juice. I smile to myself—she’s taking care of my child.

More people begin to fill the bar, making it less likely she will spot me, and I begin to relax, enjoying that I’m able to watch her undetected.

GRACE

I booked a table for eight o'clock, so I check my watch. I needed to get out of that room, and I didn't want to risk another balcony dinner with Ivan.

A man brushes his arm against my own, and when I look up, he smiles. He's good-looking, and I automatically smile back. "You're here alone?" he asks. I choose not to reply, not wanting to put myself in danger by admitting I'm alone.

"I'm about to have dinner," I tell him.

"The food here is spectacular," he continues. "Timothy, by the way," he adds, holding out his hand.

I shake it. "Grace."

"Lovely to meet you, Grace. I'm here on business for a few nights. You?"

"Same," I mutter, taking a sip of my orange juice. "What do you do?"

"I work in finance."

My bag begins to vibrate, and I inwardly curse. I'm not sure why I brought the mobile phone Ivan gave me. Maybe it was because I wanted to gloat that I wasn't in the hotel room waiting for him to feed me. "Sorry," I apologise, cancelling the call. "Finance, sounds important?"

He grins. "It's boring, really. What do you do?"

The phone rings again. "I'm really sorry," I repeat, "I should take this." I turn my back slightly as I press it to my ear. "I'm

busy,” I hiss.

“Lose him or I will make a scene,” says Ivan firmly.

My eyes widen as I try to look around the bar without making it too obvious. “We’re just talking.”

“I mean it, Grace, don’t test me.”

“You’re not my husband. You’re not anything to me,” I remind him, still trying to pinpoint his location.

“I’m currently sitting with twelve very dangerous men. I *can* make your friend disappear.”

“Do you see why this would never work?” I hiss. “You’re not the boss of me, and you don’t get to decide who I talk to.” I disconnect the call and stuff it back into my bag. “Sorry about that. If you haven’t eaten, you’re more than welcome to join me,” I offer, not because I want him to join me but because I want to prove a point.

He grins. “I’d love to. Thank you.”

A waiter comes over to tell me my table is ready. We stand to follow him, and two men in suits move quickly, hooking arms with Timothy and leading him towards the exit. He tries to shrug them off, clearly confused as to why he’d be removed from the bar. I groan, spinning in a circle until my eyes land on Ivan. Everything stops, I inhale sharply, and the people around me blur away into distant noise. For a second, I feel like it’s just the two of us. My heart pounds wildly. I want to run, but I also want to throw my arms around him and inhale the scent of

his spicy aftershave. I subconsciously run my hand through my hair and release the breath I'm holding.

The room slowly comes back into view, but Ivan makes no move towards me. I force myself to take a few steps closer. He watches, arching a brow. "Call them off," I whisper. "I mean it, Ivan. Call them off now."

He runs a hand over his stubbled jaw before taking his mobile from his pocket and pressing a button. He casually places it to his ear and says something in Russian. "Done," he tells me, tucking it back into his pocket. "Enjoy your dinner," he adds, turning his back to me as he adds, "Alone."

I command my shaky legs to move, but instead of going for dinner, I head for the elevator. I suddenly feel sick and have the urge to lie down. As the elevator doors are closing, I see Timothy entering the hotel again, straightening his jacket and looking pissed. At least he wasn't injured.



It's a few hours later when the mobile phone rings. I mute the television and answer his call. "You didn't eat," he states.

"Stop checking up on me."

"You need to eat, for the child."

"If you cared about this child at all, you'd leave me alone."

He chuckles. "That's not going to happen, Grace. Let me bring you some food."

“No.”

“I saw it in your eyes.”

“What did you see, Ivan?”

“Love.”

I laugh this time. “Unbelievable. You really are deluded.”

“Read me something from the diary,” he mutters. “Not something bad. Read me something good.”

“Good?” I repeat.

“There were good times, before it all turned bad. She must have written about those?”

I sigh, reaching for the diary and opening to the first page. “Dear Diary, I don’t remember ever feeling like this before. I’m starting the new year with a new diary and a new story. Hopefully, it’ll have a happy ending.” I scoff. She had no idea what she was walking into.

“I’ve moved in with Ivan. I can’t even begin to tell you how excited I am. His house is huge, and he has staff. I’ve never met anyone who has staff. Maria cooks and cleans, and she is lovely. The rest are men, and they don’t really speak to me. There’s a floor for the staff, so Maxim also lives here. He’s been kind, showing me around and offering to drive me anywhere I want to go.

“And then there’s Ivan. My one true love. Every time I think of him, my heart beats faster. I’m his whole world and it shows because he can’t do enough for me.” I slam it closed,

refusing to believe this man ever existed. “This is bullshit,” I say. “She can’t have known you at all.”

“She knew me, Grace. Better than anyone. We were in love.”

“So, what changed? Did she know what you did for a living?”

“She didn’t ask questions.”

“Of course, she didn’t. She had no idea what kind of monster you really were.”

“I wasn’t always like this,” he admits.

“So, I’ll ask again, what changed?” I move over to the balcony, opening the doors and taking in the cool evening air.

“I got in too deep. I listened to Maxim and Lev. I thought being bigger was what I needed. And then I lost her, and everything fell apart. And I don’t mean when she died. That was the final nail in the coffin, but I’d lost her months before that, and I couldn’t stand her being so cold and distant. It was like I couldn’t breathe when we were off balance.”

“Well, this is who you are now, so you have to live with it.”

“You don’t believe people can change?” he asks.

“No,” I say firmly.

“So, you’re still a cheating, lying whore?”

I gasp. “No.”

“Would your ex agree, if he was still alive?”

“I fucked up. It was a mistake, and I apologised over and over.”

“And now, if you met someone, married, settled down, you can honestly say it would never happen again?” he asks.

“I’ve learned my lesson.”

“And so have I,” he says, sounding satisfied.

“It’s not the same thing,” I screech. “You steal women and sell them as sex slaves. I cheated. People do that all the time.”

“It doesn’t matter how we got here, Grace. The fact is, we both did shit things that hurt the one person we loved. And it ultimately led to their death. We both have blood on our hands, you just choose to see it differently.”

I disconnect the call. I am nothing like him, and I resent him comparing us.

IVAN

I check myself one last time in the mirror. Alek hands me the bouquet of flowers and bottle of non-alcohol Champagne. “I hope it goes well,” he tells me, and I nod, heading for the door.

So far, I’ve kept my distance from Grace, apart from the night in the bar a week ago. I’ve been patient. Now, I need to show her I’m serious about us.

I take the elevator to the next floor and head to her room, knocking once. She pulls the door open without looking up, and I take a second to appreciate her in a T-shirt that sits just

below her bum and her hair tied up into a messy pile on her head.

She's got her nose buried in a book. "Thanks," she mutters, and I frown. When I don't move, she glances up from the book and her mouth falls open. "Ivan," she whispers.

"We've spent too long apart," I say. "It's time we talked."

She frowns before closing the door in my face. I stand for a second, unsure of what to do. This hasn't happened to me before. "Grace, open the door," I say firmly.

"How dare you just turn up like this? Who the fuck are you to decide when we should talk?"

"We can't go on like this, talking over the phone. We're in the same damn hotel. It's ridiculous."

"I agree," she snaps, "so go home. Leave me alone."

"That's not going to happen." I'm irritated by her stubbornness. Running a hand through my hair, I take a calming breath. "Please, Grace. Let's just talk."

"I don't trust you," she says. "You might drag me out of here."

I sigh heavily. "If I was going to do that, don't you think I would have by now?"

"I'll meet you," she tells me, sounding defeated. "Downstairs in the bar. Give me ten minutes."

I place the flowers by her door. "Fine. Try not to throw these flowers from the balcony."

GRACE

I run a brush through my tussled hair and re-tie it back into a messy bun on the top of my head. I pull on some leggings and leave the T-shirt I was already wearing because I don't want him to think I'm making an effort. I check my appearance in the mirror, gently rubbing my pale cheeks. Morning sickness has begun, and I'm feeling awful. My tired-looking skin and dark-circled eyes show my struggles.

I step out the room and spot the huge bouquet of flowers resting against the wall. I groan, kicking them over in annoyance. Flowers can't make all this better. I scoop them up and place them outside the room opposite my own, removing the card and stuffing it in my pocket.

I get into the bar and spot him right away. He's sitting on a tall stool with his back to me, and his shoulders are hunched like he has the world on them. As I move closer, I catch his spicy scent and briefly close my eyes. It shouldn't affect me the way it does every time I'm close to him.

I slide into the vacant seat beside him, and he glances at me like he's surprised. "I didn't think you'd come."

"I thought about it but realised you're never going to leave me alone until we talk, so ..."

"Would you like some dinner?"

I shake my head. The bartender approaches, and I smile politely. "I'll take a water, and he'll have the same," I order, feeling Ivan's eyes on me. The bartender goes off, and I shrug,

“You seem like the kind of guy who always takes the lead, so I thought I’d jump in there first.”

“Do you know how hard it is to sit beside you and not touch you?” he murmurs, staring down at his clasped hands resting on the bar.

“You’re so good with smooth,” I say, shaking my head in irritation. “Flowers, nice talk, but it’s all bullshit, Ivan.”

“I hate it when you curse,” he mutters.

“I hate it when you stalk me. I hate it when you kill the people I love.” He glances around to see if anyone heard before bringing his narrowed eyes back to me. “What, I can’t speak the truth? Isn’t that why you asked to see me?”

“I’ve made mistakes—”

I laugh, and it’s cold and bitter. “Mistakes?” I repeat. “What you’ve done is not make mistakes, Ivan. Mistakes can be forgiven, maybe forgotten, but what you’ve done to me, to the very few people around me, that’s just messed-up. It can’t ever be forgiven and is definitely never forgotten.”

“It has to be,” he mutters, sounding unsure, “because we’ve created a life together.”

“Now that,” I say, taking my water from the bartender and taking a big gulp, “that was a mistake.”

Ivan whips his head round to look at me. “Don’t say that, Grace.”

I slam my glass down, causing some of the liquid to spill over the edge. “I didn’t choose this,” I hiss.

He nods. “Okay,” he whispers calmly. “Let’s just calm down and work out where to go from here. Going over the past isn’t helping. We’ve done too much of that already.”

“We don’t go anywhere from here. Not together. You will go home and leave me to live my life.”

“And our child?”

“I haven’t decided,” I tell him, feeling a stab of guilt.

“What does that mean?” he snaps.

“It means I haven’t decided,” I say through gritted teeth. How can he expect me to make a huge decision like this after everything?

“I’m not going to leave here wondering if my child lived or not,” he hisses. “I can offer you a good life. In time, you’ll forgive me. I know you will.”

“Maybe that’s the problem, Ivan. Maybe you’re right and I’ll forgive you, and that scares the shit out of me. You’re not a man who deserves to be forgiven.”

“Can’t you see I’m changing? I’m changing for you.”

I shake my head. “Don’t do it for me, do it for yourself.”

He buries his head in his hands and scrubs his face. “You don’t understand my life. This is how I was raised. This is all I know. But I’m trying, Grace. For you and this baby that I want so badly. Since I lost Lara and our child, there’s been a hole in

my heart, and these last few months, it's been filled by you. I can't do as you ask and just walk away."

My heart squeezes a little. The more he talks, the more hope I feel, and that's too dangerous. "I'm never going to be with you." I keep my voice even and look him in the eye, seeing each word puncture his heart. "If you don't leave me alone, I'll have no choice but to go to the police and report everything."

His eyes darken. "Don't make threats like that, Grace."

"It's not an empty threat. I want you to leave tonight."

I feel him pulling away. His eyes become distant, and his body language changes as he stares straight ahead, squaring his shoulders. "What if I offered a life without me? One where you and our child would be safe but you wouldn't have to see me?"

"I don't need anything from you."

He sighs impatiently. "You're really leaving me no other option, Grace. I'm trying to be reasonable, to be the man you'd like, but if you're not going to come home willingly ..."

And there he is, the man he's been hiding behind the fakeness of the last few weeks. "You'll never get me out of here without alerting the authorities," I snap.

"Don't be so fucking naïve, Grace," he growls, and I jump at his tone. "Pack your bags, we're leaving early tomorrow, and if you dare to run, I'll be less reasonable when we next meet."

I push to stand, fear gripping me as I realise Ivan will never change. He will always be the man who resorts to force when

he doesn't get his own way. The Mr. Nice Guy act these last couple months was just that ... an act. The real Ivan is the man who took me from the streets. He's the man who killed two of my friends in cold blood, leaving me alone in this world. He's the man who was willing to ship me to a foreign place and sell me for sex. The man who unintentionally got his wife and child killed.

He stands too. "I'll escort you to your room," he mutters, taking my upper arm roughly and marching me from the bar. As we wait for the elevator, he keeps hold of my arm, and I blink away the tears that are threatening to fall. I've cried way too much for this piece of shit.

We get to my room, and he grabs the flowers I dumped across the hall. He waits while I unlock my room door before following me inside and throwing the flowers on the bed. He takes my keycard and stuffs it in his pocket before releasing me and storming through the room to the balcony.

I watch as he braces his hand on the wall and presses his mobile to his ear. "Alek, I'll be staying with Grace this evening. We're checking out first thing. Pack my things and have them sent to Grace's room."

I angrily swipe a tear. I should never have gone to meet him. I'm a fool. I lock myself in the bathroom and break down, sobbing quietly into my hands, hoping he can't hear.

After ten minutes, I shake out my shoulders and splash my face with cold water. I have to find the strength to get through this. My plan isn't fool proof, but it's the only one I have, so I

dry my face and take a few deep breaths before pulling open the door and going back into my room.

Ivan is staring out over Paris. I join him on the balcony, and he glances at me. “Better?” he asks.

I bite back my bitchy retort and force a smile. “Yes.”

“I hate that you’ve forced me into this,” he adds, gazing out. “I wanted us to be grown up about it and choose something suitable for us both.”

“But instead, you chose something to suit yourself ... again.”

He turns to me, gently placing his large hand against my cheek and smiling sadly. “Grace, I love you. I have to be with you and our child. I know somewhere deep down, you feel our connection, but for whatever reason, you’re choosing to ignore it.”

“Did you do this to Lara?” I ask, and his hand drops back to his side.

“Why are you so obsessed with Lara?” he snaps. “This is about us now. Me, you, and our child.”

I roll my eyes and go back into the room. He’s one to talk about obsession. I begin to strip down to my T-shirt, and I feel him watching from the doorway. “I’m tired,” I mutter.

“It’s been a long afternoon,” he admits. “Sleep.”

I climb into bed, pulling the sheets over me and squeezing my eyes closed.

IVAN

I watch her sleep. It took her all of two minutes and she was out like a light. She's so beautiful, I can't take my eyes from her as I undress down to my shorts and slide into bed beside her. I know she's trying hard to fight her feelings, but they're in there. Her eyes show it every time she sees me.

My plan is to get her home and show her how it could be. I'll give her the space she needs the second we're home. I'll set her up with a bank account, so she'll never want for anything, and I'll treat her like the queen she deserves to be. She won't be a captive like she thinks. She'll be my wife. My queen.

I gently tuck her against me, making sure to slide her leg over mine, and wrap her in my arms. She stirs slightly before settling against me, burying her head into my chest. I close my eyes and smile.

She's going to be the change I need so badly. She's going to be the light I need to stop the darkness that swallows me.

GRACE

I wake with a start. A warm feeling is spreading through my body, and I groan sleepily. Ivan nuzzles my neck, his panting breath warm against my skin.

I realise his fingers are the cause of my warmth as he pumps them inside me, using his thumb to rub delicious circles over my swollen clit. I'm crying out in pleasure seconds later, and

he replaces his fingers with his erection, easing into me while pressing his front to my back.

His fingers dig into the flesh on my hips as he slides in and out. His free hand cups my breast, teasing my nipple as he rolls it between his fingers, occasionally tugging. I realise he's building up to his own release and I place my hand on his thigh. He pauses, and I take the opportunity to let him slip from me.

I turn to face him, smiling before kissing him with a passion I've never shown him before. It takes him by surprise, and I throw my leg over him and push myself to sit up. I rub myself against his large cock, and he groans in pleasure.

I reach between us and line him up at my entrance, slamming down onto him. We both cry out. I begin to ride him, slowly at first and then picking up the pace. He closes his eyes and grits his jaw, and I know he's lost to me.

Sliding my hand beneath the pillow, I find the cold handle. I grip it, pulling it from its hiding place, all the while fucking him with everything I have.

His hands slide to my waist, and he thrusts up, matching my pace as he desperately seeks his release. I watch his gorgeous face as he strains in pleasure.

"I hate that you've forced me to do this," I whisper, leaning down and pressing my lips to his. His eyes shoot open as he feels the tip of the blade pierce the skin of his waist.

Confusion plays out on his face as I push harder until I feel the blade meet resistance, then I withdraw it, and he groans somewhere deep in the back of his throat. It sounds different to the groans of pleasure I'm used to him making.

"I have no choice," I whisper, and tears are spill down my cheeks onto his.

I push the knife in a second time, and he winces, taking my face in his hands and fixing his eyes to mine. A slow smile spreads across his face as I twist the knife. He frowns, then coughs, and his hands fall back to his chest.

He finds my wrist and tries to remove the blade, but I stick it in harder. He grunts, his body jerking once as I pull out the knife and drop it onto the bed beside us. I take his clammy face in my hands and kiss his lips gently. "I'm so sorry," I whisper, "but it was the only way to stop you from taking me back to hell."

His breathing is shallow as he gasps harder. I climb from him and stare down at the wet, blood-soaked sheets. *There's so much blood.* My hands shake violently as I wipe them on the sheets before pulling my bag from under the bed and rushing to fill it with my belongings.

My mind is racing with thoughts of the police, or what I'll do if Alek turns up unexpectedly. I shake my head to clear it as now's not the time to panic.

I go to the bathroom, all the while crying, and I wash his blood from my thigh and hands. It runs down the drain like a crimson, which only makes me feel sicker inside.

When I go back to the room, Ivan is silent, but his eyes track me as I dress. They're full of pain, and I wonder what's going through his mind right now.

Once I have everything I need, I go back to him and listen closely. His breathing is shallow, with more gasps than breaths. I place a gentle kiss on his lips. By the time Alek finds him tomorrow, he'll have bled out, but to make sure, I take his mobile phone from the bedside and place it on the other side of the room. Pulling the plug on the room phone, I take one last look at him. His eyes are now closed, and he almost looks peaceful.

I pull the sheets over him to hide the blood. "I hate the person you've made me into," I tell him as I place Lara's diary on his chest. "And despite everything, I love you, Ivan. And I hate that about myself. I'll take care of our child," I tell him, placing one last kiss on his lips.

As I pull back, he grabs my wrist, and I cry out in surprise. His eyes shoot open, and he gasps hard. "I love you," he whispers. "I love you." And then he releases me, closing his eyes and letting his head fall to one side.

I cry harder, covering my mouth with a shaky hand to muffle the sound. As I back out the room, I pray I make it out before anyone discovers his body.

IVAN

It's a strange feeling knowing the woman you love wants you dead. It's even stranger that each time I close my eyes,

drifting between life and death, I see Lara's face. She doesn't look pleased, and maybe that's what forces me to open my eyes again.

Grace is moving around the room, panicked and shaking. Does she realise this will haunt her nightmares? She'll see blood on her perfect skin for months, and she'll scrub her hands extra hard to remove something that's invisible, something only we see.

The next time I open my eyes, she's gone. My beautiful Grace has gone, taking my child with her. The pain of knowing that hurts so much more than the wounds she's inflicted in my side.

I let my eyes close one last time, smiling at Lara as she comes back into view. She reluctantly holds out her hand, but when I try to take it, I feel nothing. Like we're worlds apart. And then suddenly, I'm falling. Down, down, down, until my body crashes hard onto the ground. It's the last thing I feel, and as I succumb to the pain, I take a final rattling breath.

Hell will be my final resting place. And I welcome it.

The End