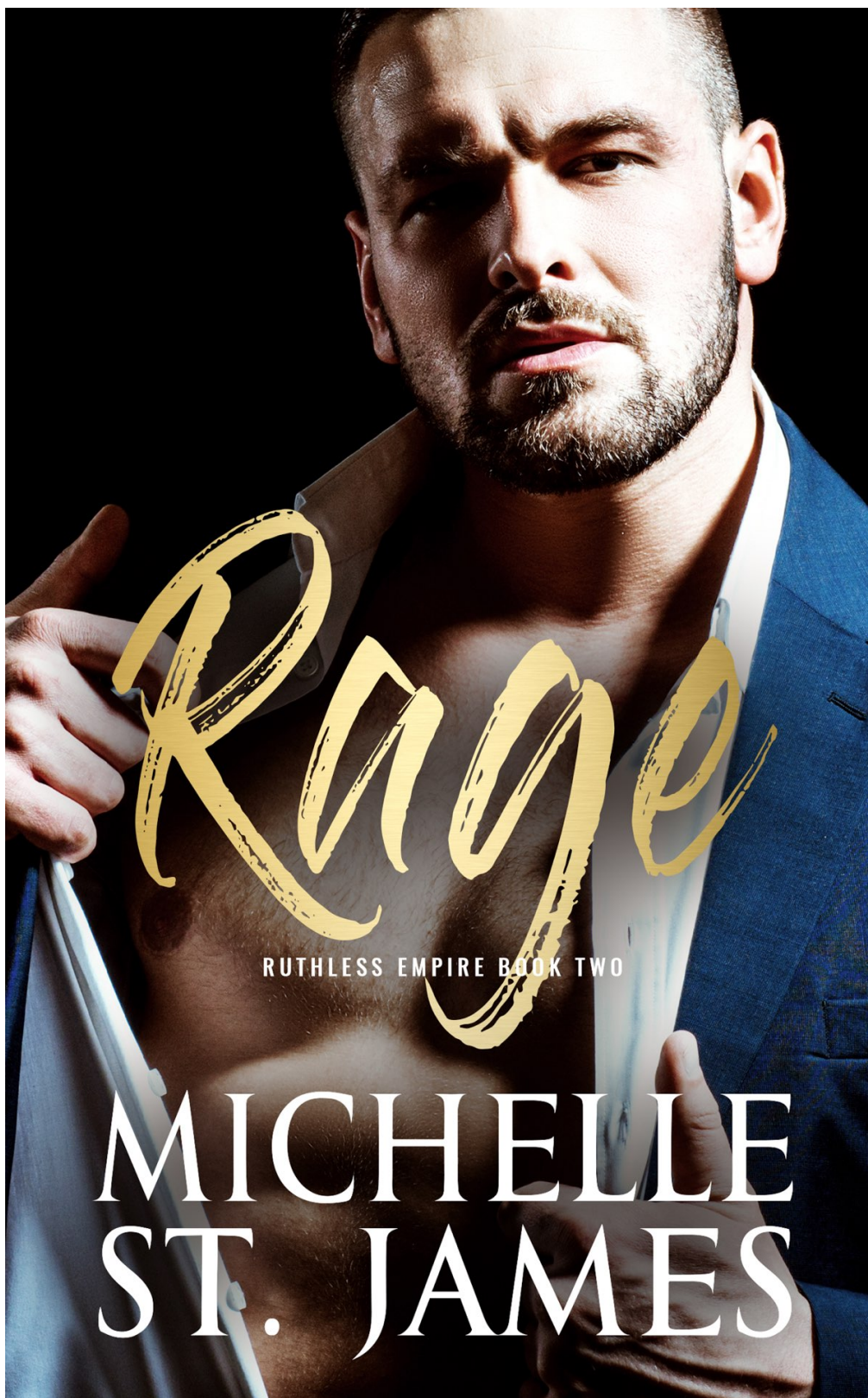


Rogue

RUTHLESS EMPIRE BOOK TWO

MICHELLE
ST. JAMES



Rage

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RAGE

Ruthless Empire Book Two

Michelle St. James

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ROMAN

Roman tapped his fingers on the diner's scratched tabletop and assessed the security situation.

Max, sitting across from him, his gun bulging under his leather jacket.

The shadow of Pavel and Leo, the two men who'd become Roman's security detail, standing in front of the diner's glass doors.

Ilya and Danny— newly defected associates who worked for Roman's father — pacing the sidewalk, their breath clouding the cold night air as their watchful gazes roamed the streets that intersected at Kellogg's Diner in Brooklyn.

It was enough. Roman was almost sure of it.

And it wasn't like he couldn't protect himself. He felt the weight of his own weapon, nestled against his side like a lover, and relaxed a little.

"Once we get the location, we'll have to act fast," Roman said.

"I know," Max said. "We're ready."

It had been three weeks since Roman's father had kidnapped Ruby. Three weeks since Adam had taken physical

custody of Olivia.

Which is how Roman knew they were working together.

While Ruby's father and sister made public pleas for her safe return, Adam remained silent, dropping Olivia off at school, picking her up at the end of the day like he was angling for Father of the Year.

Like he hadn't been party to the kidnapping of Olivia's mother.

Or worse.

No, Roman wouldn't think about that. He was already riding the knife's edge of his sanity, his need to punish — to hurt, to maim, to kill — a scarlet curtain ready to drop over his sense of reason at any moment.

And Ruby needed him to be reasonable.

For now.

The time would come for the violence he craved, but not yet.

“More coffee?”

Roman looked up at the waitress, a young blonde woman who'd been nervously serving them since they'd arrived.

He didn't blame her. It was obvious they weren't just two bros out for a late-night cup of coffee.

“Please,” Roman said.

She poured more coffee from the carafe and Roman caught the eye of the balding man behind the register before his gaze slid away. Mel, the diner's owner, wasn't happy to have one of his booths occupied by Roman and Max, a full security

contingent standing like Rottweilers outside of the place, but he didn't have much of a choice.

He owed Roman quite a lot of money.

Well, technically he owned the Kalashnik bratva a lot of money, but the diner was in one of the areas Roman had seized in the three weeks since he'd begun the takeover of the bratva.

His father, Igor, had thought his kidnapping of Ruby would stay Roman's hand. Instead it had only made Roman more determined to take Igor down.

What kind of monster kidnapped an innocent woman? A mother? What kind of man worked with the woman's ex-husband to steal her child from her arms?

Roman knew the answer: the kind of man who didn't deserve the power he wielded.

His gaze was drawn to movement at the door and a second later Matvey David entered the diner looking somber in dark jeans and a tailored blazer as he scanned the diner.

He caught sight of Roman and Max and started toward them, his weapon flashing in the holster under his blazer. Mat was a brigadier, one of Roman's early loyalists, and Roman had noticed he'd been dressing more professionally since Roman brought them into his inner circle. Despite the danger he was in as a consequence of his choice to back Roman over Igor, Mat carried himself with new authority.

They hadn't initially seen that the old bratva was dying, but they saw it now, had come over to Roman's vision for the new organization, and that had given them fresh enthusiasm — for their jobs and the future of the organization.

He slid into the booth next to Max and spoke without preamble. "We think she's at the old grain terminal."

“You think?” Roman asked. There was no help for the edge in his voice. They couldn’t afford to *think*.

They had to *know*.

“We’re as sure as we can be without going inside,” Mat said.

“Tell me,” Roman said.

“Anton followed the doctor to the grain terminal last night,” Mat said.

“And he hasn’t been on the move before?” Roman asked.

Mat shook his head. “Not anywhere they might be holding her.”

Roman turned the information over in his mind. He’d had his men chasing every possible location in Brooklyn and a few on Staten Island, but it was a lot of ground to cover, especially with Roman’s still-limited army. The number of men joining his side of the turf war increased by the day but it was still no match — at least in terms of headcount — for the army his father had been building for the past thirty years.

Assigning men to follow Fyodor Larin had been a crapshoot. The decision had cost Roman two of his very few men, but he’d had a hunch, and he’d learned not to ignore hunches.

Doctor Larin wasn’t the bratva’s regular doctor, the one called in for knife wounds and bullet holes, the kind of injuries that in a hospital would prompt questions and a likely visit from the police.

Doctor Larin was his father’s secret weapon, one his father didn’t know Roman was aware of. Called in only for the most confidential of circumstances. Roman would be surprised if

anyone other than Konstantin, his father's trusted bulldog, knew about Doctor Larin.

But Roman had spent the last decade accumulating knowledge he shouldn't have. Knowledge about his father's finances, his daily operations, and yes, people like Doctor Larin who were on the most secret of payrolls.

"I assume you've done your own recon?" Roman asked Mat.

Behind the diner's counter, the young waitress started toward them with a coffee pot. Roman shook his head, meeting her gaze to make it clear they weren't in need of more coffee.

She set the coffee pot down and disappeared into the kitchen.

"I did," Mat said. "On the down-low obviously."

Roman wasn't surprised. Mat was quickly becoming one of the most valuable members of Roman's fledgling army. He was young enough to be valuable in the field and old enough to have some wisdom, methodical and conscientious while retaining the ability to be flexible and make decisions on the fly.

All valuable character traits in a leader.

"And?" Roman opted.

"Looked quiet at first," Mat said. "But overnight there was a shift change. Four men swapped for four more. Happened again eight hours later in the morning."

Roman had to resist the urge to stand and hurry from the diner, to head straight for the old grain terminal with nothing but his own weapon and the men at the diner.

He was thirsty for the blood of the men who'd dared to take Ruby and hold her in the abandoned grain terminal. He wanted to feel the warmth of their blood on his face, hear the crunch of their breaking bones under his blows.

He took a deep breath. He could assuage his thirst later. Right now he needed to be smart.

He needed to be calm.

"Only four men," Roman said.

"That's what I saw," Mat said. "No guarantees, but I stayed for twelve hours and it looked like a shift change to me."

The thought of Ruby locked up for three weeks on the orders of his father — a man without any honor, a man who thought nothing of hurting women and children — made Roman's blood run cold.

But she was alive. She had to be. Otherwise there would be no shift change. No guards.

He stood, trying to calm the adrenaline flooding his veins.

"Convene with the men in two hours," he said to Max.

"All of them?" Max asked.

"All of them."

RUBY

Ruby peered through the shadows and focused on the scratching sound in the corner.

She wasn't afraid. Not of the scratching sound anyway.

The mice and rats that had been her companions in the weeks she'd been imprisoned were a welcome distraction from her eventual fate.

Not that she knew what that was. But she could guess.

The first few nights, she'd been terrified when the creatures had emerged from the crumbling walls of the building where she was being held. She'd only ever seen mice and rats in the city or on the subway. They'd seemed dirty and menacing and she'd quickly hurried Olivia away from them.

But here she'd come to think of them as her friends. The rats were a bit bolder than the mice, coming within inches of her until she shooed them away, but they never came closer or tried to hurt her.

And anyway, what else was there to do but observe their movements as they scuttled around the room?

She pulled her two thin blankets more tightly around her shoulders — it was freezing — and drew her knees up to her

chest on the dirty mattress that had been her bed since the men had thrown her into the van. She'd long since given up on an escape plan. She had no idea where she was but it was quiet, the sounds of the city distant, the building clearly set apart from the rest of civilization.

And then there was the matter of the iron cuff around her wrist. A shackle really, one that was attached to the brick wall with an iron chain. A bucket in the corner was her toilet, the ultimate humiliation, although at least they left her alone.

The shackle allowed her to move in an eight-foot radius around the bed. In the beginning she'd tried to get the iron cuff off. When that had proved futile she'd worked on the chain, looking for a weak link.

But in the end it was all pointless. They gave her one meal a day, takeout usually, and only ever provided plastic utensils. She had no tools, no weapons.

No way out.

Sometimes — on the rare occasions when it didn't hurt too much to remember moments with her daughter — she replayed *The Princess Bride* and *The Neverending Story* in her mind from beginning to end, imagining Olivia was sitting next to her on their little sofa in their cozy apartment. Other times she sang Olivia's favorite songs one right after the other.

She had to believe Olivia was okay. Adam would never allow anyone to hurt their daughter.

She ignored any memory of his meanness, refused to recount all the times he'd done things Ruby had once thought he would never do. Olivia was his daughter. He'd never given any indication that he would hurt her the way he'd hurt Ruby.

Plus, there was no way Ruby's father and sister would allow it. Between the three of them, Olivia would be taken care of, regardless of what happened to Ruby.

And Ruby had only the vaguest of ideas of what might happen to her. She didn't even know who'd kidnapped her, although she assumed it was connected to Roman's business.

Adam was wrong about a lot of things, but he'd been right to tell Ruby about Roman's connection to the criminal underworld. It was the last thing Ruby wanted around Olivia. Ruby had lost her mother to New York's criminals. She wasn't going to risk her daughter's safety.

Not even for Roman Kalashnik.

Which didn't mean Ruby hadn't thought of him. There was anger for sure. She wished she'd never met him, imagined her life continuing as it had been — devoid of color except for her daughter, but safe.

But sometimes, when it was dark and she was alone with nothing but the scratching of her rodent friends, she imagined Roman with her, closing her eyes and sinking into the memory of his strong arms around her.

It was fucked-up, but until she'd learned the truth about who he was, she'd never felt so safe.

She looked up at the broken factory windows near the room's ceilings and studied the pale light just beginning to wash over the room's brick walls.

She gauged the time to be sometime between six and seven a.m. If she were home, she'd be getting Olivia ready for school, coaxing her sleepy daughter through the morning routine of breakfast, teeth, clothes, backpack. Ruby closed her

eyes, imagined the feel of her small daughter in her arms, the smell of the baby shampoo she used on Olivia's hair.

The pain was physical, hitting her in the chest like a sledgehammer, and Ruby stuffed her dirty fist into her mouth to stifle her sobs so the men in the hall wouldn't hear her cry.

She'd made that decision a long time ago. They'd taken her freedom, her dignity.

But fuck if she was going to let them hear her cry.

She heard the rattle of the lock on the other side of the steel doors and scooted back against the wall behind her mattress. So far they hadn't hurt her — they'd even brought in a doctor when she'd refused to eat or drink, back when she hadn't been thinking straight, when she'd forgotten that she needed to stay strong for Olivia — but fear still flooded her body every time they entered the large room that had become her private domain.

She tried to relax. It was morning, the time of day when they brought her food.

She watched the door as it swung open, expecting the gruff fleshy guard she'd dubbed Meat Face who usually brought her breakfast.

But the man who walked through the door wasn't Meat Face. It wasn't any of the guards.

It was a man in a suit, a tall man with broad shoulders that defied his obvious age.

He walked toward her and she immediately knew this was Roman's father. He had a similar gait, a similar way of striding slowly across the room like he was in no hurry, like he knew the world would wait for him.

When he got closer she saw it in his eyes too. They were shrewd like Roman's — measuring, considering — but where Roman's held the light of humor, this man's eyes were as cold and flat as a sheet of ice.

This was Igor Kalashnik, pakhan of the New York bratva. Roman's father.

His abuser.

She had a flash of Roman's tattoo, the ink splayed across his muscular chest: the mansion in Brighton Beach, Roman's sharp gaze staring out from behind a gladiator helmet. She'd understood the image even without the context of the bratva, an inked promise to make the man who'd hurt him pay.

She pushed the thought away. She couldn't afford to feel sympathy for Roman. Not when it was his fault she was here.

And it was. She didn't know how or why, didn't know the inner workings of Roman's conflict with his father, but she'd obviously become a pawn in their game.

“Good morning,” Igor said, his voice thickly accented.

She stared up at him, hoping he could see the hatred burning in her eyes.

He looked around the room. “I trust you've been made comfortable.”

“Not really,” she said.

She was chained to the wall, sleeping on a dirty mattress in the clothes she'd been wearing when they took her, huddled in the pile of blankets she'd found on the bed, wondering if she was going to live or die.

Shitting in a bucket, for fuck's sake.

“Pity,” he said, his voice devoid of emotion. He paced in front of her. “Perhaps we can do something to alleviate your discomfort.”

“You can let me go home to my daughter,” she said.

“I’m afraid that’s not on the table.” He tipped his head. “But better food, more blankets, access to a proper toilet...”

It was the toilet that tempted her.

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“Information.”

“I don’t have any information. One day I was going to work, taking care of my daughter. The next I was here.”

“Now now,” he scolded softly, “you’re leaving out the part about my son Roman.”

“I didn’t know he was part of your... organization until a few days before your goons kidnapped me. As soon as I found out, I ended it. I have no desire to be affiliated with any of you.”

“Be that as it may, here you are... *affiliated*.”

“If *affiliated* means being held prisoner,” she said.

He stopped pacing. “It’s in your best interest to think about what you might know. Think back to your conversations. Nothing is too small to mention. A meeting, plans for the future, a name.”

“I told you, I don’t know anything. Roman never talked business with me. If he had, I would have figured out his identity and it would’ve been over between us.”

“That’s a shame,” Igor said, his expression as placid as ever. “I was hoping to make you more comfortable while we

wait.”

“Wait for what?”

“For my son to come to his senses.” He started for the door, continuing without turning to look at her. “Let the guards know if you remember anything. My offer stands.”

ADAM

Adam clenched his fists, steeling himself against the sound of Olivia's whining.

This wasn't what he'd imagined it would be like to have full custody of his daughter.

"Eat your breakfast, Olivia. Now."

"I hate pancakes." She glared at her plate, sat back in her chair, and folded her small arms across the Little Mermaid on her T-shirt. It was her favorite shirt, and Adam had taken to washing it almost nightly to avoid the tantrums she threw when she couldn't wear it the next day.

Just another fucking thing on his plate.

"You said you wanted pancakes," Adam said through his teeth.

"Now I hate them," Olivia said, tears glistening at the corners of her eyes.

Once upon a time, the tears would have moved him. But that was before he'd struck the deal with Igor Kalashnik, before Ruby had gone "missing," before Olivia had come to live with him full-time, against the protests of Ruby's father and her bitch of a sister.

Adam stalked to the table and picked up the plate, then tossed the whole thing in the garbage, fork and all. “Fine. Go brush your teeth.”

The tantrums that had once been a rarity now occurred on a daily — sometimes hourly — basis. He knew if Ruby were here she would tell him Olivia was “acting out” or “regressing” or some other bullshit aimed at making Adam feel like shit for working with Igor Kalashnik.

Lately he’d just started to wonder if his adorable daughter was a fucking brat.

“I already brushed them,” Olivia said.

Adam sighed. “No, you didn’t, and you know how I feel about lying.”

“I did,” Olivia insisted.

Her pout didn’t bode well for the rest of the morning. She was digging in, prepared to fight him on anything and everything.

“Did,” she said.

He stalked back to the table, his blood boiling, and grabbed her arm. He pulled her from the chair and set her on her feet.

“Ow!” she bellowed. “You hurt my arm!”

“Stop being a baby,” he said. “Go brush your teeth.”

They were running late. Again. And Adam had a department meeting in just over an hour.

He couldn’t afford to draw the attention of the chief. He’d already been reprimanded once for calling out — it was harder than he’d expected to find child care when he had to work, and

he wasn't about to ask Ruby's family. Plus he had those "excessive force" violations on his record.

Not exactly the NYPD's golden boy.

Ruby stomped off to the bathroom, her pigtails bobbing (he couldn't do the braids she asked for but he was okay at the pigtails, although they were always a little off center), and a second later he heard the water running. She was probably pretending to brush her teeth — another tactic she used to defy him — but he couldn't muster the energy to give a shit.

Work had become a refuge. He just wanted to get Olivia to school and escape to the station.

He fished Olivia's plate out of the trash — the fork was too far gone, probably at the bottom of the bag under last night's uneaten dinner — and rinsed it in the sink.

"Brush," he ordered as he passed the bathroom, Olivia standing in front of the sink without her toothbrush as he'd expected.

She jumped and reached for her toothbrush and he felt the familiar thrill of power.

It used to be reserved for Ruby — making her jump, making her cower, making her cry.

Then after their divorce, work had been his only release. He had to be careful. Some of the guys on the force had turned soft, his partner Deon among them.

But Adam had been a cop long enough to know how to get a pass, and he forced himself not to break the carefully constructed rules of force but instead to ride the line of what was allowed.

Lately it hadn't been enough. Olivia was pushing him to the limit. She had too much of her mother in her. She *enjoyed* pushing his buttons, *liked* pissing him off.

He'd found his temperature rising during her temper tantrums, the sound of her whining like nails on a chalkboard. He had to fist his hands against the impulse to hit her, to shut her the fuck up.

At first the impulse had horrified him. Ruby had deserved his anger. Always questioning him, defying him. ignoring his rules.

Fucking cunt.

But Olivia was his sweet little girl. Tiny and innocent.

How could he even think about hurting her?

As time marched on, days piling into weeks, he'd stopped being so hard on himself. No wonder Olivia was such a spoiled brat, being raised mostly by Ruby, who'd babied her nonstop.

Spoil the rod, spare the child.

That was what Adam's own father had said, and he'd definitely lived up to his advice with Adam.

What Olivia needed was a good kick in the ass.

He didn't voice his innermost thought, the one he kept hidden even from himself — that if he started hitting her, he wouldn't stop.

He shoved the thought down. He was just stressed out. It was understandable. He was a single parent doing the job of two people.

He thought of Ruby, wondered if she was still alive or if Igor Kalashnik had disposed of her. Adam didn't know and he didn't want to know. It was one of the terms of their arrangement.

Adam wanted to make Ruby hurt and Igor had promised to deliver. Having Olivia to himself was the deepest of all cuts to Ruby. He didn't know if she was still alive to assume Adam had seized custody of their daughter, but he knew, and that mattered almost as much.

She'd been so fucking smug, holding things over his head like whether he'd be allowed to ride with them to Olivia's show at school, always acting like she knew what was best for *their* daughter.

Look who's in charge now bitch.

He put on his belt and looked at his reflection in the mirror. He liked the way people treated him when he was in uniform, the way their eyes either lit up with admiration or slid nervously away. He looked respectable, dependable.

Powerful.

He thought of something his father used to say when he was beating on Adam: *you don't have to like me, you don't even have to respect me, but you will fear me.*

"Fear me," Adam murmured to his reflection.

He shook himself out of the haze of memory and went to the closet to remove his weapon from the safe, then started down the hall.

He found Olivia sitting on the couch, playing with the little figures she carried everywhere and singing a song from one of the movies she watched over and over again.

“Where’s your backpack?” he asked.

She gave a small shrug of her shoulders and Adam felt the anger rise in him all over again.

“Well, go get it,” he said. “I don’t need another email from Ms. Moretti about tardiness.”

Olivia acted like she hadn’t heard him.

“Get the fucking backpack Olivia.” She startled at the sound of his raised voice. “Do it now or you’re going to feel my hand on your ass.”

She looked up at him, her defiant expression a replica of the one Ruby wore when she was being a bitch.

“You said bad words. And Mommy says it’s not nice to hit,” Olivia said.

“Yeah?” He stared his daughter down. “Well, *Mommy* isn’t here now is she?”

For a few seconds, she didn’t move. He wondered if she would call his bluff, almost wished she would call his bluff so he could deliver the ass-kicking she so obviously needed.

Then she stood slowly from the couch, walking around it the long way to avoid getting too close to him, and disappeared down the hall.

He ran a hand through his hair. It was 8 a.m. and he already needed a beer.

ROMAN

Roman looked around the van's interior at the men checking their weapons and tactical gear.

He'd already double- and triple-checked his own. He was eager to move.

He couldn't get Ruby back in his arms fast enough.

He tried not to think about the fact that it might not be that easy. Before her kidnapping, Adam had outed Roman as a member of the New York bratva. Ruby had been rightfully hurt and pissed off.

Roman should never have kept his work a secret, not once he realized he wanted Ruby in his life for more than one night. He hadn't had a chance to make things right with her before she'd been taken by his father's men, and it was one of many things that ate at him on an hourly basis.

He didn't expect her to be happy to see him. He didn't even expect her to be grateful for the rescue. After all, it was his fault she been kidnapped in the first place, his fault Olivia was now with Adam 24/7, the next injustice Roman planned to correct.

But it was okay. He didn't care if she still hated him as long as she was okay.

Liar. The word wound through his mind like smoke.

It was true. He was a liar. He did care whether Ruby was able to forgive him for his deception, but whether she did or not, the most important thing was that he get her away from his father's henchmen, who were old-school in more ways than one.

Igor had made more than one offer to Roman through their intermediaries but the offer was always the same: abandon Roman's bid for power and Ruby would be set free.

And every single time the offer was made, Roman was tempted to accept it.

The power he'd craved over the past decade had dwindled to the faintest of aches compared to the hole in his heart left by Ruby's kidnapping, but in the end it wasn't her captivity that stopped Roman from accepting his father's offer: it was the knowledge that this was who his father was.

No rules. No accountability. No honor.

He didn't even trust his father to honor an agreement to set Ruby free.

That Igor had worked with Adam Hale, a dirty cop and wife-beater, to separate Ruby from her child said everything about Igor Kalashnik. He was a cancer in the organization — and not just because he'd been raiding the bratva's coffers at its expense.

Igor's mismanagement of the organization meant Russian intervention would come sooner rather than later, an eventuality that would be no better on the honor front. Other innocents would be hurt and killed, and so Roman held fast to his initial plan.

Dethrone his father. Ruin him.

Destroy him.

But first, rescue Ruby.

“You good?” Max asked.

Roman met his gaze across the shadowed interior of the van. “All good.”

Concerned about Roman’s lack of objectivity, Max had expressed reservations about Roman’s presence on the rescue team, reservations Roman had attempted to assuage by assigning Max the job of finding Ruby once they were inside the grain terminal.

Roman would be on kill duty where he belonged.

It hadn’t been an easy compromise — Roman wanted to see for himself that Ruby was okay — but it had eased Max’s mind about Roman’s presence on the mission. Plus, Roman didn’t want Ruby to feel anything but relief when they got her out, and to say their relationship was complicated was an understatement.

He looked at the men inside the van who were waiting expectantly for his orders.

Max. Always.

Mat and Tima, both brigadiers who’d left the street behind when they’d gotten crews of their own but who’d insisted on coming.

And Pavel for good measure, because even though he was green, Roman saw potential in him.

If Roman was right about the number of his father’s men inside the grain terminal, it would be more than enough. Most of Igor’s crew was aging — like his business strategy — and Roman had chosen carefully when he’d selected men from his

father's ranks to join his side. He'd chosen only the most ambitious, only those with something to offer in the way of youth and strength or wisdom and strategy.

Vasily and Yuri were in their fifties, still capable but not as young as they once were. What they brought to the table was gravitas, the loyalty of their crews, and the wisdom that came from years of dealing with Igor Kalashnik.

Mat and Tima were Roman's age, street-smart enough to handle themselves in a gun fight and young enough not to be liabilities if the rescue proved challenging.

"Will we have enough men?" Pavel asked nervously.

"We'll have enough." Roman wasn't as sure as he sounded — he'd even considered calling in another favor from Lyon Antonov in Chicago — but the drone footage had given them as clear a picture as they could expect. "The footage shows four-man teams rotating on a ten-hour schedule, but be alert for surprises."

They'd surveilled the old building via drone for the past twenty-four hours, but the terminal was huge. There were no guarantees they hadn't missed something.

"And remember," Roman added, "the hostage is all that matters. Whatever else happens, we get her out alive."

He avoided Ruby's name. Calling her *the hostage* kept his blood cool enough that he stood a chance of thinking clearly.

He had every intention of killing his way through the grain terminal while Max looked for Ruby, but a clear head was still required if he didn't want to get shot in the process.

And he didn't, because he also had every intention of seizing his father's empire, if only to watch the bastard topple from his throne.

“Any questions?” Roman looked from Mat to Pavel to Tima.

The men shook their heads. This wasn't their first rodeo, except for Pavel, who looked impressively calm under the circumstances.

“Like we talked about then,” Roman said, reaching for the door. “Let's go.”

They exited onto a small street across the Gowanus, a canal that ran between Park Slope and Red Hook. The canal front was almost entirely industrial, a series of large steel buildings — many of them empty — standing sentry alongside the water, once a hub of commerce, now empty and silent except for a lone tugboat farther upstream.

“Let's get to the boat,” Roman said, his breath fogging the frigid January air as they headed for the water.

They were downstream about a half mile from the grain terminal, and Roman made his way to the motorboat that Pavel had left tied to one of the pilings earlier that afternoon.

The men inside the grain terminal would likely be focused on the ground-floor entrance on the street-facing side of the building, which was why Roman and his team were approaching from the water and then planning to scale the terminal from there.

They found the boat and piled in, the vessel groaning under their weight and the weight of their packs — loaded with climbing gear — and weapons.

“You sure this thing isn't going to sink?” Pavel asked, white-knuckling the side of the boat.

“You can't swim?” Roman asked. Pavel paled. “I'm just giving you shit. I'm sure.”

He untied the boat and reached for one set of oars while Max grabbed the other.

The boat was equipped with a small motor, but it would be safer to approach the grain terminal silently. It wasn't just about his father's men guarding Ruby: the Gowanus was rarely used and Roman wasn't eager to be stopped by the Coast Guard or Port Authority.

They rowed silently downriver, the sluice of the oars through the inky polluted water the only sound, the city feeling a million miles away.

Less than five minutes later the grain terminal rose like a hulking beast in the night. Roman and Max steered the boat toward the edge of the canal, hugging it as the building grew closer.

It was enormous, rising twelve stories into the air. Once upon a time, it might have been lit, a beacon of industrialization. Now it was as dark and silent as a long-dead monster, its asymmetrical roofline making it look like it had been constructed by a drunkard on a bender.

There were two connected structures, rectangular concrete boxes covered in seeping black mold. Two towers rose higher than the rest of the building, one made of brick, and Roman saw the blueprints from the planning office in his mind, pictured the individual grain silos — fifty-four of them — inside the building, all connected by a series of moveable spouts that had directed the grain loaded onto the roof from the canal.

Once an engineering marvel, the structure was slowly sinking into the Gowanus, and Roman and Max navigated the boat carefully around the disintegrating foundation.

“This place is fucking creepy,” Pavel said as Roman reached for a crumbling wood platform.

“Comms on,” Roman said, switching on his mic and earpiece. “Let’s move.”

He and Max held the boat steady as the others disembarked. There was no point looking for a place to tie the boat. If Roman had his way — and he would — his father’s men would be dead when Roman and his team left the grain terminal with Ruby. They would make their way to the second van, parked on this side of the canal by Pavel that afternoon.

Roman was the last one out of the boat. He gave it a push and it glided silently into the canal, snatched by the darkness in seconds.

They picked their way over the crumbling foundation, a hodgepodge of decaying lumber and broken concrete, finally finding their way onto a narrow unintentional pathway created by the eroding foundation.

There was no need for words. Roman had gone over the building’s plans countless times in the past twenty-four hours, had looked at pictures of the building online until every angle of the structure was seared into his memory.

They stopped at a disintegrating wood platform, once used by the laborers at the terminal and the boat captains bringing in grain.

Roman looked up, mapping the scarred and decaying facade of the building. The street side was less dilapidated, but Roman was willing to bet his father’s men were covering what had once been the terminal’s main entrance. Approaching from the river — and from the top of the building down — would give them a greater element of surprise, an advantage that

might make or break them when it came to getting Ruby out alive. It would also give them more time to get their bearings inside the building.

He didn't want his father's men to have time to move her — or worse — before Max got to her.

Roman decided on his first handhold and stepped toward the building. "See you up top."

He started climbing, using the building's eroding exterior to find handholds to the first gaping window frame. It was slow going — he had to test each divot before using it to make sure it would hold his weight — but little by little he rose into the night.

It would have been easier to send one of the men, but Roman was building his army. He couldn't afford to rest on nonexistent laurels. He needed the men not just to follow him but to respect him. That meant showing them that he was willing to get his hands dirty, risk his life alongside theirs, even do the worst of the work if it came to it.

He looked up and spotted the factory window frame that was his target. The glass had long since disappeared. It would make a good staging ground to drop the rope for the other men.

Almost there...

He reached up with one hand to test the strength of the old wood, felt it give.

Not there.

He tried again, toward the corner of the frame.

It held.

He hoisted himself up and through the window frame, hoping he hadn't made too much noise as he lifted himself into a large drafty room inside the silo.

He was in.

He took a few seconds to listen for his father's men, didn't hear anything, and bent to his pack to remove his climbing equipment. He anchored the rope and moved toward the window frame. The canal was a dark glimmer below, the men invisible.

"Dropping the rope," he whispered.

"Copy that," Max said in his ear.

Roman dropped the rope through the window, then moved toward the frame to begin the climb to the next floor of the building. He didn't know where Ruby was being held, how close she was to the top floors of the building. They would work from the top down, clearing every floor until they found her.

But he was close. He could feel her waiting for him.

I'm coming for you, Ruby. I'm coming.

RUBY

She shivered and drew her blankets more tightly around her shoulders, tucking her chin into them and letting her breath warm her face. Was it her imagination or was it colder than it had been the night before? Was that even possible? Sometimes she thought she couldn't get any colder without dying of hypothermia.

Nights were the worst. She had no idea where she was being held or what the outside of the building looked like, but the temperature rose midway through each day, the heat lingering until an hour or so after the sun went down. Then she'd watch darkness descend over her room, her body filled with dread as she braced for the coming cold.

Somewhere beyond the room, the laughter of the men grew louder.

Another reason to fear the night.

They were louder, more boisterous at night. Once, she'd been woken out of a dead sleep by one of the men entering her room. She could hear the others, laughing and cursing, could see the faintest shaft of light behind the big man standing in the doorway.

She'd blinked in confusion, her body flooding with adrenaline in the face of this new development.

No one ever visited her room in the middle of the night.

She'd recognized the man as the one she called Snake Eyes, a tall man with a cold dead gaze.

She'd scooted back against the wall, her breath coming fast as he'd stepped into the room, walking slowly toward her bed, his eyes glittering in the dark.

He was at the end of her mattress, a long quiet moment passing between them when she knew he was going to lunge for her on the bed, when every instinct in her body told her to run before her brain reminded her about the chain shackling her to the metal bolt in the wall.

And then, Meat Face had appeared in the doorway behind him and barked something in Russian.

Snake Eyes didn't take his eyes off Ruby when he replied in accented English. "Just looking for a little fun."

"You heard the boss," Meat Face said. "No fun. Not yet."

Snake Eyes had cursed, his gaze lingering on Ruby before he turned reluctantly away.

The other man waited for him to step from the room, then looked back in at Ruby. "Are you all right?"

"No," she said, her voice a croak.

He sighed. Frustration? Sympathy?

She didn't know.

"I'm sorry." He almost sounded like he meant it. "It's cold. Tomorrow, I'll bring you another blanket."

The door had closed behind him.

She hadn't slept well since. She had the sense her time was running out, an instinctual clock ticking closer to the sound of an alarm.

They couldn't keep her here forever and she wasn't stupid enough to think they planned to let her go, not after she'd seen their faces.

All of which meant they would kill her eventually.

But maybe not just that.

She forced herself to lay down. She needed to sleep, to be alert for whatever was to come.

She tried to think of Olivia but when she closed her eyes all she saw was Meat Face, his words ringing through her mind like a warning.

You heard the boss... No fun. Not yet.

ROMAN

They started across the roof carefully. Dotted with manhole-sized cutouts that had once been used to drop grain into the system of chutes that fed the mini-silos, it was a deadly obstacle course. One wrong move and they'd topple into the abyss below, the fall all but guaranteeing their deaths.

They moved by the light of their tactical headlamps, stepping carefully over and around the yawning holes.

"This place is a fucking death trap," Tima muttered.

He wasn't wrong, and Roman knew the roof wasn't the end of it. He'd seen enough on his way up — painstakingly climbing to set the anchors on each new level — to know the terminal's interior was a mess, a toppled Jenga-like array of concrete pillars, fallen metal chutes, and the gaping manholes left by their absence.

They would have to move slowly, methodically, and Roman had to breathe through his impatience. Ruby was here — somewhere — but the place was so cavernous, so dilapidated, it could take them hours to pick their way through the mess.

They worked their way down from the roof with their weapons drawn. As Roman had predicted, it was slow going, a delicate dance of movement around the old equipment and debris that filled the building.

It was a chaotic jumble of graffitied walls, metal, and concrete. The chutes that had been used to move grain from the roof to the docks on the canal sprawled every which way inside the building, creating an endless series of obstacles that forced them to go over and around.

It slowed their pace and Roman had to fight against the desire to race through the place like a raging bull, tearing it apart in his quest to find Ruby.

The place was quiet as a tomb and Roman tried not to think about what that might mean for Ruby. Was she even still alive? Had his father been acting in good faith when he'd offered Ruby's release in exchange for Roman's surrender?

He pushed the thought under a mountain reason. The guards were working in shifts, had probably been doing so for weeks. That meant only one thing: a hostage.

And there was only one hostage worth so much of his father's time and resources.

Roman kept moving, leading his small team off the roof and through the twelfth floor.

Then the eleventh.

Tenth...

Ninth...

It seemed to take forever, although they moved as efficiently as a military unit, using hand signals and occasionally whispered commands into their comms.

The staircases were the worst, both dangerous and noisy. Roman tested each tread, half expecting the rusty structures to crumble under his feet. Then came the careful stepping down, their boots sounding too loud on the metal treads no matter how carefully they moved.

They were starting down the stairs to the fifth floor — or was it the fourth? — when Roman heard voices.

He held up his arm, his hand in a fist to stop the rest of the group. He listened, training his ears to the silence left in the absence of the soft footfalls of his team.

He hadn't imagined it. Somewhere below, the deep voices of men echoed through the dilapidated building.

“We got company,” Roman murmured.

Max's voice sounded in his ear. “Fuck that. They've got company.”

Roman resisted the urge to remind the men that Ruby was the priority. He'd said it countless times.

They knew.

But it was a compulsion. He worried most about Max, whose instinct was always to protect Roman. This time there was someone more important, and Roman was counting on Max to remember that.

He clicked off the safety on his weapon and started down the stairs, taking his time, trying not to make any noise even though every bone in his body urged him to run for Ruby.

If his father's men were on this floor then so was Ruby. They would be positioned near where she was being held.

Find the men, find Ruby.

He stepped off the staircase and scanned the floor for debris. It was surprisingly clear, probably because his father's men had set up camp here while they'd been guarding Ruby.

He waited for the rest of the men to step off the staircase, then halted their progress again, listening for the sound of the guards, trying to place their location.

Their voices and laughter were louder here, rap music pumping under the conversation.

Roman followed the noise to the left, stepping slowly down a long hall.

This part of the terminal was different than the rest. Rather than a cavernous open space littered with old equipment, there were rooms on either side of the hall. Some of the doors hung haphazardly on rusted hinges. Others had lost their doors long ago. Roman guessed the rooms had once acted as offices for administrative personnel at the grain terminal.

They came to the end of the hall and Roman flattened his back against the wall, waiting for the others to do the same. The voices and music were louder, a faint glow of light leaking into the hall.

The men were right around the corner. Roman and his team would need to be ready when they stepped around it.

He listened again, tracking the conversation, counting the number of people they would be facing.

"... Konstantin will shoot your balls off," one of the men said.

"Konstantin won't do shit," another voice said. "He's not the boss."

“The boss is the one who said not to touch her yet,” the first man said.

“Who’s going to know?” the second man asked. “Bitch is essentially already dead.”

Fury flooded Roman’s body, a curtain of scarlet rage dropping over his mind, his vision.

Everything.

They were talking about Ruby. About touching her. About hurting her.

Roman shook his head, trying to clear the fog of violence from his mind long enough to issue instructions to the team.

He held up two fingers, indicating there were two men. They were playing cards, obvious from the slap of plastic, the leisurely pace of the conversation. That meant there were two more men somewhere in the building, probably on the first floor by the door near the street.

Roman held up three fingers, then two.

Then one.

He stepped from the shadows and rounded the corner into a smaller hallway. He registered the scene in a matter of milliseconds: a door on the right, closed and locked with a padlock; a cheap card table set up in front of it; two men — one beefy with a meaty face, the other thin — sitting in folding chairs, playing cards laid out in front of them; empty beer bottles littering the table.

He was only a few feet away when one of the men — the big one facing him — saw him.

The man’s eyes widened, his mouth opening as he rose to his feet.

The slender man had his back to Roman, obviously unaware of Roman's approach, which suited Roman just fine.

"What the fuck are you...?" the slender man asked the other man, who was now on his feet and fumbling for his weapon as he watched Max and the other men file silently into the hall behind Roman.

Roman raised his weapon and fired into the back of the skinny man's head. He slumped forward onto the card table and Roman turned his weapon on the other man, now raising a gun in Roman's direction.

Roman fired again, hitting the man in the chest three times before he shot him in the head.

He fell to the floor with a thud.

Roman looked at the padlocked door, forced himself to walk past it.

"Get her out," he said as he headed for the next flight of stairs. "Now."

He was starting down the stairs when he heard the fire of a gun behind him followed by the metallic clink of the padlock hitting the floor.

He wouldn't think about what Max would find in the room where Ruby was being held.

He couldn't.

He was halfway down the stairs when he heard the clatter of boots behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Tima on his heels.

"I'll cover you," Tima said.

It was fine with Roman. Max would get Ruby with Pavel's help.

They moved fast this time, unconcerned about the noise they made as they clattered down the stairs. The rest of Igor's men would already know they were here.

Now it was just a matter of who pulled the trigger first.

They were making their way across the third floor to the next staircase when they heard heavy footfalls ascending from below.

Roman picked up the pace, wanting to hit the top of the staircase first.

High ground was always an advantage.

He got there just in time to see two men starting up the staircase with their weapons drawn.

Too late.

Roman fired into the first man's skull and was preparing to hit the man behind him when he fell too.

It took Roman a moment to register that the man had been shot not by Roman but by Tima behind him.

"Thanks," he said.

Tima shrugged. "No problem."

And then, in Roman's ear, Max's voice.

"We got her."

Roman held his breath.

"She's alive."

RUBY

She was still in shock when she was hustled into a black SUV idling at the curb outside the building where she'd been held. It had all happened so fast: the scrape of chairs against concrete outside her room, the single shot fired before several rounds of muffled gunfire that sounded like it was coming from a silenced weapon, the voices on the other side of the door.

Then a voice she didn't recognize telling her to stand back.

A few seconds later there was another muffled shot, closer this time, right at the door.

Then two men were storming into the room.

She'd peered up at them through the dark, expecting to see Roman.

But it hadn't been him. It had been Max.

He'd said something in Russian when he'd laid eyes on her, a curse from the sound of it, and had ordered the other man to find the key to her shackle. Then he'd fumbled to insert the key into the lock around her wrist. It wasn't until he'd pulled off his jacket, draped it over her shoulders, and guided her out of the room that she'd comprehended how they'd freed her.

They'd stepped over the two dead bodies — Meat Face and Snake Eyes — outside her room, playing cards strewn around them, and Max and the other man — young, thin, and nervous — had guided her down several flights of rusted metal stairs in a building that was bigger than she'd imagined while she'd been locked away in her room.

She'd started to think the stairs were endless, that she was in some kind of nightmarish maze, when two shots sounded just below them.

“Copy. We're almost down,” Max had said.

She'd thought he was speaking to her, but when she looked up at him she saw his earpiece and realized he was talking to someone else.

Then they'd descended another staircase and Max had moved her forward, through the shadows of the buildings, hulking metal and concrete strewn about like the Legos Olivia loved to play with.

“Olivia...”

She was free. She could see her daughter.

“We're going to get you to her,” Max said.

A sob caught in Ruby's throat. She was alive. She was going to see her daughter.

They'd emerged onto a desolate street, old factory buildings all around, and she'd been hit by the smell of the canal. She looked back as Max hurried her toward one of two SUVs idling by the curb.

She knew this building. It was the old grain terminal in Red Hook.

She barely had time to register the horror of it — the grain terminal had been abandoned for decades, a forgotten part of the city’s industrial history — before she’d been led past the first SUV, its windows so dark she couldn’t make out who was inside, to the second one.

Now they were driving through the darkened city, gliding past streetlamps and stoplights as smoothly as if they were on a ship flying through space.

“Are you cold?” Max asked.

She shook her head, but she hadn’t realized she was shaking. That her teeth were chattering.

“Turn up the heat,” he told the younger guy at the wheel.

“You’re in shock, Max said. “We’re getting you to a doctor.”

“I don’t want a doctor,” she said through her chattering teeth. It felt weird to use her voice. She’d hardly spoken in the time she’d been held prisoner, which she guessed was in the neighborhood of two weeks. “I want my daughter.”

“You don’t want to see Olivia this way, do you?” Max asked gently.

At first she didn’t know what he meant.

She wanted to see Olivia. Full stop.

Then she looked down and realized she was dirty and half-naked under the jacket, her legs strangely thin.

And that was just the part of herself she could see.

She hadn’t showered in weeks, hadn’t even been able to brush her teeth. She’d been using a bucket as a toilet (shame heated her face even now).

No, she didn't want Olivia to see her this way.

“We'll have you looked at by a doctor,” Max said. “You can shower and clean up, eat something. Then... we can talk about Olivia.”

It took her a second to place his hesitation, not a hesitation to discuss Olivia but to say the name that had been unspoken, hovering like a specter over her rescue.

Roman.

He was behind the rescue. Obviously. Maybe even in the SUV they were following through the city.

Why hadn't he shown himself? Why had he sent Max to free her from the room?

She didn't have time to think about it further, and anyway, her mind was fuzzy, on sensory overload as they pulled to a stop outside a sleekly renovated industrial building in a gentrified part of Brooklyn.

“Here we are,” Max said.

He got out of the car and moved around to her side of the SUV to help her out, then hurried her toward the building's glass doors.

She looked over her shoulder at the other SUV, parked at the curb, and wondered if Roman was inside, if she would see him now.

But if he was there, he wasn't ready to see her.

Max led her through the building's glass doors and a nondescript lobby. It was late — the clock on the SUV's dash had read 3:02 a.m. when she'd looked at it — but she had the feeling this lobby was always empty. That it wasn't the type of

place where residents greeted each other warmly and shared anecdotes about package delivery.

“What is this place?” she asked as they stepped into one of four elevators.

“A place where you’ll be safe,” he said, punching a code into the keypad. “Where you can rest and regroup.”

She started to mention Olivia, then closed her mouth. Max was right: Olivia would be traumatized for life if she saw Ruby in her current condition.

She would take advantage of the opportunity to clean up and get her head on straight before seeing Olivia. It was the right thing to do for her daughter even if every bone in Ruby’s body wanted to go to her now.

The elevator glided smoothly upward, mercilessly free of music, and a few seconds later the doors opened onto a quiet dimly lit vestibule.

It wasn’t until Max stepped from the elevator and looked back at her that she realized she hadn’t moved. She was suddenly frozen, terrified to take another step.

What was this place really? And why was she trusting Max and Roman when her relationship with Roman was what had gotten her into this mess?

“It’s okay,” Max said, his eyes kind. “I promise you’re safe here.”

“Where’s Roman?” she blurted.

She had the sudden urge to see him, to be shielded by his massive scarred body. It didn’t make sense, not after what had happened because of him.

“He’ll speak to you soon,” Max said. “He thought you might like some time.”

The elevator must have had some kind of sensor. The doors were still open, Ruby inside while Max coaxed her out like she was a feral animal.

Ruby’s ears pricked to the sound of a distant rhythmic clicking. It grew closer and then an older woman came into view. She was tall and imposing, her gray hair pulled back into a severe bun.

Aside from her gray slacks and black blouse, she looked like a character from a Victorian novel, a mean nanny or a nun at an orphanage.

Ruby shrank back as the woman stepped briskly into the elevator. Then she smiled and her face transformed from stern authority figure to kindly grandmother.

“It’s all right now,” she said in accented English (Russian, obviously), taking Ruby’s hand. “I’m Vera. I’m going to show you to a room where you can change and bathe.”

Ruby allowed the woman to lead her out of the elevator, past Max and down a long hallway lit softly from recesses built into the ceiling.

Ahead, Ruby saw a large open space, but Vera guided her to the right and they started down another hall lined with closed doors. They passed several of them before coming to one at the end, and Vera bent to open it, then stood back so Ruby could enter.

She hesitated — she’d just left a room that had been her prison for the last however many weeks, albeit a room that was nothing like this place — but it wasn’t like she could remain in the hall forever.

She walked into the room and saw that it was a large high-ceilinged bedroom. The bed was huge and piled high with comforters and blankets and pillows that suddenly made Ruby's eyelids heavy. She'd had nothing to do but sleep during her captivity, but it had been the sleep of the doomed, filled with nightmares and dreams where Olivia was perpetually out of reach.

Vera crossed the floor — warm wood layered with patterned carpets — and gestured to the attached bathroom. The light was on, a warm glow hinting at the luxurious marble and gold fixtures within.

“I've laid out some towels and toiletries,” Vera said. “Would you like me to stay?”

Ruby shook her head. “I'll be fine.”

Vera nodded. “You'll find clean clothes in the bureau. If you need anything else, you can use the intercom.”

She tapped a digital panel next to the bathroom door.

“Thank you,” Ruby said.

She had a million questions, but somehow she knew Vera wouldn't be the one to answer them.

For that, Ruby would need to talk to Roman.

“Is there anything else I can get you?” Vera asked, her voice kind.

“No, thank you.”

“I'll leave you to it then.”

She was almost out the door when the question that had been plaguing Ruby's mind again flew from her mouth. “Where's Roman?”

Vera met her gaze and Ruby wondered at the strength she saw there. Vera had stories to tell. Ruby was sure of it. “He’ll be waiting for you when you’re ready.”

She closed the door behind her, leaving Ruby wrapped in the muffled silence of the elegant bedroom.

She didn’t know how long it took her to move. She’d been a prisoner for so long it felt strange to think she could move whenever she wanted, but finally, she stood and headed for the bathroom.

She wanted to wash away the dirt and grime of her captivity.

Then she would see her daughter.

ROMAN

He paced the large open-plan living and kitchen area of the loft, feeling like he wanted to jump out of his skin. After three weeks — of worry, of fear — Ruby was finally safe.

Here, just a few rooms away.

“And she didn’t seem hurt?” he asked Max, who was leaning against the giant island that acted as a divider between the living and kitchen areas.

“Not outwardly,” Max said. “But... you know.”

Roman did know, although he’d been trying not to think about it. His father’s men could have done anything to Ruby during the three weeks they’d kept her prisoner.

Anything.

He took a drink of the tequila in his glass and tried to calm the drumbeat of rage that still beat out a rhythm in his body.

Killing his father’s men — the two that had been guarding Ruby’s door and the two he’d found at the front entrance — hadn’t quelled it.

Not even close.

The city would run red with the blood of his father and his men before Roman's fury was satiated.

But behind the fury was something else, an emotion far less familiar to him than anger.

Worry. He was worried sick about Ruby. About what she'd endured, about how she'd been treated, about how she'd feel when she discovered that Adam — not her father or her sister Brooke — had taken custody of Olivia in her absence.

"It'll be dawn soon," Max said.

Roman knew what he was getting at: the shift change at the grain terminal.

If his father didn't know his men were dead and Ruby had been rescued by now, he soon would.

"I know," Roman said.

They were entering uncharted territory. For the past three weeks his father had used Ruby as leverage, alternating between retribution and pacification. Several men who hadn't turned to Roman's side had been killed on suspicion alone, Roman's own men watching their backs even as they tried to protect him.

And then, the pledge of Ruby's return, of a reconciliation, a new model in which Roman would be given more authority in the *bratva*, his father's soft-spoken promises whispering to the child in Roman who still wanted to please the old man who would never be pleased.

The carrot and the stick. His father wielded them with equal mastery.

Except Roman wasn't a boy anymore. He knew his father's moves, knew there was no freedom — for Roman or

the men — and no survival of the bratva under Igor’s rule.

Now he’d lost his bargaining chip. The city would fall into full-fledged war, a war no one but the criminal underworld would see but a war that would nonetheless have deadly implications.

“What should I tell the men?” Max asked.

Roman knew his friend was looking for a strategy, a way forward now that the board had changed, now that Roman’s queen had been restored to the chessboard, but he couldn’t think about that now.

Not until he’d spoken to her, explained why she would have to stay away from Olivia and the rest of her family.

Why she would have to stay with him.

“Tell them to watch their asses,” Roman said. “And assume an attack is around every corner.”

RUBY

She sudsed her hair and body twice with the expensive bath products in the shower and stayed under the hot water until her skin started to wrinkle.

She wasn't sure anything had ever felt better in her life.

Her body was unfamiliar under her hands, and she felt the dissonance of her smaller breasts and waist, her flatter ass, as she washed. She was still soft — she would always be that — but weeks of eating one meal a day had taken their toll.

The captivity diet.

She suppressed maniacal laughter at the thought.

She was probably not right in the head.

She turned off the water and stepped from the shower, then wrapped herself in one of the impossibly thick white bath towels hanging on a gold rack next to the shower.

It was warm, and she realized the rack was a towel warmer, its indicator light going dark when she grabbed the second towel for her hair.

She used a hand towel to wipe the steam from the mirror and stared at her reflection.

It was strange to see herself after weeks with no mirror. Her face looked thinner, as unfamiliar as her body, and her eyes were shadowed with dark circles, devoid of life.

She looked like an empty husk. Felt like one too.

But at least she was clean.

She slathered her body with lotion and thought of her mouse and rat friends in the old building. She hoped they would be okay, that they would find enough to eat and maybe some kind company from time to time. They were living things, just trying to make their way like everyone else in the world.

She thought about telling Olivia about them — her daughter would be enchanted by the thought of her mother making friends with animals, even mice and rats — then realized she would never be able to tell Olivia what had happened to her.

She would never be able to tell anyone, except maybe Brooke.

Not if she didn't want to hurt them, and she would do anything, keep anything to herself, to avoid that.

She would have to concoct a story, one that would explain her absence to her daughter in a nontraumatic way, a way that wouldn't make her feel abandoned.

She walked into the bedroom with the towel still wrapped around her body and opened the top drawer of the bureau. Vera had told her there were clothes, but Ruby was still surprised to see rows of expensive bras and underwear from La Perla, all in her size. There were pretty lacy ones in an array of colors but there were simple white cotton bikinis too — albeit with delicate lace detail — and Ruby remembered

going into one of the stores with Brooke, both of them gasping at the \$120 price tag on the cotton briefs.

She plucked a cotton bikini from the drawer, wanting to be comfortable, and then opened the other drawers, remembering what Vera had said about it holding clothing.

She got as far as the first drawer when she stopped in her tracks, staring at its contents. She didn't know what she'd expected. A pair of jeans and a T-shirt maybe?

Not piles of downy tracksuits and lounge pants, complete with tags from high-end stores she could never afford.

She shut the drawer and opened the others: jeans and T-shirts, thick socks, pajamas and cashmere sweaters.

All in her size.

Roman had done this. He'd done all of this for her.

She drew in a breath and steeled her heart. She was in this mess because of him. He didn't get a medal for getting her out of it and buying her new clothes.

She chose a black long-sleeve T-shirt — she wasn't sure she'd ever actually be warm again — and one of the silky tracksuits in deep green. She didn't bother with a bra. She wanted to be comfortable, and it wasn't like she needed to impress Roman.

They were done.

She thought of a line from an old *Sex and the City* episode — *we're so done we need a new word for done* — and fought another burst of deranged laughter.

She pulled on a pair of thick wool socks and sighed with pleasure. She couldn't believe it. She was clean. She was warm.

She was free.

It was crazy how everything had changed in a just a few hours.

She considered climbing into the big bed, but her stomach was gnawing with hunger, so she crossed the room and reached for the door. She was definitely losing it, because she half expected it to be locked, half expected to have traded one prison for a (much) nicer one.

But the knob turned in her hand and a second later she was stepping out into the quiet hall.

She listened for a few seconds, trying to gauge how many people were in the apartment, but it was as silent as a mausoleum.

The doors were still closed on either side of the hallway, giving her no additional clues about where they'd brought her. It was clearly some kind of in-between place, somewhere she could regroup before seeing her family again.

A safe house? Did the Mafia use safe houses or was that only law enforcement?

She gave up trying to figure it out. It didn't matter. She was grateful for the shower and clothes — and she would definitely accept food if it was available — but all that mattered was getting back to Olivia.

She heard the sound of running water and headed for the big main room at the end of the hall. Maybe Vera would be in the kitchen.

But it wasn't Vera.

It was Roman.

The sight of him stopped her cold. Not just her forward motion, but her breath, the blood in her veins.

Everything.

Then he noticed her standing there. His eyes met hers and she started breathing again, if that was what you could call the shallow in and out of her breath.

She hadn't seen him since their accidental weekend together, a weekend she'd replayed over and over again during her imprisonment. Sometimes she'd done it just to pass the time. Sometimes she'd done it to stoke her anger at him, to stop herself from longing for him.

But other times... well, other times she'd done it just to relive it. Because it had been the kind of simple magic she loved best — the Saturday pancakes and the park with Olivia, the hot cocoa and a movie and someone to help her tuck Olivia into bed — and she'd enjoyed sharing the time with Roman more than she dared admit.

But now he was here, staring at her from across the sterile, immaculately designed loft, and he was even more beautiful than she'd remembered. She knew his eyes looked blue in the sunlight, gray in the shadows, but right now they looked black. She thought she'd embellished his gaze in her memory, the way it had felt like he could see right through her, but she felt naked under his gaze all over again.

He was the biggest man she'd ever known, imposing even in the high-ceilinged loft space, his massive shoulders on full display in one of his perfectly tailored button-down shirts.

“Hello,” he said, his voice gruff. “Feel better?”

She walked cautiously toward him, as if toward a bull who could wreak havoc with a single toss of its head, because that

was what Roman had done to her life.

His features were strong and angular, the bump on his nose a testament to the many times it had been broken. She knew from their conversations that he was a fighter, knew from the scars under his shirt and the ink on his body — a gladiator standing in front of a mansion — that the enemy he fought was his father.

She had a flash of the old man who'd come to visit her during her captivity and pushed it away.

“I feel human at least,” she said.

“That’s a start,” he said. “You must be hungry.”

“I want to see Olivia.”

“You will,” he said.

She stuffed her hands into the pockets of the tracksuit’s jacket. “I want to see Olivia now.”

He looked up from whatever he was cooking. She smelled butter and melting cheese. “We’ll talk about Olivia while you eat, Ruby.”

A shiver ran down her spine at the sound of her name in his mouth, the command in his voice. She felt chastened, like a child, but also safe like a child.

Roman was in control, but it wasn’t the control that had been exerted over her during her confinement in the grain terminal. It was protective and nurturing. It might even have been parental if not for the way he looked at her, like he was a wolf and she was a mouse who’d just walked into his den.

“Have a seat,” he said, looking from her to the dining room table.

It was long and sleek, a table for wine and dinner parties. Four bottles of water were lined up in front of an empty place setting, a powerful incentive to get her there. She was crazy thirsty.

She crossed the room, feeling his eyes on her the whole time, and slid into the chair.

It was more comfortable than it looked, and she reached for one of the bottles of water, removed the cap, and downed it in one swallow before reaching for the other one.

“Easy,” Roman said from the kitchen. “Don’t make yourself sick.”

She ignored him, downing the other water bottle almost as fast as she’d finished the first, then sat back, feeling slightly nauseous.

She waited for it to pass, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of being right.

She looked around, took in the big room, the walls morphing like magic from white in the living room to slate in the dining room, the furniture modern and obviously expensive. There was actual art on the walls — photographs and paintings — rather than the amateur art Ruby had picked up on the city’s curbs over the years.

There wasn’t a single book or magazine on display. No photographs or candles, no clues about the man cooking her food, the man responsible for both her confinement over the past three weeks and her rescue.

“You live here?” she asked.

“More or less,” he said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He hesitated, like he wasn't sure how to answer. "When I'm not working."

It was a strange thing to say. Everyone lived in their homes when they weren't working.

He came around the kitchen island carrying a tray and set it on the table, then unloaded its contents onto the place setting in front of Ruby.

There was a small plate with grilled cheese, a bowl of what looked like tomato soup, another dish filled with cut mango, strawberry, banana, and blueberries.

"I thought you should start slow," he said. "It looks like you haven't been fed properly. I don't want you to get sick."

Her stomach tightened at the smell of the food, her mouth watering as Roman took the tray back to the kitchen.

"You said we'd talk about Olivia," Ruby said.

"We will." He turned off the lights in the kitchen and returned to the table.

She was relieved when he took the seat at the other end of the long table, directly across from her. Her mind was spinning, her heart a chaotic clutter — relief at being rescued, desperation to see her daughter, anger and fear and longing for the man at the center of the hurricane that had become her life.

It was better to keep her distance.

"Where is she?" Ruby asked.

"You eat and I'll talk," Roman said. "When I'm done, you can ask questions. Deal?"

She hesitated before nodding. She really was famished.

She picked up the grilled cheese and bit into it, closing her eyes as the crispy buttery bread and melted cheese hit her tongue. “Oh my god...”

There was nothing fancy about it, but after the cold takeout she’d been fed at the grain terminal, it was the best thing she’d ever tasted.

When she opened her eyes he was staring at her from across the table, his eyes obsidian in the moody lighting of the room.

Desire moved through her body, unfamiliar and strange after all the weeks in the grain terminal, when her only thought had been of survival.

And she wasn’t alone. She saw her desire reflected in the black mirror of his eyes.

He cleared his throat as she took another bite.

“Olivia is with Adam,” Roman said. “She has been since you went missing.”

Olivia stopped chewing, her heart sinking.

“He’s been on day shifts mostly. He takes Olivia to school and picks her up, then takes her back to his apartment.”

“Is she okay?” Ruby asked.

“She looks healthy,” Roman said.

There was something he wasn’t saying.

She put down the grilled cheese and met his gaze. “This isn’t going to work if you’re not honest with me. I deserve that.”

He nodded and she saw the shame in his eyes.

“She does look healthy,” he said. “She looked taken care of, but she’s been... more temperamental lately.”

She shook her head. “How do you know?”

“I’ve had someone tailing your ex-husband since you went missing.”

She couldn’t hide her surprise. “Why?”

“To keep an eye on Olivia.” He hesitated, and she had the feeling that her life was hanging in the balance. That the next words out of his mouth would be a seismic shift in everything she trusted. “And because I suspected Adam worked with my father to have you kidnapped.”

ROMAN

She put down the grilled cheese and gripped the table like a lifeline. He watched helplessly, wanting to take away the pain she was feeling — the pain still to come — but knowing he couldn't.

“Breathe,” he said.

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, her chest rising and falling more slowly over several breaths.

She was heartbreakingly beautiful despite the fact that her face was gaunter than it had been before she'd been kidnapped by his father, deep shadows under her blue-green eyes.

When he'd first met her, she'd seemed as strong as steel. Then, after he'd gotten to know her, he'd seen the vulnerability that was hiding under layers of strength and trauma. Now she was more vulnerable than ever, and he wondered if it had been a mistake to put the doctor on standby until after she'd eaten and rested. He'd wanted to give her time, to tell her about Olivia and Adam, but maybe he should have insisted on the doctor first.

“Have some water,” he said.

She took a drink from the third bottle of water, following his command like a child, then drew in a deep breath.

She exhaled slowly. “Keep going.”

“My father contacted me shortly after you went missing to negotiate your release,” Roman said. “But no one else seemed to know where you were or what had happened to you. Your father and Brooke held press conferences, pled for your return, but Adam was never there and his custody of Olivia seemed too easy... planned.”

“What makes you say that?” she asked.

It pained him that she didn’t want to believe Adam Hale was a psychopath after all he’d done to hurt her, but it hurt him more that he had to prove it to her.

“He picked Olivia up from school the day you went missing,” Roman said. “Didn’t miss a beat.”

She bit her lip, her brow furrowed in concentration. “It was a... Monday when I was taken?”

He nodded.

She swallowed hard enough that he saw her slender throat ripple, and he gave her a minute to take in the information.

“Could the school have called him when I didn’t show up to get her?”

“He didn’t wait for the end of the school day. He signed her out at recess,” Roman said.

He could see her doing the math in her head — Olivia picked up by Adam at recess, well before Ruby’s shift had ended at Roasted. Well before she’d been kidnapped, proving Adam knew in advance that Ruby wouldn’t be at pickup later that day.

“Should I bother asking how you know all this?”

He held her gaze. "I've made it my business to know all kinds of things about you, Ruby."

She broke eye contact, her cheeks flushing as she reached for her spoon.

He let the silence settle between them while she tasted the soup, then proceeded to take several more bites, probably processing everything he'd told her so far.

"Did you tell my family about your father?" she asked after a couple of minutes.

"That would have been dangerous for them," Roman said.

"So they have no idea what happened to me?"

"No, but you can call them after you eat," he said.

"Are you saying I'd need your permission?"

"Of course not."

"You said your father had contacted you to negotiate my return," she said, taking a bite of the fruit. Now that she'd started eating, she was digging into the food hungrily.

"Yes."

"You must be a shitty negotiator."

"I'm not a negotiator at all," he said.

She glared at him. "So you didn't even try to get me out."

"Negotiating with my father is like negotiating with a terrorist," Roman said. "He doesn't negotiate in good faith."

She sat back in her chair, anger darkening her eyes. "You were going to let me rot."

"No."

"What then?" she asked.

He turned his palms to the ceiling. “You’re here, aren’t you?”

“So you were banking on being able to get me out yourself,” she said.

“It wasn’t a gamble.” He heard the darkness in his own voice, wondered if she heard it too. “There was never going to be a world in which I didn’t get you out.”

She picked at the bowl of fruit, plucking a piece of mango and putting it in her mouth, then a piece of banana. He was glad to see her eating the fruit. She was clearly malnourished. It would take a while to get her back to full health. He would talk to the doctor about vitamins.

“I want to go home,” she said. “I’ll call my dad and Brooke from there.”

Roman drew in a breath, steeling himself for the next thing he had to say.

This was going to be the hard part.

“You can’t go home,” he said. “And you can’t go to your dad’s or Brooke’s place either.”

She blinked like she was trying to decipher a foreign language. “What are you talking about?”

He’d known he would have to spell it out — not because Ruby was unintelligent but because she wasn’t part of his world — but he still had to brace himself against the conversation to come.

“Your apartment is off-limits for obvious reasons. It’s the first place my father will look if he wants to capture you again. Your dad’s and Brooke’s apartments are next in line.”

Her eyes widened and she pushed back from the table to stand. “All the more reason I have to go.”

“Sit down, Ruby.”

“I don’t want to sit down.” She was more agitated now, probably beginning to realize that there would no quick return to her old life.

“I need to walk you through the situation,” he said. “For your safety. For the safety of your family.”

She hesitated, then lowered herself grudgingly to the chair.

“I’ve had men stationed outside your dad’s apartment. Brooke’s too. I don’t expect my father to look there for you there,” he said. “But if they do, my men will take care of it.”

“But... I have to pick up Olivia,” she said. “Where will I take her?”

He hated saying the next words as much as she would hate hearing them. “I suspect you won’t be able to pick up Olivia, not anytime soon.”

The blink again. “What are you talking about, Roman? You said she was safe, that she was with Adam.”

“She is, but I have a feeling Adam won’t return her to you without a fight.”

She looked incredulous, and a puff of mocking laughter escaped her mouth. “He doesn’t have a choice.”

“You share physical custody?”

“On paper but— ”

“You’ve been fraternizing with a known criminal, Ruby.” He could barely utter the words around the contempt he had for himself. Ruby had gotten under his skin like no other

woman, but he would have given anything to turn back the clock, to go back to the day when he'd shown up outside the coffee shop and convinced her to have dinner with him.

He'd ruined her life.

"What exactly are you saying?" she asked.

"Adam worked with my father to make you disappear, which means they both have an end game." Roman had been able to put it together with the facts and the few clues his father had dropped about Adam Hale when he'd dangled Ruby's release in front of Roman like bait.

Roman didn't know the details but he knew enough. His father's goal: decimate Roman, leave him broke and alone, humiliated, and possibly dead. He suspected Adam's goal was to take Olivia from Ruby, not necessarily because he wanted full custody but because he wanted to punish her.

"I really don't know what you're talking about," Ruby said.

"My father used you to stop my takeover of the bratva," Roman said. "Except how did he know about you? I was never tailed to your house — I made sure of that, and so did Max — and we'd only been... seeing each other a few days."

The words didn't do justice to what had been happening between him and Ruby before the shit hit the fan. He'd fallen hard, had been obsessed with her — her cozy apartment, her life, small in her eyes but big in all the important ways.

And then there had been the fucking.

He pushed the images of her naked body from his mind. Now was not the time.

She let out a gasp of horror as the pieces fell into place. “You think Adam approached your father, told him about us.”

He nodded. “I don’t have the full picture, but yes.”

The lack of information had nagged at him, kept him up at night in the weeks they’d been searching for Ruby. It hadn’t made sense for Adam to recognize Roman from his work on the police force — Adam was a beat cop, not a detective or organized crime specialist — and Roman’s father hadn’t known about Ruby then, which meant he couldn’t have approached Adam.

Ruby got even paler. “I think I do.” She drew in a labored breath, like she had to remind herself to breathe. “Adam found out who you were. I don’t know how — probably by asking around at work — but he found out and put together a file on you. He brought it to me at the coffee shop before...”

The final pieces of the puzzle clicked into place. “That’s why you weren’t returning my calls and texts.”

Roman had been thrown by her sudden silence after the weekend they’d spent together, but now it all made sense.

She’d found out about him, about his work, from Adam. Then she’d been kidnapped by Igor’s men before she’d had a chance to talk to Roman about his lies.

Her eyes flashed green. “You lied to me.”

“Yes.” He wouldn’t defend himself by pointing out that it had been a lie of omission.

A lie was a lie.

“Why?” she asked.

“At first, it was because I didn’t want to involve you. Then...”

“Then?” She lifted her eyebrows like she knew the answer and was challenging him to say it.

“Then you told me about your mother.”

“You knew I wouldn’t want to see you again if I knew,” she said.

He nodded.

The room was quiet around them, the tension between them heavy and oppressive in the sleek, sterile loft.

She met his eyes. “I think I hate you.”

“I know.” The words were like razors, cutting their way through his heart on the way to his mouth.

“So Adam went to your father after he told me who you were,” Ruby said. “He... what? Told your father to kidnap me?”

Roman thought back to what he’d known, put it together with what Ruby had told him. “I’m guessing it was an informational visit. If Adam asked around about me, it’s not out of the realm of possibility that someone on the force knew I was working to seize control of the *bratva* from my father.”

The organized crime task force always had people monitoring the organized crime families, watching for changes in the power structure, looking for weaknesses and evidence that would hold up in court.

“So I’m just a pawn,” Ruby said bitterly. “My daughter, my *life*, are just pawns to be used in your game.”

“No,” Roman said. “Not to me. Never to me.”

“You’re not the only one playing, Roman.” Her words were as sharp as a slap across his face.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Your words mean nothing.”

He nodded.

“You still haven’t told me why I can’t get Olivia back,” she said. “I’m free. I share custody with Adam, although I’ll make sure that ends the second I can prove he was part of this.”

“I hope it’s that easy, but I suspect Adam’s power play was taking Olivia from you, and now he’ll do anything to keep her.”

“Including telling the court that I’ve been having an affair with the son of the leader of the New York bratva,” Ruby said softly.

“Does that sound like something he would do?” Roman asked.

“It sounds exactly like what he would do.” She pushed back from the table. “But he’s only able to do it because of you. I assume I can sleep here until I find someplace else to go?”

“You can sleep here as long as you like. My best men are on duty here. You’ll be safe.”

She barked out an ironic laugh. “Safe. Right.”

He watched her make her way back to the hall with his heart in his throat. He’d ruined her, had ruined what had been growing between them. She would never forgive him and she didn’t even know everything yet.

Tomorrow he would have to tell her. He would have to tell her that she wasn’t staying here as long as she wanted to stay — she was staying here until his takeover of the bratva was over.

Whether she liked it or not.

RUBY

She lay the bed staring at the ceiling. She should have been crying — screaming, something — but she was physically and emotionally numb. She'd thought the worst was over but apparently she'd been very, very wrong.

Adam had kidnapped Olivia.

That wasn't what it would look like on the outside, but as Roman's words echoed in Ruby's mind, she knew that was exactly what had happened.

Adam had heard through the police grapevine that Roman was making moves against his father and had taken that information to Igor. Igor got leverage against Roman by taking Ruby and Adam got the satisfaction of taking the only thing that really mattered to her.

Their daughter.

She'd thought her rescue was the end of her torment, but really, it was just the beginning. Adam would fight her for full custody. Ruby could fight back, but once Adam proved that Ruby had been seeing Roman — that she'd brought a notorious criminal kingpin into the home she'd shared with Olivia — no court on earth would give her even partial custody.

She'd be lucky to see her daughter unsupervised.

And it was all Roman Kalashnik's fault.

Well, not *all*.

It wasn't Roman's fault her ex-husband was a psychopath. It also wasn't his fault that his father would stoop to kidnapping a woman, a mother, who had nothing to do with his business. That Igor would hold her hostage as leverage against his son.

She remembered Roman's scarred body, the image of the gladiator inked on his chest. She was mortified to feel desire stir at her center, and she rolled onto her side, shutting it down.

She would not feel sorry for Roman. She would not make excuses for him.

She would not want him.

She'd left the bedside light on in the bedroom and she let her gaze travel over the shadowed room. There was something different about this room, something that set it apart from the rest of the loft — the part she'd seen anyway.

It took her a minute to place it: it was... cozy.

There were books on the bookshelves that flanked a large TV. Not brand-new books but books with wrinkled dust jackets and faded covers.

A plant hung in the corner, its vines trailing downward, and thick velvet curtains hung on either side of the large window, the city twinkling in the distance.

The blankets on the bed were warm and luxurious, a candle on each nightstand waiting to be lit, and the bed itself had a massive carved headboard like something out of a Victorian novel.

It was so strange, a homey oasis in a sea of concrete and steel, designer furniture, and tabletops free of clutter.

She stretched to reach the nightstand and found a lighter in the drawer. After lighting the candle, she laid back in bed with a sigh, her gaze on the steady flame.

She needed to call her father and Brooke, needed to figure out where she was going to stay while she sorted out the mess that was her life. Because Roman was right: she couldn't stay with them while Igor Kalashnik was out there with an ax to grind against his son.

She would call them in the morning, when her mind was clearer.

Her eyelids felt heavy, the food in her stomach and the silence of the room working with the flame of the candle to calm her nervous system.

I am safe in my body.

It shouldn't have felt true, not when Roman — at least as dangerous as his father — lurked somewhere in the loft.

But it *felt* true.

Her eyes drifted closed and a moment later she fell into the abyss of sleep.

ROMAN

“What’s the word on the street?” Roman asked the men sitting around the table in the loft.

He would need to establish another headquarters at some point, but it was still too dangerous. They had too few men to protect multiple locations. Right now, the loft was the safest place for them to gather.

“I’ve heard there’s chatter among the associates,” Mat said. His ice-blue eyes were alert, no sign of the previous night’s raid on his face. “They’re worried, wondering if they’ve thrown in their lot with the wrong leader after the incident at the grain terminal.”

The *incident* meaning four of Igor’s men found dead this morning.

“Good,” Roman said. Leadership started at the top but dissent started at the bottom. If the associates were becoming disenchanted with Igor’s leadership, the brigadiers would follow. “What’s he doing to placate them?”

His father was not a born leader. In the best of times, he ran roughshod over the brigadiers and their associates.

But he wasn’t stupid. He needed them now more than ever. He would try to keep them loyal.

“Bonuses mostly,” Mat said.

“Artyom Gusev got 5k for collections this morning,” Pavel said.

Information from the lower ranks had been an unexpected bonus of having Pavel on Roman’s team. He was still connected to many of the men who’d started alongside him.

Roman rubbed his jaw, then looked around the table. “What are your thoughts?”

The men still seemed surprised when he asked this question. He didn’t ask it often, but he wanted them to know he valued their opinions, a stark contrast to his father, who didn’t solicit outside advice even when doing so would be wise.

“It’s time to storm the castle,” Vasily said, his pate — mostly exposed due to his severely thinning silver hair — shiny under the loft’s overhead lights. “Take Igor out. If the associates are becoming nervous, they’ll fall into line easily enough and the brigadiers will have no choice but to follow.”

Roman tapped his fingers on the tabletop.

Thinking.

Vasily was one of the older members of Roman’s new contingent and was prone to force as a weapon of choice. Roman didn’t necessarily disagree with him, but he was loathe to let his father off the hook.

His father had taken Ruby. Had starved her. Terrorized her.

And Roman was all too familiar with the terror his father could wreak.

No, his father deserved more than simple death. He deserved humiliation and dethronement. Deserved to know

he'd lost everything before taking his final breath.

Plus there was the matter of the Two Spies.

Mikhail Lavrov had pledged to back Roman, but that wasn't a get-out-of-jail-free card. An assassination of the pakhan — even by his son — wouldn't be easily overlooked.

Roman needed to break his father first, make it clear — not just to Mikhail but to the other Spies on the council — that the bratva couldn't afford to keep him.

“What about the money?” Roman asked.

“What money?” Tima asked.

“My father is broke,” Roman said. “How is he funding daily operations and giving out large bonuses?”

His father's financial situation — a situation that mirrored the bratva's — was why Roman had been promised to Valeriya Orlov before the shit had hit the fan.

Roman had no intention of marrying her, something that would be obvious to Valeriya's father, Vladimir, by now. Vladimir was an oligarch with more money than god, but it was hard to imagine him fronting Roman's father millions of dollars out of the kindness of his heart.

Unless...

He met Max's gaze, unspoken words born out of their decades-long friendship moving between them.

“Hello.”

Roman turned to the sound of the voice and found Ruby standing at the front of the hall, watching the men around the table.

The men rumbled to life at the sight of her, murmuring greetings.

Pavel jumped to his feet. “Would you like some coffee? Or tea or... something?”

Roman stared at him. The youngest member of his team was animated and clearly nervous, his cheeks red.

“Coffee would be amazing,” Ruby said. “But I can get it.”

“No, no,” Pavel said, rushing toward her and guiding her to the sofa in the living room. “You sit.”

Roman sighed, trying for patience.

Ruby allowed Pavel to lead her to the sofa. She looked better already, the shadows under her eyes a shade lighter, her shoulders less defeated than they’d been when she’d gone to bed.

She was sleepy and disheveled in the track pants and one of the hoodies he’d purchased for her and he had to fight against the urge to pull her into his arms, smooth her dark hair, the burgundy streak faded after her long weeks in captivity.

She would smell like clean sheets and herself. He would bury his face in her hair, hold her close enough that no one would ever dare hurt her again.

“How are you feeling?” Mat asked her as Pavel hurried to the kitchen, making himself at home as he bustled around making Ruby’s coffee.

“Better, I think. Thank you for getting me out of there last night.” She looked at each of them. “Thank you all.”

They bobbed their heads, murmuring their responses, making light of the rescue like they’d carried her groceries

instead of getting her away from the men who'd been guarding her.

The boss is the one who said not to touch her yet.

Roman couldn't think about what would have happened if they hadn't found her, if they hadn't gotten her out. The images that came to mind tripped the wire on his fury, made him see red, want to rage and destroy.

There would be a time for ruin, but right now, he needed to be smart.

Pavel brought Ruby her coffee and Roman turned his attention to his men. "I'll give our discussion some thought. We'll meet again tomorrow."

The men stood. The meeting was over.

Max led them out of the loft and closed the door behind him. He didn't need to be told to leave. He knew Roman better than anyone, would know Roman wanted to be alone with Ruby, but he would be just outside the door, an imposing last line of defense if anyone got past the men stationed in front of the building.

The silence left by their absence weighed heavily in the room and Roman moved around the table and crossed to the living area where Ruby sat on the sofa, clutching her coffee with both hands like it was a life preserver in the middle of a violent sea.

He took one of the chairs opposite the sofa.

"You should have woken me." Her tone was accusatory, and he had a feeling it would be a long time — if ever — before she spoke to him without it. "I need to call my dad and Brooke."

It was afternoon, the winter sun slanting toward the horizon and casting the loft in gold light.

“You needed sleep.” She’d been through a terrible ordeal and the conversation with her father and Brooke would be better had when she was rested.

“You don’t get to tell me what I need,” she snapped.

He nodded, unbothered by the outburst. He took full responsibility for the situation, hated that he’d put her in it. It would take time for the anger to work its way out of her system.

As luck would have it, time together was something they would have a lot of.

She took a deep breath, as if trying to compose herself. “I’ll call my family. Then I’ll be out of your way.”

He stared at her. “You’re not in my way.”

She took a nervous drink of the coffee. “Still. It’s not like I can stay here.”

“Where will you go?” He studied her, waiting for her to come to the conclusion herself.

She slammed the coffee down on the coffee table and stood, then paced to the window. “You can’t keep me prisoner here.”

“You’re not a prisoner.” It wasn’t entirely true. He wouldn’t let her leave on her own. He couldn’t. Not after his father had made it clear he would use Ruby as a pawn in their war. But it would be better — for Ruby, for both of them — if she came to the logical conclusion herself. “I’m simply asking a question.”

She stared at the city, glimmering like a beacon on the other side of the wall of glass, her back to Roman. “I’ll... I’ll go to a hotel.”

“Without any protection?”

She spun to face him. “You can... you can assign men to protect me there. It’s the least you can do.”

He frowned. “I’m afraid I can’t. I have very few men right now, a handful chosen from my father’s army to help me fight him.”

“You just want to keep me here,” she said.

“I won’t deny it,” he said. “I do want to keep you here. This is where you’re safe, where I can protect you until this war with my father is over. But I’m telling the truth about my men. Why do you think the ones you saw gathered here today — attending a strategy meeting — are the same ones who rescued you last night? Do you think I’d risk my very few leaders unless I had no other choice?”

He could see her mind working, the conclusion inevitable but unwelcome just the same.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “So I *am* a prisoner here, just like in the grain terminal.”

“Not at all like that. There, someone was trying to hurt you. You’re being protected here.”

“Says you.”

He looked around the room. “Do you see any evidence to the contrary?”

He hated this distance between them. This negotiation. He wanted the Ruby he’d come to know before she’d been taken

by his father. The Ruby who'd teased him like he was just any man, not one who was broken and damaged inside.

The Ruby whose laughter had lit up his soul, who'd rested her head against his chest in bed and had slept in his arms.

She flattened her luscious mouth into a hard line, clearly unwilling to concede the point. "How long?"

"How long...?"

"How long until this whole... whatever this thing is between you and your father, is over?" she asked.

He wanted to give her a straightforward answer, but the truth wasn't simple. "I don't know."

"You don't know." She repeated his words woodenly.

"It's complicated," Roman said. "My father's men have to be won over, his finances collapsed. And there's a governing body who have to ultimately approve my takeover."

She lifted her eyebrows in disbelief and he saw shades of the Ruby he'd gotten to know before everything had unraveled, the Ruby who was quick-witted and even a little snarky. "What kind of governing body?"

"I know it must sound strange," he said. "Movies portray our business as one without much structure, but that couldn't be further from the truth. My father is the current pakhan, the boss, but he answers to a group of men who are loosely overseen by others in Russia. I have to convince them — all of them — that I'm a better leader than my father."

She held his gaze. "Are you?"

"Yes."

She seemed to consider his words. “So I’m trapped here until you *convince* them.”

“‘Trapped’ is such an ugly word, but I don’t see another option that keeps you and your family safe.” He reached into his pocket and removed a phone, slid it across the coffee table. “You can use this to call your family.”

“And then what?”

He stood. “Make yourself comfortable.”

She would be here awhile.

“Isn’t it dangerous for me to contact my family?” she asked, looking up at him. “What if your father goes after them next?”

“It would be foolish to draw more attention to your family. My father is many things, but foolish isn’t one of them,” Roman said.

“What if someone’s tracking this phone or my family’s phones or something?” She shook her head. “I don’t know how it works, but shouldn’t I keep my location a secret?”

“Not necessary. My father knows where you are by now.”

“That’s not reassuring,” she said.

“There are men stationed outside the door and more at the front of the building.” He stood. She would want time alone to call her father and sister. “I meant what I said, Ruby. You’re safe here.”

“Where are you going?”

Was it his imagination that she sounded scared? That she didn’t want him to leave?

Wishful thinking, no doubt.

“I have business. Vera will be by later.” He headed for the door, forcing himself to walk away before he forgot everything but her. “In the meantime, make yourself at home.”

RUBY

She stared at the phone in her hand for a long time after Roman left, contemplating her options. There had to be somewhere else she could go, somewhere she could afford that would be safe until the war between Roman and his father was settled and the target was removed from Ruby's back.

But no matter how hard she thought about it, she came up empty.

She was too broke to get a hotel long-term, and even if she could convince Roman to give her the money — the least he could do under the circumstances — she would have no protection.

If she was alone in the world, she might have been willing to chance it. She'd been taking care of herself in one way or another for a long time and the thought of staying with the man responsible for the decimation of her life was sick.

But she had Olivia to think about.

Her daughter had been living with Adam for the past three weeks, and Adam was anything but a safe harbor for their daughter. Ruby didn't think he would hurt Olivia, but she wasn't willing to stake everything on it.

She had to get her daughter back, get her to safety, and for that, she had to remain alive.

The thought of Olivia hit her like a physical blow. It was like being reminded that she'd lost an arm or a leg, a critical part of her missing.

She turned the phone over in her hand. She wanted to call Adam, ask to speak to Olivia, but she didn't know if it was wise.

Had Olivia been told she was missing? Dead?

The thought made her want to scream.

She had no idea what Olivia had been told, how she would feel when confronted with a call from Ruby after what Olivia might feel was her mother's abandonment. Ruby didn't even know if Adam would let her speak to Olivia.

She drew in a breath, forced herself to breathe around the pain weighing on her chest like a boulder.

She should have asked Roman about calling Olivia.

She hated herself for thinking it, hated that she was reliant on the man who'd blown up her life, not just for her safety but for advice about the situation with Adam and Olivia.

She stood and walked to the window, dialed her father's number, easily remembered along with Brooke's since the two of them were the emergency contacts for everything in her and Olivia's lives.

He answered on the second ring, his voice hesitant and tired until he discovered the unknown caller was Ruby. Then, a chorus of relief and happiness followed by a storm of questions she had trouble answering.

He didn't know about Roman — she'd only confided in Brooke about the enigmatic man she'd been dating before her kidnapping — and she did her best to hedge around the truth: that she'd inadvertently become involved with someone entangled in some shady shit, that it had been a mistake, that it was safer for Ruby to stay away from them until she figured out how to extricate herself from the situation.

He fought her on her determination not to come home, on her unwillingness to give him details, but he had no choice but to accept it when it became clear Ruby had made up her mind.

She turned the discussion to Olivia and learned that Roman had been telling the truth. Adam had picked Olivia up from school the day Ruby went missing and she'd been with him ever since.

Her father and Brooke had pushed to see her, but Adam had said they were busy with Olivia's school schedule and his work schedule and that it was "better" for Olivia to settle in to her new routine.

Her new routine. As if it were permanent. As if Adam expected Ruby to stay gone.

She was almost grateful for that little tidbit. The anger that rose within her pushed aside the fear and frustration she'd felt after her conversation with Roman.

And right now, she needed anger.

Fear and frustration were useless emotions. She needed to get her daughter back, to keep her safe.

She promised her dad she would call soon and told him to call anytime — Roman had said her location wasn't a secret — then dialed Brooke.

"Hello?"

She fought tears at the sound of her sister's voice but her voice cracked anyway. "It's me."

"Ruby?" Brooke gasped. "Ruby?!"

"Yeah," Ruby said, choking on a sob. "It's me. I'm... I'm okay."

"My god! We've been worried sick. Where are you?" Brooke asked.

"I'm..." She looked out at the city across the water, imagined her sister pinning fabric at the expansive studio of David Yang, the designer she worked for in the Fashion District. "It's a long story, but I'm in Brooklyn."

"Give me an address," Brooke said. "I'll come get you."

Ruby drew in a breath and tried to compose herself. "No. You... you can't."

"For fuck's sake, Ruby!" Brooke was losing it and Ruby couldn't blame her. "What the actual fuck is going on?"

Ruby told her everything: leaving Roasted, being shoved into the van on the street, her long captivity in the grain terminal, her rescue by Roman before she'd been brought back to the loft.

She even told her sister about Roman's war with his father, about the danger to Brooke and their dad if Ruby came home, but Brooke didn't care.

"I fucking dare them to come after you, after any of us," she said. "Come home, Ruby. We'll deal with it."

Ruby shook her head. "These are bad men, Brooke. Like... really really bad men. I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you or Dad because of me. And I'm safe here. I'm okay."

She didn't know if that was true.

Safe? Maybe.

Okay? Not even close. Not until she got Olivia back. Got back their life together.

"Can I come to you?" Brooke asked. "Just to see you?"

Ruby thought about it. Roman hadn't explicitly said no one could visit her at the loft, but with his warnings ringing in her ears, she wasn't ready to risk it.

"I don't know," she said. "Let me ask him."

"Let you *ask* him?" Brooke's voice was incredulous. "He's the reason you're in this mess, Ruby."

Ruby sighed. "I know that. But... he's also the reason I'm alive, the reason I have a place to hide."

"Ruby... this is crazy. He doesn't get credit for getting you out of a mess *he got you into*."

She knew where her sister was coming from, knew Ruby sounded like some kind of abused domestic partner — she'd had enough experience with making excuses for a bad man to know that — but it wasn't that simple.

"I know how it sounds," she said, "but it's complicated, okay? Like, really fucking complicated. I think I need to be here alone right now, figure out what's next." It was time to change the subject. "Tell me about Olivia."

Brooke exhaled into the phone. "She's been with Adam. He won't let us see her."

"Dad told me," Ruby said. "Is she... Do you think she's okay?"

"I know she's physically okay, because I've seen her."

“I thought Adam wouldn’t let you see her?”

“Adam doesn’t *let* me do anything,” Brooke said. “I went to the school and waited to see her through the fence during recess.”

“Brooke! You have to be careful. The school will call the police.”

“I made sure I wasn’t seen,” Brooke said. “I just needed to see it for myself. And I know we can’t know for sure she’s really okay, but I needed to see her face.”

Ruby knew what Brooke was getting at: did Olivia have any bruises, anything to indicate she might have been physically harmed the way Adam had hurt Ruby when they’d been married?

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you. Thank you for doing that. How does she look?”

“From afar? The same,” Brooke said. “It’s not enough obviously, but it’s better than nothing. Dad hired a lawyer to see about our rights as her family, in case... in case...”

“In case I didn’t come home,” Ruby finished.

“Yeah,” Brooke said. “I’m so fucking relieved you’re alive.”

“I’m alive, but we might still need that lawyer,” Ruby said. “Roman told me he thinks Adam worked with his father to have me kidnapped.”

Brooke gasped. “No!”

“He can’t prove it, but the day I went missing? Adam picked Olivia up at recess.”

“So?”

Ruby didn't fault Brooke for not putting the pieces together. She wasn't a parent, had no desire to be a parent anytime soon. The world of school schedules and pickup routines was completely foreign to her.

"It was a Monday — not Adam's day — and they took me after Adam picked up Olivia," Ruby said.

"That motherfucker *knew*," Brooke said.

"That's how it looks," Ruby said.

"I wondered why he didn't show for the press conferences," Brooke said. "I mean, I just assumed it was because he's a monumental asshole — I even wondered if *he'd* done something to you — but it seemed mean even for him not to show up, at least for Olivia."

"Yeah, it's just all too much of a coincidence," Ruby said. "And then he doesn't let you and Dad see Olivia? He did this to punish me for seeing Roman, not because he cares about me or Olivia but because he thinks he owns us. Which is why we're probably going to need that lawyer."

"You think he's going to fight you for custody?" Brooke asked.

"I can almost guarantee it, and he's going to use my relationship with Roman to win." Ruby almost couldn't get the words out around the pain in her chest. Losing Olivia was unimaginable.

"Okay, but there is no relationship with Roman, right?" Brooke asked.

Ruby didn't answer fast enough.

"Right, Ruby?" Brooke prodded. "Because I know you wouldn't keep seeing the mobster — a leader in the fucking

Russian Mafia — after you've been kidnapped and held prisoner because of his business.”

“Of course not,” Ruby said. “I’m just saying, once Adam finds out I’m back, he’ll tell the court that I *had* a relationship with Roman.”

“And you can tell them that Adam worked with the head of the fucking Russian mob to have you kidnapped,” Brooke said, raising her voice. “He’ll never see her again. He might even go to jail.”

Ruby closed her eyes with a sigh, wishing she could block everything out and sleep forever. “Somehow I don’t think it’s going to be that simple.”

She’d thought if she got free her life would go back to normal. Instead it was starting to seem like there was no normal. She was trapped in the beautiful but sterile loft with the man who’d stolen her heart right before he’d ruined her life. She couldn’t see her daughter, and now she had to entertain the very real possibility of an ugly court battle to get her back.

“God,” Brooke said, “you must be exhausted and freaked out. We should talk about this later, after you’ve had time to rest and recover. Did they... did they hurt you, Ruby?”

Ruby opened her eyes, focused on the Freedom Tower across the water, tried to keep herself in the here and now instead of in the dark grain terminal when she’d been cold and hungry and alone. “No, although they talked about it.”

No fun. Not yet.

“Jesus,” Brooke said. “I’m so fucking sorry you had to go through that, Rubes. You must have been so scared.”

She smiled at the childhood nickname Brooke hadn't used in years. "I was, but I'll be okay now. I think I just need to eat and sleep a ton."

"And you're sure you're safe there?" Brooke asked, lowering her voice like she was telling Ruby a secret. "With *him*?"

Ruby looked around the loft, took in its high ceilings and soaring factory windows, the brick wall that ran the length of the living and dining areas and the security system that blinked from a panel on the wall.

"I do," she said. "He has men guarding the place."

"Jesus, Ruby."

"I'm fine," Ruby said. "I'm going to eat now. You have my new number. Text me."

"I love you," Brooke said. "I'm so happy you're okay."

"I love you too," Ruby said.

She slipped the phone into the pocket of her hoodie and leaned toward the wall of glass, craning her neck to see the street below, where two men in leather jackets stood a few feet apart.

She was glad to see them, to confirm with her own eyes that they were there, but she knew they weren't the reason she'd been telling Brooke the truth about feeling safe.

And it wasn't the fortress like loft either.

It was Roman.

There were a thousand and one reasons she shouldn't feel safe with him, but deep inside, locked away from Brooke and everyone else who would think she was crazy, she did.

She turned away from the window and headed for her room at the end of the hall. She didn't want to think anymore.

About anything, but especially about her conversation with Brooke.

Because if Ruby really felt safe with Roman Kalashnik, she was in more trouble than she'd thought.

ROMAN

Roman sat in the backseat of the Rover, his eyes on the street. The spa on Fifth Avenue was tucked discreetly between Cartier and Zara. Occasionally, a well-heeled woman would emerge from behind the red door of the spa or step from a chauffeured car toward it, but so far, not the woman he was looking for.

“Think she’ll play?” Max asked from the driver’s seat.

It was strange to sit in the back of the car — it was something his father did when he was driven around with Konstantin, his ever-present watchdog — but it was necessary for today’s mission.

“Fifty-fifty,” Roman said.

He didn’t want to think about what would happen if the mission wasn’t successful, so he turned his thoughts to Ruby instead, wondered what she was doing.

Having her at the loft for the past week had been torture. It was the least he deserved after what he’d done to her life, but it had created a kind of madness in him, knowing she was right down the hall, that she slept in the room next to his.

She’d made herself scarce in the loft — he was pretty sure she tried to avoid him — but every now and then he would see

her in the kitchen or the hall. Then they would speak politely, edging past each other like strangers.

He would catch her scent — the jasmine body wash he'd found that smelled like the one she'd used before her kidnapping — when they were strangers getting to know each other. Then his body would respond, his cock hardening, the desire to crush her mouth under his, to unlock the door to his playroom — a room he hadn't entered since his first date with Ruby — overwhelming.

But it was too late for all of that. She despised him, and he needed no further evidence of that fact than her complete and utter avoidance of him.

He didn't blame her. The best thing he could do was eliminate his father as a threat, destroy Adam Hale so he could never threaten or hurt Ruby again, and return her to the quiet life she'd built for Olivia.

Which was why he was sitting in front of the spa, watching the women come and go from its red door.

Finally, he caught sight of a polished brunette emerging from a car, the door opened by a suited driver who was clearly packing, his coat bulging with a weapon.

Roman rolled down his window and waited for her to start toward the door of the spa to call out. "Valeriya."

She turned, caution on her face in the moment before she realized it was him.

"I can't talk to you."

She turned away and he hurried to speak before she disappeared behind the red door. "It will be to your benefit."

She slowed, then turned to face him, her blue eyes wary and accented by the high ponytail that pulled her hair back from her face. “I’m not sure you’re in a position to offer anything of benefit.”

He smiled. “You might be surprised.”

She rolled her eyes and walked back to the car. “I’ll give you five minutes, and only because I’m intrigued.”

He opened the door and slid across the backseat.

She lowered herself next to him and he caught a whiff of her perfume, something elegant and complicated. She was bundled in an expensive wool coat, her feet clad in Ferragamo boots.

She shut the door, enveloping them in the muffled quiet of the Jag’s interior. She turned to look at him, her gaze appraising. “I’m surprised you’re still breathing.”

“You’re only surprised because you don’t know me,” he said.

She flashed him a sly smile. “I’ve always found arrogance oddly appealing.”

“How have you been, Valeriya? How are the wedding plans coming along?”

She glared at him, then reached for the door. “Arrogance may be appealing, but I’m not a masochist.”

He put a hand on her arm. “I’m sorry. You’ve always been so good-humored.”

She dropped her hand from the door and turned to look at him. “No one could be good-humored enough to laugh at the predicament of being forced to marry your brother.”

He nodded, feeling a surge of sympathy for her. He'd put two and two together when he'd started to work the puzzle of his father's cash flow. A turf war was expensive under the best of circumstances, and for Igor, these were not the best of circumstances.

That he'd been forced into bestowing large bonuses even on the associates was one of many signs that he was desperate — and that he'd found a source of capital.

Before Roman had launched the war against his father, that source was supposed to be Roman's marriage to Vladimir Orlov's daughter. Lucky for Igor, he had a spare groom on hand.

"I'm sorry," Roman said. "My brother is..."

"... an overgrown child with the impulse control of a poorly trained puppy and a drug habit like Scarface?"

He laughed in spite of the seriousness of the situation. "It sounds like you've gotten to know him over the past few weeks."

She sniffed imperiously. "Unfortunately."

"I take it you had little say in the matter?" Roman asked.

"When do we ever have *say*?" For the first time, she sounded tired. "I'm nothing but chattel to my father. An asset to be leveraged for still greater assets. It's never been a secret."

He was hit with a burst of sympathy. Up until a month ago, he'd been practiced at sacrificing his life on the altar of duty, and he was a man. He couldn't begin to imagine the challenges endured by women in their world.

"May I ask you an indelicate question?"

“Please,” she said drily. “It will probably be the most exciting thing to happen to me since I was betrothed to your brother.”

“Are you the sole beneficiary of your father’s wealth?” Roman asked. “In the event of his death, I mean.”

Her pale skin turned even paler. “You have no idea what could happen to me for even engaging in this conversation.”

“I do.” His voice was solemn. He wanted her to know that he understood the gravity of their discussion, because she was right: if it got back to her father, she would be in grave danger. “Which is why we’re talking here.”

“You say that like I’m supposed to be comforted by it,” she said. “You’re the enemy. Why would I discuss such a... sensitive matter with you?”

“Because I’m not *your* enemy.” He brushed a piece of lint off his trousers. “In fact, I would go so far as to say we might even be allies, under the right circumstances of course.”

Her gaze turned shrewd. “I’m listening.”

“Your mother is dead. You have no siblings. I assume you’re the beneficiary of your father’s wealth,” he said.

“And if I was?”

“If you were, I would think there would be a strong incentive for claiming that inheritance sooner rather than later,” Roman said. “Say, before you marry my brother?”

Her eyes grew wide. “You aren’t suggesting what I think you’re suggesting.”

He shrugged. “I can’t possibly know what you think I’m suggesting. I’m simply stating facts. The kind of wealth you stand to inherit... it would represent ultimate freedom,

wouldn't it? No more arranged-marriage proposals. No more doing Daddy's dark bidding."

"The trust only comes to me in the event of his death," she said.

"I assumed."

She swallowed and glanced nervously around, the only time he'd ever seen her lose her cool. "He's my father."

Roman nodded. "I'm not unsympathetic to the fact."

He wasn't being snide. He knew what it was like to loathe and love a parent with equal measure. To bow and scrape for their approval in the harsh light of day and pray for their painful death in the dark of night.

"Still," he continued, "a woman like you with the money to make her own way... there's no telling what you could do. You'd be free."

"Free."

He nodded and gave her a minute, could see the wheels turning in her head.

"You might be surprised to hear that I... love my father, although I'm not even sure that's the right word," Roman said. "Despite the challenges of my upbringing, I've tried other methods of wresting the bratva from his control, hoping we could find new footing in our... relationship."

"Men like our fathers don't give up power easily," Valeriya said softly. "Or at all."

"Exactly. And I see now it was a fool's errand anyway," he said.

Roman wasn't a good man. He knew this, would never assert to the contrary. But he had an honor code of sorts, lines he wouldn't cross. Hurting women and children was one of them.

Ruby's kidnapping had ended any remnants of Roman's hope for his father. He had zero doubt his father had intended to kill Ruby sooner or later — after he let his men have their fun with her.

The boss is the one who said not to touch her yet.

He had to shake his head to rid himself of the thought.

A man like that couldn't be trusted with power. Valeriya's father — a man essentially selling his daughter to the bratva — was no better.

“Which is why I propose that we free ourselves from the shackles of our parentage,” Roman said. “Our fathers had their chance. They played the game their way. Maybe it's our turn.”

“What — exactly — do you propose?” Valeriya asked.

“Nothing overly dramatic,” Roman said. “Nothing painful. Say... a nightcap before a long sleep? I'll provide the nightcap's essential ingredient of course.”

He remembered meeting the Orlovs to discuss a marriage between Roman and Valeriya, the way she had ordered the household staff to bring drinks.

Poison would be easy with Valeriya on his side.

“Why didn't you do that with your own father when you had the chance?” Valeriya asked.

“I considered it,” he said. “More times than I can count. But my father deserves something more... leisurely.”

Especially now, after what he did to Ruby.

“What’s in it for you?” Valeriya asked.

“Money,” he said. “Lack of it for my father and an influx of capital for my cause.”

With Vladimir Orlov out of the picture, Roman’s father would lose his primary investor. No more bonuses for the men. In fact, his father might have trouble paying them at all if Roman continued to chip away at his father’s holdings.

Roman, on the other hand, would have plenty of cash to continue battering his father’s financial infrastructure and rewarding the men who came to his side.

All thanks to Valeriya Orlov.

“I withdraw the funding from your father and give it you instead,” Valeriya said.

“And then you can be on your merry way,” Roman said. “A free — and very wealthy — woman.”

She studied him. The light in her eyes had returned, the weariness gone. She looked like the Valeriya he’d met at her father’s apartment in Tribeca, the cool, assured Valeriya who’d found him at Basil’s to try and win him over to their arranged marriage.

“I’ve always felt you underestimated our power as a team,” she said. “We could surprise them all. Marry anyway. Combine our... assets.”

He had a flash of memory: Ruby asleep on the sofa in her tiny apartment, her body warm when he lifted her into his arms, her soft curves molded against his body after he’d fucked her.

“I’m afraid that’s not in the cards,” he said. “But you’re a magnificent woman. I have a feeling you’ll have no trouble finding a cadre of men more than willing to take my place.”

She smiled. “And I have a feeling that won’t be easy for any of them to do.”

“Do we have a deal?” he asked.

“I’ll consider it,” she said, reaching for the door.

“It goes without saying this has to stay between us,” Roman said. “Poison can flow all ways.”

He didn’t like threatening her, not now when they seemed to be on the same team, as if they were step-siblings plotting the breakup of their newly married parents.

But he had to make it clear. He couldn’t afford to clue his father in to his next move, couldn’t afford for Vladimir Orlov to mobilize his significant assets against Roman.

He had his hands full with one war. He couldn’t fight two. Not right now.

She smirked. “I’m not foolish enough to make an enemy of you, Roman Kalashnik.”

“Nor I, you.”

“I’ll be in touch,” she said, stepping out of the car.

He watched her make her way across the sidewalk to the spa.

“Can we trust her?” Max asked from the front.

“As much as we can trust anyone.”

It wasn’t saying much.

Roman watched Valeriya open the red door and disappear inside.

OLIVIA

She was going to be in trouble, and she knew it because of the cold wet spot between her legs and under her bottom in bed.

Shame heated her face.

She'd peed the bed.

She didn't understand. Only babies peed the bed and she was a big girl.

She was in kindergarten!

She thought of Noah DeAngelo. He'd peed his pants in class at the beginning of the year. He'd cried and been sad but everyone had been nice to him, even Ms. Moretti, who'd taken him to the school nurse. Noah had come back sniffing and wearing new pants (Olivia didn't know where the new pants came from).

But Olivia was pretty sure her dad wasn't going to be nice about the wet sheets because her dad wasn't nice about anything anymore.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to move. Maybe if she pretended she hadn't peed the bed it would go away, like magic. She knew magic was real because it happened in *The Neverending Story*.

“Olivia!” her dad barked, suddenly standing in the doorway of her room at his apartment. “Time to get ready for school. And don’t drag your ass this morning. I don’t have the patience for it.”

She waited for him to disappear, then sat up in bed. At least the pee hadn’t gotten on her sparkly purple comforter. It was her favorite part of her room at her dad’s (she didn’t call it home because home was where she’d lived with her mom before the business trip she’d had to go on, which was taking forever).

She liked her room at her dad’s fine she guessed, but it wasn’t *her* room. Not really. There was no nightlight (her dad said nightlights were for babies) and no fish swimming on the walls before she went to sleep. The walls were white instead of pink and she didn’t have twinkly lights here like she did at home.

But mostly, she missed her mommy.

Olivia missed her mom’s pancakes and the way she smiled when she caught Olivia doing something she wasn’t supposed to do. She missed the way her mom sang when she braided Olivia’s hair. She missed the way her mom snuggled next to her in bed for her nighttime story (her dad sat on the edge of the bed, like he didn’t want to get too close to Olivia) and the way she used different voices for all the characters in the books, even the animals.

“Get moving, Olivia!” her dad yelled from the other room.

Olivia scrambled out of bed and went to her dresser to find clothes. She chose pants and a sweater because it was too cold to wear her dress without tights and her dad said tights were a *pain in the ass*.

Her dad could say things like that because he didn't have a swear jar like her mom, and that meant no ice cream either because Olivia's mom always used the swear jar to take Olivia for ice cream.

She hurried to get dressed. Maybe if she got to the table early her dad wouldn't come in to her bedroom and then he wouldn't see the pee spot in her bed.

She covered it with the sheet just in case, but she left the sparkly purple comforter off because she didn't want pee to get on it.

"Finally," her dad said when she came into the kitchen. He didn't say it like he was happy to see her, more like he was mad, even though she'd hurried today.

He poured cereal into the bowl at the table while Olivia scooted onto the chair. Then he went to the fridge for milk. "Where's the permission slip for the field trip?"

"In my backpack," Olivia said, picking up her spoon.

He sighed and turned toward the hall, and then Olivia remembered about her accident.

"I can get it," she said, sliding off the stool.

"You eat," he said.

She thought she heard her heart beating, the way the heart had beaten in a documentary she'd watched with her mom about doctors.

Thump-thump, thump-thump.

Except she wasn't sick or anything so she didn't know why she could hear her heart.

“Olivia!” He’d found the accident in her bed. She could tell from the sound of his voice. “Get your ass in here.”

She slid off the chair and walked slowly down the hall.

Thump-thump, thump-thump.

“What?” she asked when she got to her room.

He glared at her. ““What?”” He pointed to the wet spot on the bed. “This is *what*. You wet the bed?”

“I didn’t know.” It was a lie and she knew lies were bad but she also knew her dad was mean when he was mad.

Like, super mean.

He stomped toward her and grabbed her arm, then dragged her toward the bed.

“Ow!” His big hand was hard and tight around her arm. “That hurts!”

“I don’t care,” he said, dragging her to a stop next to the bed. “You’re lying, Olivia. There’s no way you didn’t know about this. You were trying to hide it.”

“I wasn’t,” she said, even though she’d definitely been trying to hide it.

He gripped her arm harder and glared down at her. “Stop lying to me.”

“I’m not.” Tears came out of her eyes because he really did seem mad and because it was embarrassing and because Mommy wouldn’t have yelled at her if she’d had an accident.

He spun her around fast and she felt the sharp sting of his hand on her bottom.

“Ow!”

“Are you a baby?” He was so mad a fleck of spit flew out of his mouth but Olivia was too scared to think it was gross. “Because only babies wet the bed and only bad girls lie.”

“I’m not bad!” She was crying harder now and it was hard to breathe, like when she had hiccups, except when she had hiccups her mom laughed and Olivia didn’t cry.

He spanked her a lot of times, his face red while he said, “*Goddammit*, Olivia, look what you made me do.”

By the time he stopped her bottom was stinging and she didn’t even care that they didn’t have a swear jar because she didn’t want to get ice cream anyway.

She just wanted her mom.

RUBY

Ruby sat on the reading chair in her room and tried to focus on the words in her book. She'd read the same passage three times while trying to tune out the muffled sound of the TV from the living room.

Roman was watching a movie, something with a lot of shooting from the sound of it.

She'd been surprised the first time she'd stumbled on him watching a movie in the living room. Up to that point, he'd seemed almost inhuman. A god-man who did nothing but work, walking into the loft after a long day and out of it in the morning, occasionally hosting the men who'd rescued her for strategy meetings.

Then one night she'd gotten up for water and had found him sitting on the sofa, some kind of action movie flickering across his strong features in the dark.

She'd gotten her water and returned to her room, feeling like she'd dodged yet another bullet with the man who occupied way too many of her thoughts.

Way too many of her dreams.

It wasn't like she wanted to want him. God no.

But they'd been occupying the same space for almost two weeks and she was horrified to find that after a few nights of rest and several days of Vera's cooking, another kind of appetite had reared its ugly head.

She would never act on it of course. That would just be dumb.

But she was only human, and traversing her days in the loft with Roman Kalashnik was like living in an ice cream parlor with a dairy allergy.

Temptation everywhere.

There was post-run Roman, making a smoothie in the kitchen in nothing but sweatpants, his inked chest on full display, muscles flexing as he reached for protein powder or bananas.

Then there was King Roman, dressed in tailored trousers that did nothing to hide the bulge between his thighs and button-down shirts that hugged every muscle in his sculpted chest, pacing in front of the men as they strategized what to do next.

But late-night Roman was by far her biggest temptation. She would come upon him in the living room, looking tired and relaxed, the invisible fortress that usually surrounded him having evaporated right up until the moment he spotted her.

It was too easy to imagine sitting next to him in the dark, feeling his massive arms around her, pulling her close. Too easy to imagine the way his hands would feel on her body, the way his tongue would plunder her mouth.

Dammit.

She tried reading the paragraph again, then tossed the book aside.

She was bored. That was the problem. Not the fact that she still wanted the man responsible for detonating a bomb in the middle of her life.

She'd been stuck in the loft for two weeks, allowed only onto the roof deck, which was luxurious and expansive but hard to enjoy with Roman's armed men lurking everywhere.

Worst of all, she hadn't talked to Olivia yet.

She was dying to talk to her daughter, but she had no idea what Olivia had been told and her calls to Adam had gone unanswered. The last thing she wanted was to surprise Olivia at school if Adam had told her Ruby was dead.

And then there was the legal stuff. Roman had done a search of court records and discovered that in Ruby's absence, Adam had petitioned and won full physical and legal custody of Olivia.

The document had stared her in the face, words jumping out at her as her vision had blurred with tears.

Custody had been awarded under false pretenses — Ruby going missing, perhaps being dead — but reversing it would force Ruby to wade into the legal morass of family court, and she had no doubt Adam would use her kidnapping to make the custody order permanent.

What judge would give custody of a small child to a woman who had invited a Mob boss into their home? A woman who had then been kidnapped by those same bad people (she ignored the voice in her head that said Roman wasn't bad)?

Once those allegations were a matter of court record, they would be part of it forever, and getting Olivia back would be even harder.

She needed to be smart.

Still, the need to talk to her daughter, to make sure Olivia knew Ruby was alive, was a constant ache in her chest, one no amount of sleep or Vera's delicious cooking could banish.

She threw her legs over the side of the bed and stood.

This was stupid.

She left the candles flickering in her room — she was just going to get a snack or a cup of tea — and headed for the hall. The wood floors were delightfully warm under her bare feet, the radiant-floor heating one of many surprises in the loft, which was well designed despite its sterile decor.

The TV got louder as she got closer to the living room, the light flickering over the large room that acted as the kitchen, living, and dining areas.

Roman looked over when he saw her. "Can't sleep?"

"Not yet," she said. "I thought I'd make a cup of tea. Can I make you one?"

It seemed rude not to ask.

"No, thank you," he said.

A beer bottle sat on the coffee table, a bowl of popcorn next to him on the couch.

She went to the kitchen and started the kettle (it looked brand-new and Ruby couldn't help wondering if Roman had bought it for her — she'd never seen him drink tea).

She followed along with the movie while she got a mug ready, poured loose tea into a strainer ball from one of the drawers. It was some kind of action movie, soldiers sweaty

and beleaguered as they moved through a dusty arid landscape.

She poured the water just before the kettle started to whistle, then picked up her cup and started past the sofa to the hall.

“Would you like to watch?” Roman said. “TV in the dark always makes me sleepy.”

She hesitated, every brain cell screaming at her not to be stupid.

“Okay.” She moved toward the sofa, sat at the other end of it, keeping as much distance between them as possible.

Luckily for her, the couch wasn't very comfortable despite its obviously high price tag. It wasn't a fall-asleep-watching-a-movie couch and that meant it would be easier not to let her guard down.

She took a sip of her tea and set the cup on the coffee table, then leaned back, her eyes on the screen. Roman's cologne, expensive and spicy, drifted her way along with the subtle tang of masculine sweat.

Desire flooded her core and her face heated along with the rest of her.

“What are they doing?” she asked about the men taking up position outside a terra-cotta house.

She was glad it was dark, that there was almost four feet between them on the sofa.

“Hostage rescue,” he said.

She nodded and watched as the men stormed the clay house.

A couple minutes later, Roman reached for the popcorn and took a handful, then passed it to Ruby.

She took it in silence and sank deeper into the sofa.

What was the harm?

ROMAN

Coney Island was cold and deserted, just the way he liked it. A biting wind blew in off the water and he stuffed his gloved hands into the pockets of his wool coat, aware of the fact that Max was behind him.

Normally it would have been an unnecessary precaution, but these were not normal times.

He looked out over the water and thought of his mother as he made his way to the carousel in the distance. He hadn't spoken to her since he'd begun his takeover of the *bratva*, a necessary distance given her proximity to Roman's father.

Roman didn't miss her. Not the person she'd become, drunk and numb to his father's coldness and abuse, but there was another version of her that he did miss, the woman who'd taken him and Erik to the beach in the summer, who'd worn red sunglasses and laughed when the wind whipped her hat off her head.

As an adult, coming here in the summer was too painful. Then he would see the children with their laughing mothers. He would watch as they ate hot dogs and dripping ice cream and wonder how many of them would look back on the memories fondly and how many with pain.

He'd blamed his mother for many years. Had blamed her for being too weak to leave, for letting Igor torment Erik and Roman (mostly Roman), for withdrawing into a bottle, leaving them to fend for themselves against the boogeyman to end all boogeymen.

Now he saw that she just wasn't strong enough to do anything else, that she wasn't built that way.

Not like Ruby, who fought for Olivia. Who'd left her abuser, then fought to raise her daughter with joy and love in his shadow. Who'd fought to stay alive even when she'd been held prisoner by Igor's men and who even now wouldn't reach out to Olivia (he heard her crying in her bed at night, great sobs she tried to stifle with a pillow) for fear of doing her emotional harm if she'd been told Ruby was dead.

She was the most wonderful woman he'd ever known. Living with her had relegated him to a kind of fandom, a groupie in his own home, always hoping for a glimpse of her, a chance to say a few words.

She'd taken to watching movies with him at night at least, a development that left him feeling foolishly victorious even as they hardly spoke, the distance — physical and otherwise — carefully maintained by Ruby.

He lifted his head, saw the carousel drawing closer, the dark figure sitting on a bench near it that overlooked the water.

Focus, he ordered himself.

He couldn't afford to act like a lovestruck schoolboy.

Not now.

He stepped up to the bench and sat next to the man wrapped in a thick black coat, a red scarf wound around his neck. His thick gray hair didn't move in the wind, a testament

to whatever product he used to keep its whorls in place, but his cheeks were ruddy from cold.

“Mikhail,” Roman said, greeting the member of the Two Spies who had agreed to smooth the way for Roman’s takeover.

“You’ve brought your guard dog,” said Mikhail Lavros. His Russian accent gave the words a harsh edge despite the blandness of his tone.

“One can never be too careful these days,” Roman said.

“Indeed,” Mikhail said. Roman waited for him to continue, watching the sea roil under a tumultuous February sky. “Your situation has become messy. The dead men at the grain terminal, the kidnapped woman and her pleading family.”

“Respectfully, you can speak to my father about the kidnapped woman, and the men at the grain terminal too, come to think of it.” Roman paused, reason reminding him to tread carefully with Mikhail. He still needed Mikhail’s support. “There would be no dead bodies there if my father hadn’t chosen to take a hostage.”

“I’d assumed you’d taken steps to minimize your... entanglements prior to initiating your coup,” Mikhail said.

He was talking about Ruby. Ruby was the *entanglement*.

“It was a last-minute development,” Roman said.

“An unfortunate one, especially for the woman.”

“Yes.” Roman would never forget the way Ruby had looked when Max had shuffled her past the SUV, Roman in the back, watching through the tinted windows, not wanting to traumatize Ruby more by showing his face.

She'd been dirty and emaciated, her feet bare. But worse than that had been the huddle of her shoulders, the dip of her chin, the terrified wide-eyed gaze.

His father had stolen her fire, the optimistic determination that had first drawn Roman to her at the coffee shop.

Igor would pay for that. He would pay for it all.

"I've been contacted by our friends in the motherland," Mikhail said. "They've grown concerned — about the size of our coffers and the attention. A police officer's wife..."

"Ex-wife," Roman said.

Mikhail nodded his indulgence. "It's not good for us. Our relationships with the politicians and police are built on certain understandings."

Roman knew all about those understandings: make sure everyone sees their cut but don't make them look bad. Don't give the mayor's opponent a line of attack in the next election, a reason for citizens to say he's not doing his job, not keeping the city safe.

"I know." Roman wondered if Valeriya had made a decision about eliminating her father. It had been almost a week since their meeting outside the spa. Would she sell Roman out? "I'm working on a solution, something that will speed things along considerably."

Roman's father would be severely limited without Vladimir Orlov's money. Fighting would become more difficult without the ability to throw large bonuses at the men, to shore up their weapons cache.

Just as important for Roman was the money Valeriya could inject into his own operations. The money he'd gotten from the theft of his father's gold shipment was running low.

They were racing to the bottom of their respective piggy banks.

Mikhail stood and looked down at him. “I hope so. If this continues much longer, you and your father will end up fighting a common enemy.”

The prospect of Russian leadership loomed like a specter over the conversation. That was what this whole meeting had been about.

A warning. Time was running out.

“I understand,” Roman said.

Leadership in Russia stayed out of their way as long as two things remained consistent: the money received from the bratva’s endeavors and the lack of attention on their illegal activities.

The Cold War was over, officially at least. Russian oligarchs — many of whom had been in the government at its height — had too much invested in America for American sentiment to turn against them.

And if the breadth of their criminal activity became known, it would.

Mikhail nodded and turned to go, then seemed to think of something else he wanted to say.

“This woman, is she a weakness?”

“No,” Roman said firmly.

Liar.

Mikhail studied him. “A man’s ability to be honest with himself is his greatest asset.”

He turned his back on Roman and made his way down the boardwalk, his form eventually swallowed by the gloomy day.

RUBY

Their late night-movie had stopped seeming like a mistake and had started to feel like a routine, which was dangerous in and of itself.

Obviously.

But it had been so gradual she'd hardly noticed crossing the chilly abyss she'd put between them, and the truth was, she was lonely.

It had been three weeks since her rescue. She spent every day alone, either in the loft or on the roof deck, tipping her face to the sun or wind, wondering when she would be free to walk the streets again, to take Olivia for pizza or ice cream (there was always enough money in the swear jar for ice cream).

Sometimes she prowled the loft, looking for clues about the man who had barreled into her life, beating a path of destruction behind the happiness they'd so briefly experienced before everything went to shit.

But other than her bedroom, which had clearly been made cozy for her, the house itself was devoid of information. It was like living in a museum.

Talking to her dad and Brooke helped, but they felt so far away it was like dialing home from an outpost on the moon.

She saw Vera when she came to cook, which wasn't every day (Ruby sensed more to that story but didn't want to pry), and Max when he hung around the loft to talk business.

The other men came every few days, but their business seemed serious and confidential and Ruby always made herself scarce during their meetings.

Other than that, it was just her and Roman, and her appetite for giving him the cold shoulder was dwindling by the day.

She didn't know where he'd been today but he'd returned to the loft looking windblown, his face raw and ruddy from the cold. They'd eaten separately — Ruby still took her food to her room when Roman was home, a kind of pathetic last stand — and she'd read for a while, the scented candles flickering on the bedside tables.

She told herself she didn't care about the movie, that it was just another way to pass the time, but she was antsy and unfocused, and she slogged through the chapters of the book she'd been immersed in earlier in the afternoon.

Finally, the time on her phone flipped over to 11:30 p.m., the unofficial start time of their late-night screenings, and Ruby headed for the living room.

Roman was already there, legs extended onto the coffee table in a pose that still seemed strangely casual for a man who had seemed almost formal when she'd first gotten to know him. He was wearing gray sweatpants and a long-sleeve black T-shirt and looking more delicious than any man had a right to look in such haphazard attire.

“Sure you don’t want to pick this time?” he asked.

A bowl of popcorn sat on the coffee table along with two beers.

“I’m sure,” she said.

She’d been surprised to find her lack of agency in the loft had an upside: she didn’t have to make decisions. Her food was prepared by Vera with nutrition and calories in mind — Vera insisted Ruby needed to gain weight after her ordeal and Ruby enjoyed Vera’s food too much to argue the point — and placed in front of her on the table or left for her in the fridge. She wore clothing that had been chosen for her (by Roman or by Vera, she didn’t know) before her rescue, all comfortable and more expensive than any she could have afforded in her previous life.

After years of shouldering the weight of her life with Olivia alone, it had been a relief to relinquish control over the minutia. If she had to be trapped here, she might as well take advantage of it, rest her brain.

That went for movies too. Roman was partial to action movies, which suited her just fine. She wasn’t up for anything heavy and she wasn’t sure she could bring herself to laugh.

He handed her one of the beers and raised the other one.

“Who needs sleep?”

His dark hair was a little shaggy, his features shadowed and angular in the room lit only by the title card on the movie he’d cued up. Unrestrained by his cotton T-shirt, his shoulders looked even broader than usual, and she had a memory of his bare chest under her palms.

He looked roguish, dangerously attractive.

Damn.

She swallowed around her desire and touched her bottle to his. “Who needs sleep.”

It had been their toast the last few nights.

He started the movie and picked up the bowl of popcorn, setting it between them.

She tried to focus on the movie. She really did. But she was all over the place, hyperaware of Roman’s nearness, her breath too shallow to be natural.

Their movie routine had started with a shit ton of tension, eased into a nervous camaraderie, and had now come full circle back to tension.

Except this wasn’t I-hate-being-stuck-here-with-you tension.

This was I-want-to-fuck-you tension.

Bad, bad, bad.

She forced herself to focus on the screen, then wondered if it was her imagination that Roman was breathing louder than usual.

Did he feel it too?

It was worse than the sexual tension that had built between them on their first date to Great N.Y. Noodletown. They’d had some release valves then: conversation, laughter, food.

This was like being suspended above an inferno by the finest of filaments.

One wrong move and she’d catch fire.

She was afraid to even reach for popcorn, afraid if their fingers brushed against each other it would all be over.

You can not fuck Roman Kalashnik. Not now that you know who — and what — he is.

She repeated it silently, like a mantra, willing her body to get the memo.

He shifted on the couch and cleared his throat.

She thought he might say something, but he didn't, and they watched the rest of the movie in silence.

When it ended, the credits rolled on the TV, but instead of reaching for the remote on his phone to turn it off, Roman remained frozen in place on the couch.

Get up, Ruby. Say goodnight. Go to sleep.

Then his voice, anguished and low, broke through the silence. "Do you want to talk about this?"

"About what?" The question sounded dumb even to her own ears.

"About *this*, Ruby."

She hated how much she loved the sound of her name in his mouth.

A caress.

She considered playing dumb, denying the chemistry between them was real, but lying had never been her vibe.

"There's no point," she said.

He reached across the space between them and took her hand. His skin was dry and calloused and his touch sent a zip of electricity to her already-throbbing center.

He tugged gently on her hand, urging her closer. "You'll have to come the rest of the way on your own."

She let him pull her closer, eliminating the distance between them even as her brain screamed every warning known to man.

He turned to face her and she averted her eyes, afraid to meet his gaze. Afraid of what she'd see there.

Afraid of what she would do.

He slid his hand into her hair and tipped her head back. "Look at me, Ruby."

She swallowed and raised her gaze. His eyes glinted like polished steel and for a long moment, neither of them said anything, the room heavy with their unspoken words.

"*This is* the point," he said, his voice gruff.

Then his mouth was crashing into hers, all her careful warnings obliterated by the press of his lips.

She opened for him, their tongues tangling as his hands roamed her body, over her shoulders and down to her breasts. He squeezed, then let his hands travel over her waist as his tongue made feverish strokes in her mouth.

She pushed her hands through his hair, arching her back to get closer to him as she ran her hands across his shoulders and over the peaks of his chest. His tongue was a brand in her mouth, the heat of it dissolving any vestiges of caution.

Her body was a crevasse of need, a great yawning hole desperate to be filled by him.

He grabbed her hips and pulled her onto his lap until she was straddling him. She'd forgotten how big his cock was, but it was impossible to forget now. It nestled against her sex, fanning her hunger for him.

A wave of wet heat rushed to her pussy and she moved her hips against him, completely unashamed to be dry-humping him like a teenager in the backseat of a car.

She'd spent three weeks meeting the most demanding needs of her body — safety, food, sleep. Those needs had given way to this one and she was past the point of deluding herself into thinking she wasn't going to fulfill it.

Their kiss was hot and feverish, their hands urgent as they pulled at each other's clothing like animals, Roman broke their kiss to lift the hem of her shirt, then yanked down her bra to suck at one of her nipples.

She gasped. "Fuck!"

The sensation of his hot mouth on her nipple was almost too much to bear. She clutched at his head and moved her hips over his cock, jutting inside his sweatpants, deliciously close to her pulsing center.

She fumbled for the hem of his T-shirt, desperate to feel his skin, and he pulled back long enough to let her tug it off his head.

Then there was the glorious slide of his warm flesh against hers as he returned to her mouth, her bare breasts pressed against his chest as he squeezed her ass, moving her against his cock until he growled, clearly frustrated.

He moved so quickly she didn't register what had happened until she was lying on her back on the couch, his giant body spread out over hers, his rigid cock pressed between her thighs, their remaining clothing doing absolutely nothing to dampen the lust roaring through her body.

He stared down at her, his gaze fiery, sweeping her face like a lighthouse beacon, searching for answers she didn't

have.

He lowered his head to her neck, kissed his way to her ear, pulled her lobe between his teeth while he pushed his hard cock into the cleft between her thighs.

A shiver ran up her spine and she wrapped her legs around his thighs.

“Tell me to stop if you don’t want me to fuck you, Ruby,” he murmured against her ear.

“It won’t change anything,” she said.

“I know.” He kissed his way along her jaw. “Tell me to stop.”

“No,” she said.

He growled and rose onto his knees, then pulled off her track pants, taking her expensive new underwear along with them.

He devoured her with his gaze, combing every inch of her like he’d done the first time they’d fucked.

“I’d say I forgot how beautiful you are but that would be a fucking lie, Ruby. I’ve thought about nothing but you. Nothing but this.”

She let her gaze travel over his sculpted chest, but it was too painful, too confusing, the inked image of the gladiator going to battle a stark reminder of the world that had brought them together.

The reality of the man who had turned her life upside down.

She didn’t want to think about Roman’s past right now. Didn’t want sympathy to cloud her judgement, to allow her to

forget what this was: a good hard fuck.

That was what she needed, not the emotional entanglement she'd been feeling for Roman before Adam told her who he was, not the feelings that had snuck up on her like a thief.

She reached for the waistband of his sweats and pulled them down, glad he wasn't wearing underwear. She had him in her hands a moment later, and he groaned when she wrapped her fingers around his thick shaft.

“Fuck, Ruby.” He closed his eyes as she stroked him, then pulled her hand away with what looked like effort. “That’s not going to work, sweetheart. Not right now.”

He stood and removed his sweatpants, his gaze never leaving her face.

She was naked except for her bra, still pulled down to expose her breasts, and he got back on the couch and reached behind her to unclasp it, then tossed it aside.

He positioned himself between her thighs and ran his fingers through her folds. “You’re so wet, Ruby. So ready.”

She sighed, pushing against his fingers, the humming need inside her growing to a voracious hunger that demanded to be satiated.

His cock really was magnificent, long and thick with a head that promised to split her open in the best of ways. She'd been nervous the first time he'd fucked her, half-afraid it wouldn't fit, but she wasn't nervous now.

He positioned his engorged crown against her entrance. “Last chance, Ruby. Tell me to stop.”

She looked up at him. “No.”

He pushed into her with a growl that tore through the loft.

ROMAN

He closed his eyes as he sank into her, hardly believing it was real.

Ruby was here, under and around him.

He hadn't dared to believe he'd ever get close to her again and he wasn't about to question his luck now.

She moaned when he entered her, and he gave her a few seconds to adjust to his size, studying her face for signs of discomfort. He knew he was big, remembered her trepidation about fucking him the first time, and she'd been through a lot since then.

He took advantage of the time to drink in the unique beauty of her face, the deep green of her eyes fringed by dark lashes, the dusting of freckles across her nose, the small gap between her front teeth.

He relished the softness that had returned to her stomach, the familiar fullness of her hips. Her breasts were round and heavy, pale pink nipples erect and begging for his tongue.

But then she started to move, her hips rocking as she sought friction on her clit, and he dragged out of her inch by inch before driving back into her warmth.

A shudder ran through his body at the sheer ecstasy of her silken pussy cradling his cock like a velvet vise. He wanted to taste her, to push his tongue inside her, tease her clit until she came against his mouth, but that would have to wait for another time.

He was too hungry for her, too desperate.

And she wasn't complaining. Her eyes were closed, her hands clutching at his bare ass, pushing him deeper as she lifted her hips to meet him, her breath mingling with his in a series of gasps and pants that only made him more turned on.

"Fuck, Ruby..." He grabbed her legs and wrapped them around his hips, tilting her pelvis to give him better access, and felt himself sink deeper into her warmth. "You feel so fucking good, sweetheart."

He bent his head to kiss her, their tongues sparring while he drove his cock into her soaking pussy, then stroked into her again, moving faster as the movements of her hips grew more urgent.

She let out a moan into his mouth, the sexiest fucking thing in the world, and he nipped at her lower lip on his way to her neck, then took one of her rosy nipples in his mouth and sucked.

She gasped, arching her back, and he pulled her hips even closer, sank even deeper.

Her fingers tangled in his hair, holding his head to her breast, and pushed through her channel again and again, relishing the tightening of it around his cock, the signs of her impending release.

There were things he wanted to do to her. Things he wanted to say.

But he was afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing, afraid of breaking the spell.

This wasn't like the other times they'd fucked, when their connection had been new but growing, the trust between them unbroken.

This was more complicated.

Fragile.

And it didn't matter. It was enough.

For now.

"Roman," she gasped, rocking her hips more urgently against his, the only time she'd uttered his name since they'd lunged for each other after the movie ended.

"You going to come for me sweetheart?" He pushed into her faster and harder, his own release building.

"Yes," she gasped.

"Good girl." He slipped a hand between their bodies and found her clit, then circled it with his thumb.

"Oh my god," she moaned. "Oh god..."

"Do it, baby."

He bent his head to one of her perfect tits and sucked the nipple as he slammed into her, the head of his cock buried so deep he hit her cervix.

She cried out, convulsing under him as she let go, and he fell over the edge after her.

He didn't recognize the sound of his voice, a guttural groan that tore through the room as Ruby moved with him, working her clit against his thumb as her body shuddered.

Her sweet little pussy tightened around his cock, and he tunneled through her, not wanting to stop until he'd wrenched every last tremor from her body, until he'd given her every ounce of release she needed.

When she was finished, he pressed his mouth to hers, but she was unresponsive, and he rolled off her, picking up on the shift in energy between them.

She lay there for a minute, panting, then sat up and bent over to grab her clothes. She stood, clutching them in her arms like a shield. "I told you it wouldn't change anything."

He nodded. "I understand."

And the worst thing? The worst fucking thing?

He did.

Even a spectacular fuck — and he was starting to realize every fuck with Ruby was spectacular — couldn't undo the damage he'd done.

"I'm... I'm sorry." She sounded like she meant it.

She turned to go and he watched her walk bare-assed down the hall, disappearing behind the quiet click of her bedroom door.

He sat in the dark, naked, and ran a hand through his hair. He'd never been so fucked-up over a woman, and it took him a few minutes to realize what bothered him most about the intimacy they'd just shared.

It wasn't her refusal to kiss him when it was over. It wasn't even the fact that she'd been in a hurry to leave.

He could have anticipated either of those things once the heat of their passion had cooled.

It was the fact that she hadn't looked at him while he'd been inside her.

Not once.

Like she wanted to pretend it wasn't him.

VALERIYA

“You can wait,” Valeriya Orlov told her driver as she reached for the handle in the backseat.

“Your father doesn’t like—”

“I don’t need a shadow while I buy underwear.” She used her most imperious tone, the one she used when someone had forgotten their place or when they were simply stupid. “I’ll be back in less than an hour.”

He met her gaze in the rearview mirror but didn’t make a move for the door.

She stepped onto the sidewalk in front of Saks Fifth Avenue’s venerable stone building, ten stories of luxury goods ripe for the picking, and clutched her Gucci bag as she headed for the department store’s glass doors.

She pulled her coat more tightly around herself and silently cursed the cold. She hated New York City after Christmas. Without the festive cheer of holiday window dressings, it was gray and drab and she longed fervently to be in the Mediterranean wearing nothing but bikini bottoms and sunning herself on the deck of the superyacht her father quaintly called “the boat.”

Soon.

She passed several shoppers leaving the store with Saks's signature black shopping bags and stepped inside, wrinkling her nose at the dizzying mixture of scents drifting from the perfume counter.

She hadn't been to a perfume counter since she was a girl when her father had helped her choose her first perfume, Oud Ispahan by Dior, which had become her signature scent. It was nearly a thousand dollars a bottle and Valeriya had never given it a thought — then or now.

Her father had more money than he could spend in ten lifetimes and he was still willing to pimp out his only daughter for more power.

He could buy her nice perfume.

She rode the escalator past several floors of apparel merchandised atop white linoleum and exited on the ninth floor, then started toward the lingerie section. She stopped to browse along the way, just to make sure the driver hadn't followed her into the store against her wishes.

Technically he was her driver, but Valeriya was under no illusion: everything and everyone in her world was owned by her father.

Even her.

But not for long.

It hadn't been an easy decision to accept Roman Kalashnik's offer of a partnership. She wasn't a monster. She loved her father in the limited way that love could pass between them.

But she was a realist. He didn't truly love her. She knew this to be true because one didn't use someone they loved.

Or so she'd heard.

She'd never been in love and she was almost certain no one had ever loved her.

It was the one thing the Orlov money couldn't buy, and her attainment of it had taken on an almost mythical quality.

Was it real? Could she find it? Did she deserve it?

They were questions to which she didn't have answers, and she certainly wasn't going to find those answers married to Erik Kalashnik, the manic junkie son of Igor.

The prospect of marrying Roman had been different. She hadn't deluded herself into thinking he loved her now — they hardly knew each other — or even that he might come to love her.

She'd heard love was a fickle thing, dependent on things like shared interests and goals and the ever-elusive chemistry.

But he was a man with ambition, and ambition, she admired.

It hadn't hurt that he was one of the most attractive men she'd ever met in spite of — or perhaps because of — his crooked nose, cold eyes, and a demeanor that whispered of violence.

An erotic thrill passed through her, followed by a whiff of disappointment.

A marriage to Roman wasn't in the cards. He had the look of someone in love — and not with her.

Disappointing, but she was used to being disappointed, had learned long ago to waste no time mourning the things she couldn't have. It was wiser to focus on what she could have,

and right now the most tantalizing offering of all was on the table: liberation.

Satisfied the driver hadn't tailed her into the store, she made her way to the lingerie section. She found Roman already there, looking impossibly huge but right at home as he browsed a rack of bustiers in a shade of deep raspberry.

She joined him, studying the matching lace panties. "Looking for a gift?"

She made a point not to look at him. She didn't believe she'd been followed but she couldn't say the same about Roman, although he was clearly shrewd to still be alive after declaring war on his father.

Still, he was a marked man, and the last thing she needed was to be marked along with him when her freedom was close enough to touch.

"I prefer La Perla," he said.

"You're a wise man, Roman Kalashnik."

He chuckled and she caught a hint of spicy cologne. "If you move toward me to look at the garters, I'll slip the vial into your bag."

"So forward," she scolded. "You don't enjoy foreplay?"

"I love foreplay." His voice hinted at dark and delicious things and she was unsurprised to find herself wet. "But I prefer to focus on something as important as pleasure without fear of a target on my back."

A fresh wave of regret washed over her. They really would have been good together.

"Very well," she said, moving to the rack of garters next to the bustiers. "We'll focus on business. If you insist."

She flipped through the garters mindlessly and a moment later felt Roman bump against her as he bent to check the lower rack.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

She gave him her most withering glare. “What a boor.”

He laughed. “I quite like you, Valeriya Orlov. I look forward to our future friendship.”

“You won’t be rich enough to be my friend,” she said.

“You might be surprised,” he said. “The vial is in your bag. Just a drop or two will do it.”

She swallowed, the gravity of what she was about to do hitting her all over again now that they’d concluded their banter. “And you’re sure no one will know?”

“If they do an autopsy, it will look like a heart attack,” Roman said. “And they may not bother. Your father is old and far from healthy.”

It was true that her father ate and drank like a king — not to mention the disgusting cigars he enjoyed — without regard for his health, but he’d always seemed larger than life to Valeriya, an unstoppable force. It was strange to think of him as a mere mortal, a coroner surveying him through clinical eyes and determining that he was simply another old man dead of a heart attack.

“How long will it take?” Valeriya asked.

She didn’t want her father to suffer. She simply wanted her rightful inheritance before it ended up in the hands of a flunky like Ek Kalashnik and his father because Valeriya had been forced into a marriage she didn’t want.

“It should take effect within ten minutes,” Roman said. “After that, the end will come in under a minute.”

Valeriya forced a deep breath, an unfamiliar wave of anxiety washing over her.

She wasn’t an anxious person, mostly because she had little reason to be anxious. All of her problems could be solved with her father’s money — except the ones created by it.

“All right,” she said.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Me?”

He nodded. “Yes. You.”

“I’m...” She struggled to find the words to describe her warring feelings, then lifted her chin. “I’m fine of course. I’ll transfer the money into your account a couple of weeks after I have access to it.”

Moving money too soon after her father’s death would raise suspicion.

Roman had sent his account information via encrypted message, and for once in her life, she’d had a feeling of control. There would be no seeking her father’s approval for the wire transfer — no seeking his approval for anything ever again.

“Thank you,” Roman said. “I’m sorry you’ve had to make this decision.”

She looked up at him, suddenly curious. “Are you?”

“Yes.” He sounded sincere. “I won’t lie and say I’m sorry you made it, but I am sorry you feel the need to make it. I

understand being forced to play your hand. We have that in common.”

From all she'd heard of Roman's father, Valeriya couldn't disagree.

“Soon we'll both be free,” Valeriya said.

“From your mouth to god's ears.” Roman turned to leave, then stopped. “For what it's worth, I really do think you're a magnificent woman.”

She smiled. “A pity you'll never know for sure.”

“My loss is another man's gain.”

She stared after him, wondering if it would ever be true.

RUBY

“You don’t like it?”

Y Ruby startled at the sound of Vera’s voice, then followed Vera’s gaze to the sandwich on Ruby’s plate.

“What? No! It’s delicious,” Ruby said.

Vera scowled from where she was cleaning up in the kitchen after a marathon cooking spree to stock Roman’s refrigerator and freezer with home-cooked meals.

“You don’t eat the things you like?” Vera asked.

Her Russian accent made Ruby smile. “I’m sorry. I was just thinking about my daughter.”

Vera walked around the island that ran the length of the designer kitchen and took a seat next to Ruby at the dining table. She was wearing her uniform of slacks and a blouse, her gray hair pulled back into her trademark bun, so tight it looked painful.

Vera put a hand over Ruby’s, her dark eyes sympathetic. “It is not natural for a mother to be separated from her child.”

“That’s exactly how it feels,” Ruby said. “Unnatural.”

“Roman will fix this,” Vera said. “He will make it so you’re with your daughter again soon.”

His name hit Ruby in the chest like a backdraft. It had been five days since they'd had sex on the sofa and she'd been angry at herself ever since.

She'd worked so hard to keep her distance in the three weeks she'd been at the loft and it had all gone to shit because of one late-night fuck.

Now she couldn't stop thinking about him, couldn't stop replaying the way his hands had felt on her body, the way his cock had felt buried inside her, completing her like a long-lost puzzle piece she hadn't known she was missing.

Worst of all was the memory of his kiss, his lips both supple and demanding, claiming her mouth like an invading general who planned on taking no prisoners.

She drew in a breath. "I don't think it's going to be that easy. My ex-husband is... difficult."

"Pfft! Difficult!" Vera waved a hand like she was clearing the air of the words. "Nothing is difficult for Roman."

Ruby smiled. "You must care about him a lot, the way you look after him."

Vera came every few days to cook, crafting gourmet meals for Roman and Ruby to eat during the days she wasn't at the loft. She bantered with Roman like a grandmother, their mutual affection obvious.

She laid a hand over her chest. "Like a son. I've been taking care of him and his brother since they were babies."

Ruby didn't know much about Roman's brother Erik, only what Roman had told her before she'd found out he was part of the Russian Mob — that Erik was younger and troubled by addiction and a compulsion to win their father's approval at any cost.

“Do you take care of Erik at his place too?” Ruby asked.

Caution dropped over Vera’s gaze. “Erik lives with his father. I take care of him there, as much as anyone can take care of that boy.”

“Wait... so you work at Igor’s house too?” Ruby asked.

“It’s best not to raise suspicion right now,” Vera said. “I have a family too. My daughter... my grandsons...”

It only took a few seconds for Ruby to get the picture: if Igor knew Vera was here helping Roman — even just to cook for him — she and her family would be in danger.

“But... you’ve worked for the Kalashniks for so long!” Roman was well into his thirties, and Vera said she’d been taking care of Roman since he was a baby.

Vera nodded. “Time is immaterial to Igor. He cares only for loyalty, and loyalty to Igor means making enemies of his enemies.”

“That must be hard.” Ruby was almost embarrassed. She’d been so focused on the consequences of Roman and Igor’s war to her own life that it had never occurred to her that others might be caught in the cross fire too. The thought chilled her. Vera was such a wonderful woman. Ruby would hate it if something happened to her or her family. “Maybe you shouldn’t come here for a while. I can cook for Roman and me.”

Vera waved her away and got to her feet. “Igor is not a king. I do what I want. I simply do it carefully.”

Ruby laughed in spite of the serious situation. She was starting to really like Vera,

“Well, please keep doing it carefully,” Ruby said.

“And you keep eating,” Vera said, removing her apron.

Ruby sighed. “I’m pretty sure I’ve gained back all the weight I lost and then some.”

“Is good to be soft.” Vera grinned, the lines around her eyes deepening. “Is part of being woman. I think Roman will say same thing.”

Ruby’s cheeks burned. “Roman and I aren’t—”

“Pfft,” Vera said, rolling her eyes. “I know exactly what you and Roman are, *zaya*.”

She turned and headed for the hall so quickly Ruby didn’t have time to ask her what *zaya* meant.

“Food in freezer and fridge,” Vera called out on her way down the hall.

“Thank you,” Ruby called after her. “And please be careful.”

She didn’t reply and a minute later Ruby heard the sound of the elevator door closing as Vera left the loft.

She took her sandwich to the kitchen and wrapped the uneaten half in foil, then put it in the fridge. She’d developed an embarrassingly childlike routine in the weeks she’d been at the loft: eating and reading, sleeping and getting fresh air on the deck, more eating and reading and sleeping.

But no more movies with Roman. She didn’t trust herself.

She was drowsy from the food and conversation with Vera. It was time for her afternoon nap.

Roman wasn’t home. He was almost never home during the day and often not at night either. When she asked about his

plans for taking over his father's criminal empire, he simply said things were coming along.

It was a frustratingly bland answer for the obstacle in her path: she couldn't try to get Olivia back until Roman was out of her life and Roman couldn't get out of her life until his father stopped being a threat to Ruby and her family.

She sighed and headed for the hall, making her way past Roman's room. She'd dared to peek inside it once and had been met with a wave of his scent that nearly brought her to her knees with lust. She'd only gotten a glimpse, a mere impression of his private quarters — a moody room with sleek oversized furniture — before she'd shut the door.

She hadn't looked again. She was too afraid of her own desire to risk it.

She paused at the door across from hers and tested the knob.

Locked, as always.

There was another locked door in the other hall, the one that ran opposite this one, the two halls divided by the walkway leading from the elevator to the living space.

The locked doors were doubly intriguing because they were the only ones like them in the loft. This hall held Roman's bedroom suite, the en suite that had become Ruby's, a large bathroom, and the first locked door.

Roman's office — another gloomy, impeccably decorated space — was off the other hall along with a gym, two guest rooms, another bathroom, and another locked door.

Her imagination had conjured all kinds of possibilities for the off-limits rooms: a room where the bratva stored drugs en route to suppliers, a money room with a safe and hoards of

cash, even a torture chamber where Roman could bring his enemies to force their compliance.

None of the possibilities felt right, and more than once she'd been tempted to pick the lock in his absence, to find out what was behind the mysterious doors.

But that would be wrong, a violation of his privacy.

She reluctantly removed her hand from the knob and turned back to her own room.

ROMAN

Roman stood with Max on the sidewalk across from the precinct and watched the doors.

Adam Hale would be leaving at the end of his shift any minute.

Across the street, Georgiy, the man Roman had assigned to tail Adam at all times, stood in the shadows, warned to hang back this time and let Roman take the lead.

“Sure you don’t want to grab him in civvies?” Max asked.

“I’m sure,” Roman said, his eyes on the doors.

Fucking Adam up in uniform was part of the point.

A message: I’m not afraid of you or your uniform.

He’d wanted to come alone, hadn’t wanted Adam to think Roman needed Max to deal with him, but that had been a no from Max. Not because of Adam, who Roman could easily end, but because of the escalating battle with Roman’s father.

And it was escalating. His father was throwing more of Vladimir Orlov’s money at the problem — an advance on Valeriya’s marriage dowry probably. He had more men on the street to intimidate the businesses that worked with the bratva

to continue supporting him even as Roman gave them incentives — monetary and otherwise — for switching sides.

Worst of all, his father had another container coming into the port next month — not gold this time but blood diamonds. Once they arrived, Roman's father would have even more capital and Roman would be poorly positioned to fight it.

The only upside was that the new men his father had brought on were mostly young and untrained, wannabe gangsters who hadn't been raised in their world.

It was a weakness Roman exploited. He sent his men to convince the ones with potential to join his side. The others were terrorized — tailed in an obvious manner so they were on edge 24/7, beaten up during their shifts — until they quit.

He was doing them a favor. Better for them to know now whether or not they could cut it than to find out later when not cutting it meant death.

It was messy, and Roman lived with Mikhail's warning about Russia in his ear at all times.

He was also worried about Ruby. Hence, his visit to Adam.
Speak of the devil.

“There he is,” Roman said as Adam Hale left the station.

He was alone, his partner Deon nowhere in sight. Good. Ruby seemed to like Deon, had said he was the only one on the force that ever asked if she was okay during her abusive marriage to Adam. Roman had no desire to rope Deon into Adam's mess.

Adam checked his phone, then turned left at the bottom of the stairs without so much as a look around. The bastard was walking around like he didn't have a care in the world while

Ruby cowered in Roman's loft, unable to leave or even talk to Olivia.

Hale had been living with the built-in immunity of a white cop, still on the streets even though he'd gotten several citations for excessive force, plus he'd seized custody of Olivia in Ruby's absence because who would deny a father — a cop — custody of his daughter when his ex-wife had gone missing? And who would ever suspect he had something to do with it?

The injustice of it made Roman want to take Adam apart piece by piece.

"Let's go." Roman pushed off the wall and followed Adam across the street, dodging cars to cross the intersection only after Adam had turned down a smaller side street.

Max was with him, but Max wasn't watching Adam. His gaze was wary, sweeping the area, looking for signs they were being tailed by Igor's men.

Fifty feet ahead, Adam headed for O'Toole's, the bar where he stopped for beers every afternoon on his way to pick Olivia up from school. Thanks to Georgiy, Roman knew everything Adam did when he was away from his apartment — every bar he visited, every food truck he frequented, every bodega where he bought beer, lottery tickets, sandwiches.

"Stay on him," Roman told Max. "I'm going to cut him off from the alley."

"Negative," Max said. "I'm not—"

Roman ignored him, heard Max curse behind him.

They'd only be separated for a few minutes, and if they were being followed, Roman or Max would have already spotted the tail.

Roman cut down a narrow alley lined with dumpsters and trash. He jogged, wanting to get to the intersection of the alley and the street before Adam reached it.

The smell of cooking meat wafted through the air, combining with urine and cold asphalt to create a uniquely New York City smell. One of the doors in the alley banged open and a moment later a dark-haired man wearing a stained apron stepped out and threw a bag into the dumpster next to the door.

His gaze passed blandly over Roman. Seeing someone hurry down an alley in the city wasn't exactly breaking news.

Roman reached the end of the alley, made a hard right onto the next busy street, then another right into an alley running parallel to the first one.

He dialed Max and picked up his pace, sprinting toward the street where Adam walked, pedestrians passing both ways in front of the opening.

"Where is he?" Roman asked. They'd scoped out the route beforehand, although Roman had left out the part about leaving Max to tail Adam while Roman cut through the alleys.

He wasn't taking chances on losing the bastard.

"Just passed the first alley," Max said. "Where are you?"

"Second alley."

"He'll be to you in three... two... one."

Roman stepped out of the alley almost nose to nose with Adam.

Anger washed over Adam's face — how dare someone step in front of him — right before he realized he was looking at Roman.

His eyes widened and he reached for his weapon, still in its holster.

Roman grabbed him by the shirt and tossed him into the alley like a bag of trash. Adam was tall, with the wiry muscle of someone who jogged on the treadmill while watching the game.

Roman pulverized men for sport. He wasn't concerned.

Hale went sprawling and Max stepped into the alley behind Roman.

“You!” Hale glared at him and scrambled to his feet. “I guess you didn't learn your lesson last time.”

Roman was only dimly aware that Adam was referring to Ruby, to the fact that he'd set Ruby to be kidnapped after Roman got involved in her life.

He was beyond goading now, in the still quiet place that welcomed him like an embrace. Here there were no feelings for Hale to play on. Even his fury subsided, replaced by the quiet resolve to do what must be done.

That Roman would enjoy doing it was beside the point.

Roman advanced on him, leaning to the right when Adam tried to land a blow to Roman's jaw. It was worse than ineffectual. Roman was so much taller than Adam that when he reached for Roman's face, he was thrown off-balance.

Not a lot, but enough.

Roman gave him a push, the kind a schoolyard bully might deliver to a victim.

It was intentionally mild, designed to humiliate Adam.

It did the job. Hale stumbled, almost losing his footing, and only barely managed to right himself.

Max leaned against the alley, staring blandly at his phone, following Roman's orders not to intervene unless Hale pulled his weapon.

Roman advanced on him, and something in Roman's expression must have scared the living shit out of Adam Hale because he took two steps backwards, stopping when he came up against the brick wall of one of the buildings.

"Motherfucker." Adam pointed at him. "You're going down. You're assaulting an officer of the law."

Roman didn't slow his steps, just kept right on walking until he was within arm's reach of the asshole.

Then he threw a punch and just kept on throwing them.

At first Adam tried to punch back, Then he switched to defense, trying to shield his face.

Finally, he reached for his weapon.

Roman had his own gun out and pressed it against Hale's temple before Adam could even unclip his service weapon. Max was undoubtedly behind him with his own weapon drawn, but it wasn't necessary.

"I'm almost sorry you did that, you *tiny*, pathetic fucking coward," Roman said quietly, pressing the gun harder against Hale's temple.

It would have been more fun to beat Adam to a bloody pulp, but Roman couldn't have him firing his service weapon — and of course the fucker carried his service weapon while he was off duty instead of the smaller 9mm favored by most cops when they were off duty.

Officers had to account for every bullet fired from their service weapons, even when they were off duty, and Roman didn't want to tempt Adam to report their altercation.

“What did you tell Olivia about Ruby?” Roman asked.

Adam didn't answer fast enough for Roman's liking, so Roman kneed him in the balls. Some men would think that was a dirty play, but Roman played by the rules at Basil's, which were basically that there were no rules.

Adam gasped, then groaned.

“I'd start talking if I were you,” Roman said. “There are a lot of things I can do to you that won't impede your ability to spill it.”

Adam's eyes were watering. “I told her that her slut mother was on a business trip.”

The gun cracked down on Hale's forehead before Roman was even aware of making the decision to do it. What could he do? His body had a mind of its own in these situations.

“Fuck!” Adam screamed, blood gushing from the wound on his forehead.

“When did you tell Olivia her mother would be back?” Roman asked.

“I didn't.” Hale was in a hurry to talk now. “I just said she was on a business trip.”

“And what did you plan to tell Olivia when her mother never came home?” Roman asked. “Because we all know you planned for her to never come home.”

“I had nothing to do with that part. That was all—”

Roman wrapped his free hand around Hale's neck and squeezed.

Adam gasped, his eyes bulging. This was fun. He could keep going. Could watch the light leave Adam Hale's eyes, feel his windpipe collapse under Roman's grip.

"Rome." It was Max, calmly saying his name. Telling him to come back.

Roman eased up on Adam's throat. "What were you going to tell Olivia?"

Adam gasped, taking big gulps of the air in the dank alley. "That... that Ruby just hadn't come back."

"So you were going to tell Olivia that her mother had abandoned her," Roman said. "You were going to let your daughter live with that."

"I didn't think—"

Roman removed his hand from Adam's throat and grabbed a fistful of his hair, then slammed his head back against the brick. "No, you didn't. So I'm going to think for you. You're going to pick Olivia up from school. You're going to be nice to her, take her for pizza, ice cream. Then you're going to tell her that Mommy's coming home very soon, that Mommy's going to call her tomorrow after school. And when Ruby makes that call to your phone, you're going to be pleasant, like a fucking adult. You're going to give Olivia the phone. You're going to let her talk to her mother as long as she wants."

"What if—"

"I'll tell you when I'm done!" Roman roared, slamming Adam's head against the brick again. He sucked in a breath, trying to calm the bloodlust surging through his veins. "And then, every time Ruby calls to talk to Olivia — and she's going

to be calling a lot — you're going to let them speak without interference.”

“And if I don't?” Adam rasped.

Roman had to hand it to him. The motherfucker had a death wish.

“If you don't, my men are going to meet you after work next time, and they're going to do all the things to you my father's men didn't get to do to Ruby. And when they're done, they're going to tie a cement block around your ankle and dump you in a very deep body of water so Olivia can go live with her grandpa and aunt. And honestly, that's a pretty fucking tempting proposition, so you should probably accept my terms before I change my mind. What do you say? Do we have a deal?”

“Fine.” Adam tried to nod but couldn't with Roman yanking on his hair. “Yes.”

“And one more thing,” Roman said. “If you want to keep breathing, you won't say a single negative thing about Ruby to Olivia. And you'll be nice to that little girl. No more yelling at her during drop-off. No more making her cry on the way home.”

“How do you—”

“I know.” Roman slammed Adam's head against the wall, saw a trickle of blood creep down the brick. He took a deep breath, forcing his voice steady. “I know. You bet on the wrong horse. Now it's time to pay up.”

He relinquished his hold on Hale's head, stepped back, and lowered his gun.

“I could report you,” Hale said, his eyes bright with newfound freedom.

“Go ahead,” Roman said. “I look forward to seeing the press coverage about the police officer who partnered with a Mob boss to have his ex-wife kidnapped and killed. I’m guessing you weren’t too careful about covering your tracks.”

Men like Adam Hale — and Roman used the word *men* very loosely — never did.

They didn’t think they had to cover their tracks.

Roman was willing to bet Adam had asked a buddy on the force — probably someone from the organized crime beat — about Roman and his father. Any lawyer worth his salt would subpoena those officers and Roman was pretty sure none of them liked Adam enough to lie under oath for him.

Roman turned his back on the man, another insult.

“Let’s get out of here,” Roman said to Max, his weapon still pointed at Adam. “This place reeks.”

VALERIYA

Valeriya poured her father's vodka, then poured a double for herself before removing the vial from her pocket.

She drew in a breath, her heart hammering in her chest.

She'd been sick — unable to sleep, unable to eat — in the days since Roman had dropped the vial into her bag at Saks. She'd tossed and turned in her bed, running over the situation over and over again.

But she always came to the same conclusion: if her father remained alive, she would be forced to marry the detestable Erik Kalashnik, so unremarkable he couldn't even be called a shadow of his older brother, and a drug addict besides.

She would be the daughter-in-law of the contemptible Igor and his disappearing wife, something that might have been bearable had she been married to a man like Roman.

But on her own, with her father's remaining years doubtless numbered even without the poison, she would be a prisoner of his making.

She stared at the drinks on the bar, considering the other option for the hundredth time: she could leave. She could pack her bags and leave this place, make her own way in the world.

The idea was as foreign to her as departing for Mars and just as terrifying. She'd never had a job, hadn't even gone to college. Who needed college when your future was assured, stretched out in front of you like the yellow brick road, this one paved with gold?

She'd never lived on her own, had never even been to a grocery store.

What was it people in America said? First-world problems.

Perhaps, but problems nonetheless, and big ones for someone like Valeriya, as naive as a child in the ways of the world.

The real world anyway.

She was a queen in her own world. She could speak three languages, determine the origin of caviar with a single taste, the most expensive champagne with nothing more than a sniff.

She knew how to seduce and beguile the most jaded of men — except for Roman Kalashnik apparently — and how to dress to impress for any number of occasions and events.

None of those were skills that would allow her to live alone in the world.

But money was an indestructible safety net. With money, everything was possible, attainable.

And didn't she deserve it? She'd never known love, wasn't sure if she even knew what it felt like to be happy. She dulled the gaping hole in her soul with parties and recreational drugs and a long line of men who were as interchangeable as the designer gowns hanging in her closet.

She spent most of her time with her father, listening to him ramble about business and politics, soothing his ego and

attending to its many needs.

Should she sacrifice the rest of her life on the altar of his ego as well? Marry a man she would never even be able to tolerate simply so her father could lay claim to some of the world's fiercest thugs? So he could use them to intimidate his enemies into submission like a personal army?

No, she couldn't bear it.

He was an old man. He'd had his fun, quite often at her expense.

It was her turn.

She took a deep breath and picked up the glasses, then carried them into the adjoining sitting area.

Her father was sitting on the sofa, his feet swollen and mottled, resting on an ottoman.

"There you are," he said. "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten me."

She handed him his drink and kissed his head. "You? Never, Father."

"Thank you, *lisichka*."

Her chest warmed with the sound of the nickname, *little fox*.

She sat on the sofa and watched him take a drink.

RUBY

She was on the sofa reading — it really was an uncomfortable couch and she was surprised to find herself longing for the second hand sofa in her apartment, which she'd always thought was too squishy — when she heard the elevator open, followed by Roman's footsteps.

She picked up her phone to look at the time: 6:05 p.m.

He almost never came home this early.

“Hello,” she said when he entered the room.

“Hello.” He surprised her again by walking not to the bar or the kitchen — where he usually grabbed a drink, the tension between them still thick after the night they'd had sex — but to the sofa.

He sat on the other end, near her feet, bundled in a pair of the wool socks from the drawer in her bedroom.

She shifted. She'd been careful to keep her physical distance, not wanting to send the wrong message about what had happened between them, not wanting him to think she was letting him back into her life.

Because that would be stupid with all that she knew.

“I have something to tell you,” he said, his expression solemn.

“Olivia—”

“Is fine,” he said. “I’m sorry, I should have started with that. She’s fine and so is your father and Brooke.”

Ruby set her book aside. “What then?”

“It’s time for you to call Olivia,” he said.

She swallowed and shook her head. “I’m not doing that to her. Not until I know what Adam has told her.”

“He told her you’re on a business trip. And he’s expecting your call,” Roman said.

She took a deep breath, her chest constricting at the thought of Olivia, thinking Ruby had been on a business trip for two fucking months. As if baristas went to conferences and international meetings.

Not that Olivia would know any of that, but leave it to Adam to come up with the laziest and most absurd excuse imaginable.

At least he hadn’t told Olivia her mother was dead.

Relief washed over her. That had been her big fear — that Olivia thought she was dead, that she’d grieved the loss of Ruby at such a young age. It would make coming back so much harder for them both and would leave Olivia with lasting trauma.

Of course, she’d probably have that anyway, depending on how Adam was behaving as a single parent.

That was the thing about life. Trauma seemed to be part of the deal. Ruby had tried to give Olivia a shot at a normal life

by removing Adam from their home, but that choice had just led to trauma of a different kind: having divorced parents, shuttling back and forth between them, and now this.

“Ruby?” Roman’s voice broke through her thoughts. He looked concerned.

“Yeah, sorry. I just...” Her brain was short-circuiting, sending her down rabbit holes so she didn’t have to think too hard about what Roman had told her. “What do you mean Adam’s expecting my call?”

“I mean I told him you’d call to speak to Olivia tonight,” Roman said. “You won’t get any interference from him.”

She stared at him. “What did you do?”

“We just had a little chat. Nothing to worry about.”

“A little chat?”

He nodded.

She should have been mad. She was supposed to be keeping Roman out of her life, as much as that was possible under the circumstances.

But she couldn’t stop the smile that teased the corners of her mouth. “What kind of chat?”

He gave a shrug of his giant shoulders and something worse than lust blew through her: affection.

Dammit.

“I made it clear that it wasn’t right to keep a child from her mother, that’s all. Luckily, he agreed.”

“He just... agreed? Just like that?” She couldn’t keep the skepticism from her voice.

“Just like that.”

She had a feeling he was leaving a lot out, but that didn't matter right now. What mattered was Olivia.

"I can... I can call her right now?"

"Right now and anytime you want after this," he said.

She exhaled slowly, trying to calm the slamming of her heart. She was suddenly nervous, like she was talking to someone new for the first time. "What if... what if she's forgotten me?"

Roman reached for her hand. She let him take it, because right now she really needed someone to hold her hand. "She could never forget you, Ruby. You're her mother."

Ruby nodded. "So just... call her? On Adam's phone?"

"Just call her. You won't get any trouble from Adam."

There was a certainty in his voice that both chilled and thrilled her. She didn't know what Roman had done, how he'd arranged for the phone call to take place, but she had a feeling it hadn't been simply *a little chat*.

She reached for her phone and looked at him. "Will you stay?"

He squeezed her calf. "I'll be right here."

She sucked in a big breath, like she was getting ready to take a deep dive, and dialed Adam's number.

Her head swam as it rang, a buzzing sounding in her ears. She and Adam had been divorced for over a year and her body still went into fight-or-flight mode when she thought he might be angry.

I am safe in my body.

“Hello?” He sounded the same, but there was an edge to his voice.

Anger? Fear?

“Hey,” she said. “I’d like to talk to Olivia.”

She wouldn’t ask permission. Even now, that was something she wouldn’t do.

She heard a muffled shuffle on the other end of the phone, and then...

“Mommy?”

Ruby stifled a sob. She had to stay calm for Olivia, play along with the business trip story for her daughter’s sake. “Hi, honey! Oh my gosh... I miss you so much!”

“When are you coming back?” Olivia asked.

She was using her sulky voice and Ruby didn’t blame her a bit. It was taking every ounce of control Ruby had to hold it together. “Soon, honey.” She scrambled for another topic of conversation, because the truth was, she had no idea when she and Olivia would be reunited. “How have you been?”

“Fine.”

But she didn’t sound fine. Ruby could picture her daughter toeing the floor with her small feet, angry but unable to express it.

Because Adam was right there?

The thought was like a brick on Ruby’s chest. Was Adam losing it with Olivia now that he had her full-time?

“Tell me more,” Ruby said. “What have you been doing at school?”

Olivia started to open up, haltingly at first, then with more excitement, two months of her life pouring out over the phone.

Two months.

Ruby had missed so much.

Olivia told her about Mr. Pokey, her classroom's new pet turtle, and about how Madison Meyer had thrown up in class during carpet time. She told Ruby about a new kid in her class who "talked funny" but was nice and about how they'd had indoor recess this week because of snow.

Ruby soaked it all in, hardly believing she was actually talking to her daughter after so long apart.

"I'm glad you're having fun at school," Ruby said. "I bet you're having fun with your dad too."

It was a fishing expedition, the only way Ruby could think of to get a read on how Olivia was doing with Adam when he was probably breathing down her neck.

There was a pause, and Ruby wondered if Olivia was looking at Adam, gauging her ability to be honest.

She fought the urge to scream. This was why she'd left Adam, because she hadn't wanted Olivia to have to tiptoe around him like Ruby did, hadn't wanted Olivia to guard her words, censor her feelings.

"It's okay," Olivia said.

The truth was in the dejected tone of her voice, the lack of excitement she'd projected while telling Ruby about school.

"Well, I can't wait to see you," Ruby said. No point pushing a sore subject when there wasn't a thing Ruby could do about it. "I miss you like crazy!"

“I want you to come home now.” Ruby recognized the whine in her daughter’s voice. Olivia was on the verge of losing it, and Ruby had no doubt that wouldn’t improve the situation with Adam.

Whatever Roman had said — or done to him — probably already had him in a foul mood.

“I want to come home too,” Ruby said. “And I promise I’m working to make it happen super soon.”

“Is your business trip almost over?” Olivia asked.

The sound of her daughter’s small voice obliterated Ruby’s sorrow and replaced it with pure unadulterated hatred for Adam.

How dare he. How dare he do this to their daughter.

She didn’t even want to think about his original intent — to eliminate Ruby entirely. Just... dissolve her as if she’d never even existed for Olivia.

Ruby had to force the words out around the fury in her throat. “It is. So close! I’ll be back before you know it. And I’ll call you again tomorrow.”

“You will?” Olivia asked, a note of hope in her voice.

“I will. Same time, okay?”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart,” Ruby said.

“Okay.”

“I love you so much, honey. I can’t wait to hear about your day tomorrow,” Ruby said.

“I love you too, Mommy.”

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow. And Olivia?”

“What?”

“Be good for your dad okay?” Ruby closed her eyes, hating herself for saying it even as she knew she was protecting Olivia. The easier Olivia was for Adam, the better things would go for her.

“Okay. Bye, Mommy.”

Ruby waited for Olivia to hang up the phone, half expecting Adam to get on and rip Ruby a new one for daring to call.

But the line went dead.

She took a deep breath, exhaled it slowly, Olivia’s voice ringing through her heart like an echo.

Roman was still sitting next to her, but she was glad he didn’t say anything while she collected her thoughts. Hearing Olivia’s voice again was a balm to the open wound of her absence, but it was also a reminder.

Olivia wasn’t safe with Adam. Ruby felt it in her bones.

She was too familiar with carefully worded responses to potentially revealing questions, too practiced in the tap dance of trying to sound normal while hiding the truth.

She looked at Roman. “Thank you.”

He nodded. “How is she?”

“She’s...” Ruby shook her head. “I don’t know. I have a bad feeling.”

She waited for Roman to tell her Olivia would be fine, that she was safe, that it was natural for Ruby to feel uncomfortable separated from her daughter.

Instead he just looked at her and said, “We’re going to get her back.”

Ruby didn’t question his choice of pronoun. She’d passed the point where she thought she might fix this herself. The web was too tangled, the stakes too high.

Whether she liked it or not, she needed Roman Kalashnik.

She tried not to think about the fact that she didn’t hate it as much as she should.

She nodded, willing herself to believe it was true.

Roman stood. “You know what?”

She looked up at him, tried not to notice how beautiful he was, how much she still wanted him. “What?”

“We need to get out of here,” he said.

“Out like... out out? Like ‘not on the roof deck out?’”

He smiled. “Out out.”

“I thought it was too dangerous,” she said.

“Leave that part to me,” Roman said. “Can you be dressed for dinner in an hour?”

“Dressed for dinner?” She could hardly comprehend the words after being trapped in the loft for so long. “I don’t think I have anything to wear that falls under the heading *dressed for dinner*.”

“Right,” he said. “That’s my fault. Make it two hours. I’ll have something sent over.”

She smiled in spite of the weird situation. This man and his life were crazy.

“Is that a yes?” Roman asked.

Say no. Say no. Say no.

She couldn't go out to dinner with Roman. It was too much like a date.

“It's a yes.”

ROMAN

He was nervous as he got dressed, which was utterly absurd. He was a grown man, had been on countless dates with women over the years.

And this wasn't a date.

He wasn't fool enough to think Ruby's willingness to go to dinner with him meant that he was being allowed back in her life. She simply needed a distraction, and he owed her one.

He studied his reflection in the mirror: his suit expensive and perfectly tailored but not too formal without a tie. He'd showered while he waited for Ruby's dress to arrive — Max had called a stylist friend to have something sent over — then combed his hair and applied cologne.

New to his room, Ruby was getting ready too. He'd heard the shower running, then the sound of the blow dryer, and had tried not to picture her wet and naked.

His cock hardened and he took a deep breath. Thinking about Ruby always made him hard, and since he did little else but think of Ruby, he'd been walking around with a stiff cock for the better part of the month she'd been living in the loft.

His phone buzzed with an incoming call and he glanced at it, then picked it up when he saw the name on the screen.

“Hello.”

“You’re all set,” Damian Cavallo said.

Damian was the head of the New York Syndicate, the Italian Mafia. Once upon a time, their organizations had been enemies, but Roman had begun seeing his way to a more synergistic relationship.

“Thank you,” Roman said. “I owe you.”

Damian chuckled. “You and Lyon both.”

Lyonya Antonov had forged his own alliance with Damian and the Syndicate when he’d taken control of the Chicago bratva. It had been a shit show and Lyon had needed all the help he could get. Roman heard a rumor Lyon had even met with the notoriously mysterious Nico Vitale, head of the Syndicate, although Nico was now based out of Rome, where he lived with his wife Angel.

“We’re good for it,” Roman said.

“I’m not worried,” Damian said. “I know where you live.”

“Thanks again.”

“Happy to help. We’re not friends, but if there has to be someone on the other side of the fence, we’d rather it be you,” Damian said.

“I appreciate it.” Roman read between the lines: the Syndicate didn’t love sharing territory with the bratva, but since the arrangement was a necessary evil, the Syndicate was pulling for Roman over Igor.

It wasn’t a surprise. The Syndicate’s business model had been remade under Nico and the other men at its helm. They’d moved beyond the crude thuggery of early organized crime, expanding into more modern revenue streams: corporate

espionage, digital money laundering, credit card schemes that stole from corporations instead of the common man.

They had no use for a business alliance with a man like Igor who still saw human trafficking as a viable income stream.

“Let us know if you need anything else,” Damian said.

“Will do.” It was a card Roman would try not to play. Any help from the Syndicate would come with strings attached — now or later.

He hung up and headed for the hall, pushing aside thoughts of business. He may never get a chance to take Ruby to dinner again. He wanted to enjoy it, to forget about his father and the war over the bratva.

He just wanted to sit across from her. Wanted to see her smile and hear her voice and talk about something normal.

The living room was empty and he walked to the bar and was pouring himself a double shot of tequila when his phone buzzed with an incoming text from Max.

Word on the street is Vladimir Orlov is dead. Heart attack.

Roman drew in a breath. So it was done.

Interesting, Roman texted back. **He was an old man.**

Best to play dumb at all times. Just in case.

He thought about Valeriya, wondered how she was feeling. He would reach out — in a professional capacity of course — and express his condolences.

Then he would wait for the promised money transfer, a game changer in his war with his father.

He set the bottle of tequila back on the bar and turned with his drink. He took a sip and heard Ruby step into the hall.

She entered the living room a moment later.

A vision.

She smiled shyly as his gaze swept over her and he took his time drinking her in.

The dress was perfect for her, a deep red that set off the flush in her cheeks. She'd swept her dark hair into a complicated knot at the top of her head and the deep V of the dress's neckline provided an enticing glimpse of the soft curve of her breasts.

The dress had a tapered waistline and flared to an extravagant cascade of layered silk that skimmed her body. It looked like someone had taken scissors to it, the layers falling in artful tiers all the way to the floor.

He could almost feel the silk on his hands as he slid them up Ruby's creamy thighs, could almost hear the soft rustle of fabric as he touched his tongue to her pussy.

Fuck.

He was getting hard again. There was a time to be ungentlemanly but this wasn't it.

He cleared his throat and walked toward her, unable to tear his eyes from her face. She hadn't applied much makeup, just some eye shadow and mascara, a sweep of light color on her lips.

He caught her perfume, wished he could bury his face in her neck so he could smell past it to her skin.

"You look beautiful," he said, resisting the urge to embarrass her with an array of compliments.

“Thank you.” She grabbed the skirt in both hands and looked down at it. “This dress is... well, it’s the nicest dress I’ve ever worn.”

“It was made for you.”

You were made for me.

She looked up at him. “You look nice too.”

“Thank you.” He held out his arm. “Shall we?”

She hesitated, then slid her hand into the crook of his arm.

He felt like the luckiest man in the world.

And with Valeriya’s money, he would soon be one of the most powerful.

RUBY

They had dinner at a boutique hotel in the West Village. It felt almost subversive to be sitting in the cozily lit restaurant, a smattering of other diners murmuring around them.

Ruby had been in the loft for so long she felt like she was committing a cardinal sin.

But if sinning was wrong, she didn't want to be right. It felt amazing to be out, to glide through the city in the dark (she'd cracked a window in the back seat of the car, in spite of the cold, just so she could smell it) and feel the slide of a beautiful dress against her legs when she exited the SUV.

Roman said the hotel and its restaurant were owned by an associate who had personally guaranteed their safety, and she slowly let her guard down as they dined on tender grilled octopus and littleneck clams, ricotta gnocchi with wild mushrooms and perfectly rare steak that melted in her mouth.

They talked about politics and religion (funny how much less loaded those topics were in the face of the other stuff between them) and about their favorite books and movies.

By the time they got to dessert — rich dark espresso, white chocolate and almond panna cotta, chocolate bread pudding —

the wine Roman had ordered and the special occasion had loosened her tongue.

She sat back in her chair. “So what do you do? Exactly?”

He flashed her a ghost of a smile. “This sounds like a trick question.”

“It’s not,” she said. “I already know about your business. In fact, I’ve been up close and personal with it in a way I’ll never forget.”

There was no bitterness in it. Not toward Roman. Not right now.

It was just a fact.

His eyes flashed. “That’s not my business.”

“Then tell me what is.” She leaned forward, mindful of the other diners. “What does the Russian Mafia do to make their money?”

His eyes were fastened on her cleavage, pushed up by her arms and the table.

“Or would you rather stare at my tits?” she asked.

He gave her a devastating grin. “I’m not a fool. I’d much rather stare at your tits.”

She laughed. “Tell you what, you can look as long as you want as long as you also answer my question.”

“You sell yourself short, Ruby.” Something low and sultry had crept into his voice. “I’d do much more than that to stare at your tits.” He sat back in his chair. “But it’s too late to change the terms now.”

She laughed. “A hundred years ago, I think they would have called you a cad.”

“A hundred years ago, they would have called me a titan.” He tapped his fingers on the white linen tablecloth, the murmur of other diners and soft strains of piano music a soundtrack to the exchange. “Do you know the history of organized crime?”

“Can you be more specific?”

“It’s a tale as old as time,” he said. “Disenfranchised people locked out of the income ladder turn to other methods of survival. Every major population who came to America had their criminal faction, ones that have largely been overlooked by the powers that be. Take the Irish and the Italians. They were allowed to commit crimes as long as they followed certain rules — don’t let upstanding citizens catch you doing it, cut in the power players, don’t make a scene. African Americans tried it too. but it didn’t work out as well for them because—”

“Racism,” she said. She’d read something about this somewhere.

He nodded. “Their drug trade was no different than what the Irish and the Italians were doing, than what we were doing. But they were called junkies and thugs. Case in point, many of the Italians and Irish — the old families who came up with my father — are now legitimately wealthy. They’ve invested their ill-gotten gains into lawful businesses, stocks, bonds. Their kids attend Ivy League colleges and ride dressage on Long Island.”

“Then why do those people still commit crimes?” Ruby asked.

“Why do wealthy business people lobby for favorable corporate policy? Why do power brokers get away with manipulating the stock market? You don’t think the

Vanderbilts and Rockefellers got their hands dirty building their empires?” He shrugged. “It’s part of the fabric of capitalism now. History is made not by those who follow the rules but by those who know when — and how — to break them.”

She leaned back. “An interesting history lesson. But you haven’t answered my question.”

“And you’ve broken our agreement.”

She rolled her eyes, then leaned forward so he again had a view of her cleavage. “How’s this?”

His gaze was heated on her tits. “I’d prefer it without the dress but it will do. For now.”

His words sent a shiver of desire up her spine and she clenched her thighs together to stop the throbbing that had started in her pussy.

This was not part of the plan. Talking about his business was supposed to throw cold water on her hunger for him, not amplify it.

“My father’s still doing business the old way,” he said. “Drugs, prostitution, stolen goods, gun and commodity smuggling. It’s part of our... disagreement. These things are changing, the marketplace morphing. More and more of it is moving online and that’s only going to accelerate over the next decade. If one wanted to take advantage of this evolution, one would be wise to get in on the ground floor, so to speak.”

“Is that what you want?” she asked. “To *get in on the ground floor?*”

“Selectively. There are other ways to build wealth in our world now,” he said. “Smarter ways. Cleaner ways. My father disagrees.”

“So you want to take the... business from him to make it better,” she said.

“I want to take it from him to cause him pain,” Roman said, no emotion in his voice. “Making the business better is a bonus.”

Her breath had become shallow. He wasn't trying to be provocative, but she was turned on anyway. He was a powerful man, a man who knew what he wanted and took it.

A man who didn't suffer tyrants.

His father. Adam. Roman wanted to take away their power.

And it all made a kind of fucked-up sense when he said it.

Either that, or she really was losing her mind.

Or maybe both.

“And there's nothing else you'd rather do?” Ruby asked. He was so smart, so well spoken. He could have been a CEO or venture capitalist. “Nothing else you're interested in doing for work?”

His eyes flashed. “Don't do that, Ruby.” There was a warning in it, but not the kind of warning Adam issued when she was toeing the line of his anger. The kind of warning that made Ruby wet. “Don't pretend this is something I have to do. I have an Ivy League education, know more about business and economics than most of the little boys playing with imaginary money on Wall Street.” He held her gaze. “I do this because I choose to do it. It's my business, my world. I won't pretend to be anything else. Not even for you.”

“Is this what you would have said if I'd confronted you after Adam told me?” Ruby asked.

“It was what I was coming to say when I was shot in your apartment after you were kidnapped.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “You were... shot?”

“There were men in your apartment when I got there,” he said. “They took me by surprise.”

The realization hit her like a punch to the chest: Roman had come looking for her. He could have died.

“Are you...” She inhaled. “Was it bad?”

She’d been in such a frenzy to fuck him on the sofa that she hadn’t looked closely at his body. In fact, she’d been determined *not* to look too closely at him, afraid to fall so deeply into the well of her feelings for him that she forgot all about his business.

His new wounds would have been easy to miss in the dark living room, especially since his body had been riddled with scars even before he’d been shot in her apartment.

He gave her a faint smile. “I’m fine now. But I made a mistake not telling you about my business from the beginning. It’s what I was planning to say when I went to see you, but there was never a world in which I was going to walk away from it. Not even for you.”

“Where does that leave us?”

Why are you using the word us, Ruby? There is no us.

“That’s up to you,” he said. “You know I want you.”

The words might have sounded clinical coming from someone else, but from Roman’s mouth they were hot and heavy with meaning.

“Is that all?” she asked mildly. “You want me like a new toy? Like a satisfying fight? Like a good meal?”

He shook his head and held her gaze. “No, that’s not all, Ruby. And I think you know that.” His gaze drifted down to her tits. “Although I wouldn’t say no to eating you like a good meal.”

The moment seemed suspended between them, the murmur of conversation and music in the restaurant receding behind the rapid beating of her heart, the catch in her breath.

“I think it’s time for us to leave,” she said.

His gaze was glued to her face and when he spoke, his voice was filled with hunger and dark promises. “I couldn’t agree more.”

ROMAN

It took less than fifteen minutes to pay for the suite. Then they were in the elevator, gliding up to the tenth floor, the sexual tension thick between them.

He didn't analyze it. Didn't think about what it meant for them, for their future together, whether it meant anything at all.

After what he'd done, every moment with her felt like an unexpected gift. He opened them greedily, like a box of chocolates, devouring one right after the other out of the fear that someone might take the whole thing away before he could taste them all.

The elevator door glided open and he placed a hand on the small of her back, the fabric of her dress erotic under his palm only because he knew her warm flesh lay underneath it.

They didn't speak as they made their way to the door of the suite, and Roman wondered whether she spent any time asking herself the questions he avoided, if instead of viewing every moment together as a gift, she viewed them as a curse, their attraction a compulsion she seemed no better at fighting than him.

Roman stepped forward, slid the key card into the slot, and watched the light turn green.

He opened the door and stood back to let Ruby enter first. He didn't want to lead yet. He needed to know she was walking over the threshold of her own volition, that she wanted what was about to happen as much as he did, even if she didn't want to want it.

He followed her into the entry of the suite and let the door swing closed. He locked it, then turned and found her staring at him in the glow of the light cast by the single table lamp that had been turned on in the suite's living room.

He waited, giving her a chance to change her mind. When she said nothing, he advanced on her.

He slid his hands into her hair and backed her against the wall in one motion, crushing her mouth under his, taking possession of her with his tongue.

She opened to him hungrily, her arms coming up around his waist, her hands grabbing his back.

Kissing her was like coming home, and he pressed her against the wall, relishing the way her body molded to his, her softness a perfect counterpoint to his hardness.

He swept her mouth with his tongue, cradling her face in his hands, stroking her cheeks with his thumbs. Her skin was like velvet, and he kissed his way along her jaw and down her throat, wanting to cover every inch of her with his mouth.

"Ruby, Ruby, Ruby..." He murmured her name like a spell as he kissed her chest. He slipped a hand into the bodice of her dress and cupped her breast, thumbed her nipple. "I'm desperate to taste you."

He withdrew his hands and knelt at her feet, looked up at her like a man at worship. Her hair had come loose during their kiss, and she stared down at him with glassy eyes, her cheeks flushed, lips parted.

He slid his hands up her legs, his palms sliding along the silky flesh of her calves, up to the swell of her thighs. He tapped her right calf. "Lift your leg, sweetheart. Lean against the wall."

She tentatively lifted her leg and he rested it on his shoulder, then felt her weight shift as she leaned back against the wall.

Now she was open for him, the scent of her pussy hitting him like a drug.

He pulled aside her black lace panties and ran a finger through her slick folds. "Fuck Ruby... you're so wet."

A strangled moan escaped her throat as he stroked through her slit, and he looked up to find her head tipped back to the wall, her eyes closed.

He spread her open and licked her from one end to the other, taking his time, savoring the sweet taste of her desire on his tongue.

"Oh my god," she moaned.

She slid her fingers into his hair and he circled her clit with his tongue, flicking and lapping. She dropped her thigh open a couple more inches, giving him better access, and he took full advantage by sliding two fingers inside her.

Her breath came in little gasps as he drew her clit into his mouth, sucking in time to the motion of his fingers.

She gasped. "Fuck!"

He couldn't get enough. He wanted to bury his face inside her sweet pussy, lick every drop from her wet flesh.

She moved her hips in time to his rhythm, her hands tightening in his hair as he slid his fingers all the way inside her and dragged them back out while he worked her clit, feeling the little bud swell under his tongue as she got closer to orgasm.

He moved faster, pushing his fingers deeper inside her, lapping at her clit like a wild animal, burying his face in her juices.

“Oh god...” she moaned.

She was going to come, was holding his head in place, making it clear he was on the right track as she sought the stimulation of his tongue, the penetration of his fingers.

He kept up the pace as she climbed, his cock painfully engorged, desperate to be buried inside her warm wet pussy.

“Oh god... oh god... oh god...”

He pressed against her G-spot and drew her clit into his mouth again, then felt her shudder against his face as she let go.

She cried out into the room, her grip on his hair painful enough to make his cock throb with excitement, the movement of her hips grinding her soaked pussy against his mouth and fingers.

He didn't slow until she released the pressure on his hair, the tight coil of her body loosening as she collapsed back against the wall.

He stood and unzipped his pants. Her chest rose and fell with her labored breathing and her eyes were closed.

She still didn't want to look at him while they fucked?

Fine.

He turned her around rough and fast.

Maybe too rough and fast.

Easy, he told himself. You're not in the playroom. And this is Ruby.

When he spoke, his voice was raw from the effort of holding himself back. "Hands on the wall, sweetheart."

RUBY

She followed his command — and it was a command, despite the *sweetheart* that came along with it. This was something she'd liked about Roman from the beginning: his quiet authority, even in bed.

Especially in bed.

Once upon a time, Ruby had been adventurous about sex, had even enjoyed it when Adam took control in bed. Then, he'd taken a different kind of control over the other parts of her life and sucked the appeal out of it.

But despite Roman's command, she'd never once been afraid of him — not unless she counted the dark thrill that ran through her when they were fucking — and she wasn't afraid now.

She put her hands on the wall, her body still on fire. The climax Roman had delivered with his mouth had only primed her for more of him and she shuddered as he unzipped the beautiful dress.

There was something erotic about being undressed from behind. She couldn't see him, but she felt him push the dress off her shoulders, felt him ease it over her hips before it slid to

a silky puddle around the Louboutins that had been delivered with the dress.

The hotel room wasn't cold but she shivered as he unhooked her black lace bra, every brush of his fingers against her skin an electric shock that went straight to her core.

He pressed against her from behind, his massive cock hard against her ass as he lifted her hands from the wall to remove the bra before tossing it to the floor. She moved her ass against him instinctively, her pussy pulsing with hunger all over again, demanding to be filled by him.

He chuckled low and dark in her ear. "Patience, sweetheart." He hooked a finger in her lace underwear and ripped them off as easily as if they were paper. "Won't be needing these."

Then she was naked, the crispness of his shirt and the wool of his pants sending a sensual thrill through her body as they brushed against her exposed flesh.

His hands grazed her ass, and then the hot length of his cock nestled between her ass cheeks.

She drew in a breath and closed her eyes against the tide of lust that roared through her body.

He slid his hands up her spine, taking his time, then slipped them around to cup her breasts. "You have the most perfect tits, Ruby," he murmured against her neck. "In fact, every inch of you is perfection."

His honeyed words were dangerous. They made her feel soft and warm toward him. Made her forget what he was. She was too tempted to sink into them, let them carry her down to the dark depths she'd been fighting against ever since Adam had presented her with the manila envelope.

She pushed back against Roman's rigid cock. It was easier — safer — to seek refuge in the heat of her desire. That was pure biology. She couldn't be blamed for the needs of her body.

“You're not in charge here, Ruby.” There was an edge to his voice that scared her in the best of ways and a fresh rush of wet heat rushed between her thighs. “How does that make you feel?”

Her breath caught in her throat as she forced herself not to push against him. “Scared,” she panted.

“Is that all?” he asked against her ear.

“Excited,” she gasped.

He chuckled again. “That's what I thought.”

She heard the rustle of plastic and knew he was getting a condom, vaguely registered that they hadn't used one in the living room, then forgot all about it as he slid the tip of his cock through her folds until it bumped against her clit.

He was so close to being inside her.

She bit back the temptation to say *please*. To beg.

She didn't need to, because a second later he pushed into her, so slowly that she felt every inch of him as her body expanded to allow him entry.

“Oh my god,” she moaned.

It was all she could ever seem to say when he filled her.

An exclamation of awe.

“Nothing in the world feels as good as being buried inside you, Ruby.”

He sounded almost pained, the words raw with something she couldn't define.

Her hands started to slip from the wall, her desire obliterating everything but the need to fuck, to reach the climax that was building at her center again.

"I said hands on the wall, Ruby. I'll tell you when you can take them down."

The edge in his voice again. An order.

She put her hands back on the wall.

"That's my good girl," he said.

She felt the same kind of relief she'd experienced in the loft over the last few weeks. She didn't have to think here.

Didn't have to decide.

Roman would tell her what to do and she would do it.

He dragged slowly out of her, every inch a loss until the moment he plunged into her again.

"Feel how you take all of me, Ruby? Every inch. You were made for me."

She met his thrusts with the movement of her hips, pushing back against him when he drove in, pulling away when he withdrew, the room silent except for the sound of their frenzied breathing and the primitive soundtrack of their fucking.

It was the way he'd fucked her the second time in her apartment, the weekend he'd stayed when Olivia had the allergic reaction to her vaccine. There was something animalistic about the way he pounded into her, occupying

every inch of her body, filling her to capacity until she thought she might split open.

They moved faster, their movements coordinated in an instinctual dance as they both climbed toward release.

Roman reached one hand around her body to pinch one of her nipples while the other one circled her clit and she raced for the top, leapt into the light.

Her body convulsed as she came, filthy words spilling from her mouth as he groaned behind her.

She came long and hard, her pussy clamping down on his cock, forcing him to tunnel through her, but he didn't stop moving until she was done, her face pressed against the wall, arms limp and unable to hold her weight.

For a long moment, there was nothing but the gasps of their breath, slowly returning to normal, Roman still inside of her.

She tried not to think about the fact that she never wanted him to leave.

“I don't know what this means,” she finally said.

Because she didn't, and she didn't want to be dishonest.

“I know,” he said, kissing her shoulder. “It's okay.”

But she heard the torment in his voice. Knew he was lying.

To her. To himself.

ROMAN

Roman's footsteps echoed on the concrete as he walked through the empty warehouse.

"It's definitely big enough," he said. "And I like that it's on the water."

"Those were my thoughts too," Max said.

Roman didn't mention the warehouse's other attribute: a view of the Statue of Liberty, one of the only places in the city with a full-frontal view of the monument.

It seemed too fanciful to mention, that he looked forward to a future in which the warehouse had been built out as a headquarters for his army, a future in which he would gaze out at the statue — a universal symbol of freedom — from the warehouse's old factory windows.

Then he would think of his father — broken, penniless, and probably dead.

Roman would be truly free. And so would Ruby, although her freedom meant another kind of exile for him, one where she went on with her old life without him, probably tried to forget he ever existed.

"It's going to take a lot to retrofit it for our use," Max said. "Especially if we want to develop the waterfront."

“We’ll have it,” Roman said. It had been a week since Vladimir Orlov’s death and Valeriya had been in touch to assure him the money would be transferred in a few more days.

Soon, Roman would have more than enough capital to renovate the warehouse as a proper headquarters for his men. More than enough to put the final nail in his father’s coffin.

And not a moment too soon.

Valeriya had broken off her engagement with Erik — Roman would have killed to be a fly on the wall when his father realized he was losing access to the Orlov fortune — but Igor’s diamond shipment was due to arrive in less than a week. If Roman hoped to prevent his father from refilling his war chest, he would have to incentivize his father’s buyers to pass on the shipment.

That meant money — and a lot of it.

“Word is Erik is spinning out,” Max said.

“To be expected,” Roman said, walking to one of the big windows overlooking the water. His brother’s sobriety was tenuous under the best of circumstances. He’d undoubtedly banked on currying favor with Igor through his marriage to Valeriya and the ensuing influx of capital.

If Roman had to guess, he’d say his little brother was in a hotel somewhere, shooting up and getting drunk, giving in to the siren’s call of the substances that had always had a dark hold on him.

Roman didn’t relish the idea. He had no professional respect for his brother, who was better suited to a simple life of routine and discipline, but Erik was still his blood. Roman

didn't wish him harm. He — and his impending marriage — had simply been in the way of Roman's plans.

The same couldn't be said of Roman's feelings toward Igor. Roman imagined his father screaming and shouting at Konstantin while Kon stood helplessly by, imagined his father watching the promised money disappear with the news of Vladimir Orlov's death, the dissolution of Erik's engagement to Valeriya.

With any luck, the old man would die of an aneurysm, saving Roman the trouble of further humiliating and killing him.

Roman was mesmerized by the view, Lady Liberty gleaming like a beacon in the March sunshine. "Let's make an offer. Say... eighteen million."

It was nothing to Valeriya, who was inheriting a fortune worth billions.

"Okay," Max said.

"Good." Roman headed for the door of the warehouse. He would need to appropriate one of the bratva's service holdings as a recreational headquarters for his men.

Not Venus, the strip club used by his father. Roman needed something else. Something that hadn't been used before. Something classier. A restaurant or club.

Max's phone rang as they stepped out into the cold sunlight.

"Yeah?"

Roman didn't think anything of it until Max stopped moving.

He turned to look at his best friend, the one person he trusted, and knew something was wrong.

Max was frozen in place, his expression impassive as he listened to whoever was on the phone, but Roman knew him all too well.

“Fuck,” Max said.

And now Roman was truly concerned. Max rarely displayed emotion. It was one of many reasons they worked as partners. As brothers. When Roman was lost in his fury, it was Max’s steady voice that pulled him back.

“Tell the men to stay the course,” Max said. “For now.”

“What is it?” Roman asked when Max ended the call.

Max hesitated. “Valeriya Orlov is dead.”

And just like that, Roman’s dreams slipped through his fingers like sand.

RUBY

Ruby stared out at the city, gleaming under the bright winter sun. It had been harder to stay at the loft since her night out with Roman. She'd had a taste of normalcy and it had been too sharp a contrast to her life of confinement.

Plus, there was Roman.

Or more specifically, her feelings for Roman, which were an absolute shit show.

She'd stopped denying she wanted him a long time ago. Why bother when every time he brushed against her in the kitchen her body came alive? When she was all too happy to let him fuck her at every opportunity?

It hadn't happened since their night out at the hotel, but only because she'd been careful to avoid him in the loft, denying herself even a drink of water when she was thirsty at night until she was sure he'd gone to bed.

If he was wounded by her hot and cold treatment, he didn't show it, and she often wondered if he was a man of few emotions or if he'd simply become practiced at hiding them.

She guessed the latter, because he'd been giving her glimpses of them before everything had fallen apart between

them. But she didn't like to think about that because that meant he'd rebuilt the moat around his heart, and the fact that she cared at all about that told her she was screwed.

The only bright spots in her day were her conversations with Olivia every afternoon when she got home from school. Ruby would wait anxiously for the clock to hit five p.m., then dial Adam's number. She still expected him to give her shit, or worse, to deny her request to speak to Olivia, but he simply handed the phone to Olivia without a word.

Whatever Roman had said to him — done to him — had obviously made an impression.

She opened her palm and looked at the hair pin in her hand. She'd paced the apartment all morning, restless as a confined cat, before homing in on the locked doors.

Why were they locked? What was behind them? What could Roman possibly be hiding now that she knew about his business?

She could have asked him, but she still didn't trust him to tell the whole truth, not after what he'd kept from her in the beginning. She didn't want to give him time to clean up whatever was in there, to manufacture an explanation.

She wanted to see for herself.

She chewed on her lip, then marched toward the halls leading to the bedrooms: one containing hers and Roman's and one locked door, the other containing his office, the guest rooms, and the second locked door.

She hesitated. Which one should she try first?

She went down the hall with Roman's office and stopped at the locked door. It looked like all the others — the office

and guest bedrooms, the bathroom — but its contents were obviously different.

Something worth hiding.

She slipped the hairpin into the lock, grateful it was a simple interior lock and not a padlock or something more complicated. Clearly Roman hadn't foreseen the need to keep anyone even remotely determined out of the room, probably because until Ruby had come to stay, he'd lived alone.

She wiggled the pin, playing with the placement of its two points, closing her eyes to feel for the inner workings of the lock. Twice she thought she had it, but nothing happened when she turned it.

On the third try, the lock turned.

“Yes!” she said softly, feeling victorious.

She straightened and took a deep breath, then twisted the knob.

The room was dark, and she felt along the wall for a switch, flipped it, and was surprised when the room was bathed not in the harsh glow of an overhead fixture but in soft pink, clearly a result of colored light bulbs.

At first, her brain couldn't compute what it was seeing. She scanned the room, taking it all in — the padded table with leather cuffs and straps at each end, the walls lined with an array of what looked like tools, the giant cross at one end of the room.

Then she saw the silk-covered platform — a minimalistic bed — and understood.

She sucked in a breath and stepped deeper into the room, her pulse racing.

She ran a hand along the leather table, lifted the cuffs, surprisingly heavy. She walked to the wall of tools that weren't really tools — not the way she'd first thought anyway — and removed a leather flogger from its hook.

Pulling back her arm, she threw it forward, then jumped when she heard the crack of leather on the marble floor.

She placed it back on the wall and touched a hand to the other objects on the wall — nipple clamps and textured paddles, an assortment of feathers attached to various poles, collars and dildos and whips.

By the time she got to the cross — a giant X with cuffs at every end, clearly designed to strap someone to it — she was wet, desire surging through her body like a river about to jump the bank.

She was running a hand along the X when she heard Roman's voice behind her.

“Something catch your eye?”

ROMAN

He'd been beside himself with guilt when he'd walked out of the elevator, his mind twisting with the news of Valeriya's murder — and there was no doubt in his mind it was murder.

This was his fault. He was the one who'd encouraged Valeriya to seek her freedom by eliminating her father.

He was a one-man wrecking crew.

He'd still been getting his head around the implications to his war with his father when he'd walked into the loft and found Ruby in the playroom.

Now he stared at her across the soft glow of the room, wondering what she was thinking.

“What is all this?” she asked.

He leaned against the doorjamb and held her gaze. “I think you know.”

She looked around. “You... you like to use this stuff during sex?”

“I like a lot of things, Ruby. As you can see.”

She shook her head. “But you never...” She licked her lips. “You never did any of this when we... when we...”

He lifted his brows. “Fucked?”

It was too simple a word for what it felt like to be inside her, to bury his face in her pussy until she came against his mouth.

She nodded.

He shrugged. “I enjoy fucking you, Ruby. However it happens. But I do have certain... appetites we never had the opportunity to explore.”

“You like to... hurt women?” Her voice was small and he resisted the urge to go to her, pull her into his arms, promise that she would never be hurt by his hand unless she wanted to be hurt for her own pleasure.

“No,” he said firmly. “I don’t hurt women. I give them pleasure. And some women find pleasure in being submissive. In giving up control.”

He’d chosen his words carefully. A question described as a statement because he’d had a feeling since the beginning that Ruby might be a born submissive. That she might be tired of being in control but unable to express that fatigue sexually.

Her lips were parted, her cheeks flushed, and his cock stirred in his trousers. She was here, in his playroom, like he’d dreamed a thousand times.

He could strap her to the cross, run a tickler down her naked body until she moaned, flick a flogger across her tits until she begged him to fuck her, eat her sweet little pussy until she dripped onto the marble floor.

“I... see,” she said.

“Do you?”

“I don’t... I don’t know.” She swallowed hard. “So you have sex with women who like giving up control. That means you find pleasure in... taking it?”

“Yes.”

She looked around the room, like she couldn’t quite believe it was real, Alice in a new kind of Wonderland. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. This is my... thing. It doesn’t have to be part of our relationship.” He waited for her to correct him, to tell him what they had was no longer a relationship, and was relieved when she didn’t. “In any case, you could have asked to see it. I would have shown you.”

“I didn’t think you would,” she said. “I figured it was locked for a reason.”

“It was,” he said. “You’ve been through a lot. I didn’t want to scare you, to pressure you.”

She held his gaze. “I’m not scared.”

His cock was hard now, begging for her mouth, the haven between her thighs.

But that was better saved for another time. Better for this discussion to be clinical, as clinical as was possible with the woman of his dreams finally standing in his playroom.

“Good,” he said. “You can ask me anything, Ruby. Always. I promise to always tell you the whole truth.”

He would never make the mistake of lying to her again.

“Okay,” she said. “What’s in the other room? The one with the locked door across from mine.”

He straightened. “Follow me.”

RUBY

Her stomach twisted as she followed him down the hall. After seeing the pink-lit room with its many instruments of pleasure (pain?), she couldn't imagine what could be hiding behind the other locked door.

“I didn't show you sooner because I didn't want to upset you,” Roman said, removing a set of keys from his pocket.

What the actual fuck? she thought.

She felt like she was in a fun house hall of mirrors. Nothing had been as it seemed since the moment Roman Kalashnik had pulled Adam off her in the alley behind Roasted.

He unlocked the door and pushed it open, then stood back to let her enter before him.

She hesitated, feeling like she was on the threshold of something life-altering. Like once she stepped through the door, once she knew what was on the other side, there would be no going back.

She stepped inside and gasped.

Her hand flew up to her mouth, tears stinging her eyes even before she could process what she was seeing.

The reaction was visceral, her body remembering what her mind had been trying to forget.

She took in the room: the pale pink walls, the white iron bed, even the comforter was the same.

Roman flipped another switch and fairy lights glowed against the walls. He stepped past her into the room and bent to the nightstand and a moment later, a familiar parade of unicorns and rainbows danced across the walls from the projector nightlight.

“How did you... It’s the same,” she said softly. “The exact same as Olivia’s room in my apartment.”

“Not the exact same,” Roman said from the doorway. “But I got as close as I could.”

The shelves were the same ones Ruby had bought at Ikea — she knew from the other furnishings in the loft apartment that Roman wasn’t an Ikea kind of guy — and were lined with picture books and stuffed animals.

She shook her head and turned to look at him. “How did you do this? *Why* did you do this?”

“I wanted Olivia to have a comfortable place to live if we got her back before it was safe to go back to your apartment,” he said. “I hope I didn’t overstep.”

She stared at him, shifting on his feet. He was a big man, a hard man, and yet he looked more uncomfortable, more uncertain, than she’d ever seen him, more so even than when she’d first been rescued and she’d barely been able to look at him.

She flung herself against him and wrapped her arms around him. A second later, his muscular arms closed around her like a sheltering oak.

“Thank you,” she said against his chest. “Thank you for doing this for me. For us.”

He stroked her hair. “I’d do anything for you and Olivia.” His voice was gruff. “Anything.”

She looked up at him, afraid of what she saw in his eyes.

Afraid of what it made her feel.

For a split second, she balanced on the precipice of two equally powerful desires: to stay safe and to press herself against him. To look into his eyes as she unbuttoned his shirt, as she took him inside her body.

She forced herself to step back. “This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. For us.”

“Well, now you know it’s here,” he said. “We’ll leave the door unlocked so it will be ready when she comes home.”

She didn’t argue his use of the word *home*. Home for Olivia was where Ruby was and vice versa, and right now, Ruby was here, in Roman Kalahsnik’s apartment.

In his life, in a manner of speaking.

“Thank you,” she said.

He hesitated. “I’ll leave you alone. Let me know if there’s anything I missed.”

She nodded and watched him leave, the wall she’d built around her heart — the one designed specifically to keep Roman out — crumbling into a pile of rubble at her feet.

ROMAN

He tried to remember if Basil's had always been this packed or if it was more crowded than usual. He hadn't come to fight since before Ruby had come to stay in the loft. He'd been too eager to see her, had lurked around like a lovesick teenager hoping for a chance to say something — anything at all — to her.

But now he needed to fight.

No, that wasn't exactly right. He needed to feel the crunching of bones and dissolving of flesh, but this time he needed it to be his own.

He pushed his way through the crowd to the bar, ordered a double shot of tequila, and downed it in one go before returning the glass to the bar and making his way to the basement.

The crowd was more raucous downstairs, the thump of music drifting up the narrow staircase and fighting for attention around the shouting of patrons preparing to watch the fight.

It was a preamble to their real reason for being at Basil's, a kind of foreplay. The VIPs invited to the underground fight

club at Basil's weren't interested in clubbing and hooking up, not until the fight was over anyway.

They wanted violence. Blood. Pain.

It was all hidden under the veneer of the drinks and music that took place before the fights, but they could have gotten that anywhere. They came to Basil's to scratch their itch for pain, all of them too scared to face it more personally.

Roman held them no ill will toward them. The spectators were part of the fun. Without them, there would be no fighting at Basil's. Besides, everyone had itches that needed scratching.

Roman wasn't one to judge.

He'd been able to table his guilt when he'd been talking to Ruby in the loft, explaining the playroom and the bedroom he'd had made for Olivia. There hadn't been room for the shame that weighed on him like a lead blanket on the way home from the warehouse after they'd found out about Valeriya's murder.

Then Ruby had retreated to her room, something she did when she was trying to process something, when she wanted space from him, and it had all come crashing back.

Valeriya Orlov had been killed on the cusp of her freedom and it was Roman's fault, although that wasn't what the media was reporting. According to them, Valeriya Orlov, daughter of one of the wealthiest men in the world, was mugged on her way out of a restaurant, shot for her Gucci handbag and whatever it held.

Roman knew better. Valeriya always traveled with a bodyguard.

Always.

It came with the territory of being Vladimir Orlov's daughter.

Which meant her bodyguard had either been (intentionally) derelict in his duty or he'd pulled the trigger himself.

Either way, Roman had no doubt the order had come from his father. Who else when Valeriya's own father was dead? Who else had a stake in keeping Valeriya from inheriting all that money?

And Igor did have a stake in it. Valeriya had broken off her engagement with Erik, withdrawing the promise of her dowry. Even if Igor hadn't known about the arrangement between Valeriya and Roman, he'd know the money wouldn't be coming to him, and not getting what he wanted was reason enough for Roman's father to exact revenge.

Roman nodded at the spectators and staff who recognized him on the way to the makeshift locker room. None of them knew he owned Basil's, that he'd purchased it for the purpose of creating the underground fight club in the basement.

It was one of very few places where no one looked at him with either reverence or disgust. Here he was just another man looking for a fight.

He entered the changing room and shut the door, leaving behind the noise of the basement, the crowd getting rowdier as the hour got later, the fight imminent.

He stripped off his shirt and rolled his shoulders, then twisted from side to side, testing the gunshot wound he'd taken to the chest in Ruby's apartment. The stitches had long since been removed but the wound could still be tender. It wouldn't stop him from fighting, but he liked to know what he was working with before stepping into the figurative ring.

The music disappeared and a roar went up from the crowd. Kellen, the MC, was probably making his way to the front, getting ready to hype them up as he introduced the fighters.

Roman didn't know who he'd be fighting and he didn't care. It was irrelevant to his usual purpose — beating another man bloody — and irrelevant to his purpose tonight.

Normally he bounced on his feet to get the blood flowing before a fight, psyching himself out for the fun ahead. Tonight he sat on the bench, resting his elbows on his knees, thinking about Valeriya.

About Ruby. About Olivia.

He was an atomic bomb. A destroyer of everything in his path.

Because of him, Ruby and Olivia were separated. Ruby had been kidnapped and held prisoner. Olivia was living with a man Roman wouldn't trust to watch a dog, let alone a child.

And Valeriya was dead. She wasn't as innocent as Ruby and Olivia, but in her own way, she'd been a victim too — of her environment, her upbringing, her father.

What chance had she had to choose another life when her father had made sure she was equipped only for the life he'd sanctioned?

She hadn't deserved to be gunned down in the street.

For the first time, Roman wondered if the bratva was worth it. Even his vendetta against his father seemed small compared to the lives that had been ruined in his exacting of it.

He wondered if it was time to call it quits. Approach his father with an agreement: leave Ruby and Olivia alone forever in exchange for Roman's withdrawal.

He could leave the country. Start over doing something else. Something *honest*. Wasn't that what people said?

Nothing wrong with an honest day's work.

The thought left him cold and uninspired, but it would be worth it to put an end to the destruction his takeover was raining down on everyone in its path.

"You ready for a fight?" Kellen shouted on the other side of the door.

The crowd roared.

"That's what I thought!" Kellen said into the mic. "So tell me what you want!"

"Blood!"

"Fuck yeah! You hear that fighters?" He directed the question to Roman and Roman's opponent, preparing for the fight in another room. "They want blood!"

"We want blood!" the crowd chanted. "We want blood! We want blood!"

The irony of a bunch of Wall Street bros who'd never fought a day in their lives chanting for blood with women who probably had to get themselves off after their men went to sleep wasn't lost on Roman.

"Let's meet our first fighter," Kellen shouted. "It'sssss... Wolverine!"

Roman registered the name, had a flash of a tall, meaty man who let his fingernails grow long for fights, using them to claw and scrape. He'd tried to take Roman's eye out once, but Roman had blocked him, then bent his fingernails back until they'd bled.

He'd do plenty of damage if Roman let him.

The crowd barked and howled like wolves and someone cranked the music while Roman's opponent made his way to the fighting area.

Roman got to his feet and waited.

"And fighting the wolf, we have... the Gladiatorrrrrr!" Kellen shouted into the mic.

The crowd cheered, although there were always a few boos in there too. Roman never minded those. Show him a universally liked man and Roman would show you someone who didn't fight for anything.

He burst through the door and jogged down the path that had been created from the changing rooms to the fighting area.

The crowd was still making noise, but he didn't hear any of it. They'd gone quiet behind the faces in his mind: Valeriya and her sly smile, Ruby's gaunt face after her rescue, her eyes haunted.

And Olivia. Sweet Olivia, the little girl who'd chattered next to him while they'd watched TV, who smelled like graham crackers and strawberry shampoo, who'd sighed softly when he and Ruby had tucked her into her bed in the pink room with unicorns dancing across the walls.

He'd hurt them all. He deserved what was coming to him.

He didn't even hear Kellen set up the fight, make the usual cracks about the lack of rules.

Roman was too busy thinking about the women he'd hurt, the little girl he'd damaged forever.

He was still thinking about them when he took the first blow.

RUBY

She lay in bed in the dark, staring at the glow of the candle flickering onto the ceiling.

Roman had left hours ago, long after they'd said goodnight, and now Ruby couldn't help but wonder where he was.

He wasn't prone to late-night absences. Not that she knew of anyway.

She pondered the possibilities again: a business problem, food with Max, a nightclub.

The last was the most ridiculous. She knew Roman wasn't a monk, but she couldn't imagine him at a nightclub. Plus he was under heavy guard, and Ruby imagined that was even more true now.

She'd heard him talking to Max in the living room about a woman, someone in their world who'd been killed. Ruby didn't know how the other woman was connected to Roman's war with his father, but it seemed clear she was, and if something had happened to her, Ruby couldn't see Roman out partying.

She turned her mind to the other possibility, the one she didn't want to think too hard about: a woman.

Even thinking it was like touching an open wound, and she danced around the possibility in her mind, not wanting to picture too clearly the kind of woman Roman would visit in the middle of the night.

Although she would be sophisticated of course. Not naive and introverted like Ruby, but wise in the ways of the world, outgoing, bold.

She would be used to the toys in Roman's secret room, used to the kind of sex Roman enjoyed.

A stab of jealousy tore through her and she rolled onto her side with a sigh.

Dammit.

She'd been in trouble even before Roman showed her the room he'd made for Olivia.

Now she was fucked.

Because what kind of man — what kind of dangerous, violent man — went to the trouble to create an exact replica of a little girl's room so she would be at home in his apartment? The attention to detail was shocking. It was like walking into Olivia's bedroom in the apartment they'd shared, right down to the unicorn and rainbow projector.

And the door had been locked in the weeks Ruby had been at the loft, which meant that Roman had done it all while Ruby had been held captive by her father.

So Roman — at war with his father and recovering from a gunshot wound — had still taken the time to make a bedroom for Ruby's daughter, a daughter he'd spent exactly two days with before everything had gone to hell.

All of which pointed to an irrefutable fact: Roman wasn't the man she'd imagined when Adam told her he was part of the Russian Mafia. He wasn't the man Ruby had imagined when she'd been held prisoner in the grain terminal, trying to hate him, to forget the two nights she'd spent in his arms.

Worse, her feelings for him had grown in the weeks they'd been living together in the loft. It wasn't just the sex — although the sex was admittedly mind-blowing.

It was him. He'd gotten under her skin, had made her rethink everything she thought she knew about herself. About what she wanted for herself and for Olivia.

She thought she heard the swoosh of the elevator and froze in her bed, listening.

He was home, his footsteps slower than usual as he made his way through the living area and down the hall.

He hesitated, like he was trying to decide whether to enter her room or his own.

A few seconds later, she heard him in his bathroom, banging around, making noise enough that she heard it even through the well-insulated walls of the loft.

She sat up in bed, some kind of internal alarm ringing a warning.

Something was wrong.

She threw her legs over the side of the bed and walked to the door in her T-shirt and underwear, then stepped into the hall.

She padded to his room and knocked softly on his door, but he either didn't hear the knock or didn't feel like answering because it was met with silence.

She turned the knob and opened the door a crack, peeking in to make sure she wasn't interrupting something — she didn't think he'd bring someone home but who knew? — then stepped inside when she saw that the bedroom was empty.

The bathroom door was open, a column of light cast against the floor in the bedroom, dark except for the glimmer of the city shining through the room's large window.

“Roman?” She walked toward the bathroom. “Are you okay?”

She heard a grunt and stepped into the bathroom. “Oh my god...”

He was sitting on the toilet wearing nothing but jeans, blood dripping from his face onto his chest, bruises rising around his eyes and over his cheekbones. His nose was crooked (broken again?) and his chest had been raked as if by a feral cat, the blood already drying on his inked skin.

She crossed the distance between them. “What happened to you?”

“Fight,” he said, trying to tear a piece of surgical tape off the roll with his teeth.

“What the actual fuck, Roman?” She took the tape from his hands and fished through the first aid kit, its contents spilling out onto the counter. “I hope the other guy looks worse.”

“He doesn't.”

“Where are the washcloths?” Ruby asked. “We need to clean these wounds before we patch them up.”

“Under the sink.”

She felt relieved he wasn't fighting her, then realized that everything must really be in the shitter if Roman was letting *her* take care of *him*.

She found the washcloths and ran one under warm water, then stepped between his open thighs to dab at the cuts on his face. "Some of these are deep. We should go to the ER. You might need stitches."

"I'll be fine." He gestured at the first aid kit. "There are some butterfly bandages in there."

"Butterfly bandages aren't stitches, Roman. How did this happen?"

She knew he liked to fight but she couldn't imagine someone getting close enough to Roman to do this kind of damage, let alone get away with it.

He hissed as she touched a particularly angry-looking cut.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm trying to be careful."

"It's what I deserve," he said.

"The fight or the washcloth?"

"Both."

She finished cleaning the cuts, then swabbed antibiotic ointment on them before going to work with the bandages.

"You want to tell me why you let someone beat the shit out of you?" she asked.

It was the only thing that made sense — the condition he was in, his words about deserving it.

"Like I said..."

"You don't deserve this, Roman. I'm guessing your father made you believe that, but he's a fucking liar." It hurt her to

see him like this. Hurt her so much that she didn't know what to do with the feeling.

She put the last of the bandages on his wounds, squeezing the cut above his right eyebrow together and hoping the bandage would keep it closed long enough to let it heal.

He barked out a bitter laugh. "That's nice of you to say, but it turns out, he was right all along."

She set the bandages aside. "You're wrong," she said gently. "And so is your father."

He wrapped his arms around her bare thighs, rested his face against her stomach. "Ruby..." He sighed her name like a prayer. "If I had an ounce of honor I'd walk away from you forever."

She took his face in her hands, tipping it so he was looking up at her. "What if I don't want you to?"

"Then you're a fool. I'll never be good enough for you. Not in a million years."

The pain in his voice was too much for her to bear. She took his hands and pulled him to his feet, then led him into the dark bedroom.

When they reached the bed, she pulled off her shirt and underwear, then unzipped his jeans. His cock sprang free when she pulled them off his hips and she took his hands again and pulled him onto the bed until he was stretched over her.

He was already hard, his cock hot and smooth between her thighs.

He looked down at her, his eyes like mercury. "If you don't leave the room, I'm going to fuck you, Ruby."

Desire sparked to life at her center. "I know."

He lowered his head, kissed her long and slow. There was something different in it now, like he'd stopped expecting her to run away.

Like she'd stopped planning to.

Still, the languid sweeps of his tongue left her breathless, the hard shaft of his cock enticingly close to her pussy.

He pulled back and reached for a condom, then adjusted his position so he could get it on. She resisted the urge to tell him to skip it, caught up in the moment, wanting nothing between them.

Don't be stupid, Ruby.

He positioned his cock at her entrance, looked down at her, and smoothed the hair back from her forehead. "You're beautiful, Ruby. In every way."

"You're beautiful," she said. "In every way."

She meant it. God help her, she meant it.

He pushed into her with a groan.

She gasped with the pure pleasure of it, the way he completed her, filling her with every inch like she'd been molded just for him.

They moved slowly this time, their breath mingling in the dark, growing shallower and faster as they both reached for release.

She bent her knees, locking her ankles around his thighs to pull him deeper, watching his face as he watched hers.

His cock stroked her clit on the downstroke and she angled her hips to get even more friction, felt the sublime pleasure of it as her orgasm came within reach.

“Roman...”

He reached for one of her calves, adjusted their position so he sank even deeper. “Come for me, sweetheart.” His voice was tender. “But this time look at me while you do it.”

She couldn’t have looked away if she’d tried and she held his gaze as the wave of pleasure rolled over her, pulling her down into the blissful depths of release, her body trembling with it, tightening around his cock as he pushed through her swollen channel.

He let go with a groan and she watched the awe wash over his face, saw the shine in his eyes, like he was feeling something — witnessing something — holy.

When she’d stopped shuddering, he left a trail of kisses across her face — her brow, the tip of her nose, her cheeks, the corners of her mouth.

Then he pulled her into his arms, held her tight, kissed the top of her head.

They lay in silence for a long time before he spoke. “I used to think nothing mattered but hurting my father, taking the thing that mattered most to him. I was wrong.” He tipped her chin, forcing her to look at him through the darkness. “I love you, Ruby. And I think it’s time to end this, time for you and Olivia to get your lives back.”

She knew what she wanted to say, but she was afraid to say it, knew once she did, nothing would ever be the same.

But maybe that was the point.

“And spend the rest of our lives looking over our shoulders for your father? For Adam?” Because the death of this woman — whoever she was — was just proof that Roman’s father was a monster.

He furrowed his brow. “What are you saying?”

“Maybe *I* was wrong, Roman. To think we can live peacefully with tyrants. Your father. My ex-husband. We tried that, didn’t we? Both of us?”

He nodded.

She held his gaze. “What if all the death and destruction is just proof that you were right all along?”

The hard glint had returned to his eyes. “I’m going to need you to be more specific, sweetheart. What, exactly, are you saying?”

“We’ll never have peace as long as your father is in charge.” *As long as Adam is in charge.* “I’m saying you were right. I’m saying I’m with you on this. I’m saying you should fight.”

ROMAN

Ruby's words rang in his ears as Max pulled into the cemetery behind several other black cars and SUVs. Two hearses were at the front of the procession, but there was no limo behind them, no family to accompany Vladimir and Valeriya to their final resting place.

"She would have hated this," he said.

Max responded from behind his sunglasses, his expression unreadable. "Agreed."

Roman had wanted to tell someone that Valeriya wouldn't want to be buried next to her father, that she would want something else, something grand. That she would want, in this final thing, not to be in her father's shadow.

But there was no one to tell. Vladimir and Valeriya had no surviving relatives, none close enough to attend the funeral in New York anyway. The church service followed by a brief graveside service had been arranged according to Vladimir's will and paid for with money set aside for that purpose.

Roman had no idea what would happen to the rest of the Orlov money now that Vladimir's heir was also dead. Probably it would revert to the state — the Russian state that is, since Vladimir was still a holder of citizenship there —

although Roman had no doubt there were offshore accounts too.

They parked next to a curb behind the procession and Roman watched the black SUV carrying his father and Konstantin.

“I still think this is a bad idea,” Max said.

“I don’t disagree,” Roman said. “But I stand by my decision.”

Honor dictated their presence. He would not leave Valeriya to be laid to rest alone, with only Roman’s father — the one who had probably ordered Valeriya’s murder — and the rest of the *bratva* to bear witness. He and Valeriya hadn’t been friends, not exactly, but the situation they’d found themselves in had birthed a kind of camaraderie.

Seeing the other mourners, Roman was glad of his decision. The crowd filing toward the double grave site was familiar — Roman’s father and Kon, of course, but also made men from all the criminal organizations in the area, all of them trying to get the lay of the land, sniffing around for a hint of the Orlov money.

Roman didn’t blame them. If he hadn’t known the money was out of reach, he’d be curious too.

“It looks like a war zone out there,” Max murmured, his gaze pointed at the black-clad figures streaming up a small hill as the funeral home attendant unloaded the caskets.

Anyone else might not have seen it. To the untrained eye, it looked like any other funeral — people dressed in black, heads respectfully bowed.

What might escape notice was that everyone was armed to the hilt, the Mob bosses accompanied by body men who

watched the procession nervously, the Feds parked alongside the curb in hulking black SUVs, probably with zoom lenses aimed their way.

Occasions like this were rare, a chance to get the current lay of the land, add the new players to the roster of organized criminals they were always trying to take down.

He watched his father step carefully out of the SUV, aided by Kon, then amble behind the other mourners. Igor was getting old, his stride slower, a hitch in his gait that might have spoken to injury.

Don't die yet, old man. Not until I'm done with you.

Roman opened the door. "Let's go."

Not coming hadn't been an option, but he wasn't stupid. Roman would stay behind his father, where he could watch him.

They started up the hill behind the procession.

RUBY

She spent the first hour pacing the loft — sitting in the bedroom Roman had made for Olivia, reading the books on the shelves and imagining showing them to her daughter, even walking into the playroom, which Roman had left unlocked (in case Ruby decided she wanted to use it with him?).

Finally, she returned to Roman's bed, breathed in the scent on his pillow, replayed every moment of their time together the night before.

He wasn't tender in bed. He was consuming and demanding, like a wildfire beating a path through a forest in summer.

But last night had been different. Something had shifted between them. She wasn't dumb enough to think they were headed for happily ever after — his business would never be conducive to Olivia's well-being — but Ruby cared about him, maybe even loved him, although she was glad he hadn't pressured her into saying it back when he'd said it to her.

I love you, Ruby.

Her cheeks flushed just thinking about it, which wasn't exactly good news when she had no idea what the future held

for them and their relationship.

But she was here now, in Roman's world without Olivia. What was the harm in letting it play out? They'd probably drive each other crazy, be more than happy to move on once they got each other out of their respective systems.

She sighed and sat up, then walked into the living room. Roman was at a funeral — some Russian businessman and his daughter, the woman who'd been killed. He'd said he wouldn't be long, but funerals and weddings always lasted longer than you thought they would, so she picked up the remote and turned on the TV.

She would find a movie to watch, something light. Then she would call Olivia and Brooke while she waited for Roman to get home.

ROMAN

He stood across from his father and Kon, the two rose-draped coffins between them. Igor glanced through and past him, like he was nothing.

Some things never changed.

It was a nice place to be buried, nestled in a little valley between two hills, the one they'd walked to reach the site now at Igor's back, another one behind Roman that led to the rest of the cemetery.

He scanned the crowd as the priest droned, taking inventory: the local head of the Irish Mob was present along with two body men, representatives from two of the cartels, an assortment of brutish men Roman took to be low-level criminals, a handful of women Roman didn't recognize, even Damian Cavallo and his body man.

Vladimir had been a busy man, his fingers in a lot of pots. Roman was surprised he'd stayed alive as long as he had, that it was his daughter who'd ultimately been the agent of his death.

What was the old saying: lay down with dogs, get up with fleas?

Everyone at the funeral was a dog, Roman included. Vladimir had been playing with fire while Valeriya stood next to him in a flammable gown.

Which didn't absolve Roman of his part in Valeriya's death. That she might have met it anyway didn't change the fact that Roman had been the agent of it.

The priest was nearing the end of the graveside service. Roman joined the others in the recitation of the 23rd Psalm. He wasn't remotely religious, but when in Rome...

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters..."

Igor's head was bowed, his lips moving, expression impassive. Kon, on the other hand, wasn't paying attention. His gaze was on something beyond Roman's shoulder.

"He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake..."

Roman felt an itch to look over his shoulder, to see what Kon was looking at, but the mourners on that side of the coffins didn't seem alarmed so Roman continued to recite the psalm.

"Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..."

And then, one of the men Roman didn't recognize raised his gaze, alarm registering in his eyes as he homed in on something behind Roman.

"I will fear no evil..."

Roman turned, saw the army of men descending the hill behind him toward the Orlovs' gravesite. The men were purposeful, removing weapons from their jackets and

waistbands as they walked toward the mourners, most of whom were still focused on the psalm.

Roman looked at Max, planning to warn him, but Max was already aware, was reaching for his weapon as the first shots rang out.

Roman did the same, but not before the scene exploded into a riot of gunfire, the previously peaceful scene erupting into chaos: people screaming, shouting, diving for the ground next to the coffins.

Roman felt something hit his chest, the wound from the shot in Ruby's apartment turning to fire as Max hit him like a freight train, knocking him to the ground before he could even get his weapon out.

The gunfire was deafening, the coffins splintering as bullets embedded themselves in the wood, rose petals raining down on the scene, which had become a deadly ceremony.

Roman fumbled for his gun, but his hands weren't working. His brain said it should be right there, under his fingers, but his grasp was ineffectual.

It was because of Max, who was on top of him, as still as a lead weight.

He pushed his friend off and saw that Max's eyes were closed, a wet stain spreading across his back.

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck.

The mourners were all down now, one of the women crying while others covered their heads, some of the men prone and silent.

Warm liquid spread across Roman's chest, the scene receding as unconsciousness tried to claim him. He reached for his gun again, barely able to grasp it as one of the men in black marched toward him with his weapon drawn.

Roman squeezed off a couple of rounds before the gun fell to the ground, but he must have missed because the man was still going, raising his weapon, pointing it at Roman...

Another shot rang out, and Roman waited for the relief of death, was surprised when the other man fell, a shadowy figure silhouetted by the sun approaching behind him.

It was all blurry now, the buzzing in Roman's head calling him like a siren.

He looked up at the sky and thought of Ruby, hoped his father had been killed too.

Hoped that Ruby would be happy, that she would be free.

Then, there was nothing.

RUBY

She was halfway through the movie when her phone buzzed with a breaking news alert.

She picked it up half-heartedly — the real world had seemed far away since she'd entered Roman's — then felt her heart stutter in her chest when she read the headline.

Active shooter reported at a cemetery in Brooklyn, NY. Shelter-in-place order issued for area.

She jumped to her feet with her phone in hand, fumbling to click through to the story.

Active shooter reported in Brooklyn, NY.

Gunfire reported at funeral of Russian Oligarch Vladimir Orlov. The New York Police Department has issued an active shooter warning for the Green-Wood Cemetery area in Brooklyn NY. Shelter in place.

This story is breaking and will be updated.

She read the brief twice, a single word ringing in her mind.

No. Then... Please god... No.

She dialed her sister.

ADAM

Adam was putting another load of laundry in the washer — he'd had no idea how much laundry one fucking kid could generate — when his phone buzzed with an incoming text from his partner Deon.

Active shooter in Brooklyn. Stand by.

Fuck. That was the last thing he needed. He tried not to take shifts on the weekend when Olivia was home from school, not because he didn't need the break — god knew he needed the break — but because then he had to ask Mrs. Camus, the old bat next door, to watch her.

Olivia liked going to Mrs. Camus's apartment, but Adam didn't want it thrown in his face during a future custody hearing that he'd pawned Olivia off on a neighbor while he worked instead of letting Ruby's dad and cunt sister watch her.

He saw the breaking news alert about the active shooter — missed when he'd started the dryer — and clicked on it, hoping to gauge the seriousness of the situation.

Then he saw Vladimir Orlov's name, thought about Igor Kalashnik. He knew that Igor's son — Erik, not that motherfucker Roman — was engaged to Vladimir's daughter, and that meant they traveled in the same circles.

Adam smelled a Mob hit.

Fuck.

His plan had been simple — get rid of Ruby. make her pay for her betrayal, take Olivia, the thing that mattered most to her — but the whole situation had spun out of control.

He knew he'd been rolling the dice going to Igor, but the old man had left him alone per their agreement. Roman had been the problem, turning up when Adam hadn't expected it, putting a gun to Adam's fucking head like Adam wasn't a fucking cop, like Roman didn't care that he was.

Now this... whatever this was.

There were obviously things he didn't know, moves being made behind the scenes of the war between Roman and Igor.

If Igor prevailed, Adam would be fine.

If Roman prevailed, Adam was fucked.

And if this shooting was something else? Well, Adam had no fucking idea.

One thing was clear: the city wasn't his anymore. He needed to get out of here until everything settled down.

He stalked into the living room where Olivia was watching cartoons, too loud as always.

“Put some things in your backpack,” he said. “We’re taking a trip.”

Olivia looked at him, her eyes wide. “A trip where?”

“Don't worry about it.” He'd been trying to be calmer when he spoke to Olivia, Roman's words about being nice ringing in his ears like the man was a fucking ghost haunting his every move. “Just do it.”

“What about Mommy?” Olivia asked.

“What about her?” Adam was already thinking: what would they bring, where would they go, what would he tell work?

“How will she find us when she gets back from her business trip?”

“She might not come back.” Olivia looked stricken and Adam felt the familiar thrill of power. Roman could issue orders all he wanted, but when push came to shove, Adam was in charge of his home.

His family.

And he had the power to make Olivia happy or sad with a few choice words.

Olivia started to cry. “But you said!”

“Grow the fuck up, Olivia!” Watching her shrink back was like letting the steam out of a pressure valve on his anger. He was still in control of the situation. “Move your ass and pack your shit. Now!”

She scrambled off the couch, a sob escaping her mouth as she walked past him, her cheeks stained with tears.

He drew in a breath. Now, where would they go? Somewhere Ruby wouldn’t ever find them.

Somewhere far away.

Thanks for reading Rage! Read Ruin, the final book in the Ruthless Empire series, and find out what happens when New York City descends into a bloody battle for control of the bratva. Will Roman and Ruby triumph over their differences while the city is coming apart - or will their love be the war’s greatest casualty?

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Suggested Reading Order

AVAILABLE ON ALL PLATFORMS

Mafia Boss Saga:

Ruthless (Ruthless King #1).

Fearless (Ruthless King #2)

Lawless (Ruthless King #3)

Savage (Savage King #1).

Primal (Savage King #2)

Eternal (Savage King #3)

Covenant (Vengeful King #1)

Revenant (Vengeful King #2)

Rule (Vengeful King #3)

Syndicate Saga (with appearances by your favorite Mafia Boss characters):

Fire with Fire (NY Syndicate #1)

Into the Fire (NY Syndicate #2)

Through the Fire (NY Syndicate #3)

King of Sin (Las Vegas Syndicate #1)

Wages of Sin (Las Vegas Syndicate #2)

Surrender to Sin (Las Vegas Syndicate #3)

Thicker Than Water (Boston Syndicate #1)

Blood in the Water (Boston Syndicate #2)

Hell or High Water (Boston Syndicate #3)

Murphy's Law Saga (with appearances from your favorite Mafia Boss and Syndicate characters):

Murphy's Law (Murphy's Law #1)

Murphy's Wrath (Murphy's Law #2)

Murphy's Love (Murphy's Law #3)

Wicked Game (Wicked Game #1)
Fair Game (Wicked Game #2)
End Game (Wicked Game #3)
Second Chance (Second Chance #1)
Fighting Chance (Second Chance #2)
Last Chance (Second Chance #3)
Coming Home (Coming Home #1).
Home Turf (Coming Home #2).
Home Free (Coming Home #3).

Imperium:

Love or Money (Imperium #1).
Devil You Know (Imperium #2).

Savage Empire:

Conquer (Savage Empire #1).
Captivate (Savage Empire #2).
Claim (Savage Empire #3).
Crown (Savage Empire #4).

Ruthless Empire:

Ravage (Ruthless Empire #1).
Rage (Ruthless Empire #2).
Ruin (Ruthless Empire #3).

Syndicate Standalones:

Muscle (Luca's story - newsletter exclusive)
Eternal Love (Mafia Boss Christmas Reunion - newsletter exclusive Novella)
Sentinel (Leo's story)

King of Corruption Standalone Series (Braden Kane, Locke Montgomery:

Rogue Love (Braden Kane and Nora Murphy - newsletter exclusive)

Rebel Love (Locke Montgomery)

The Awakening Series (Dark Romance, mid-life heroine):

The Awakening of Nina Fontaine

The Surrender of Nina Fontaine

The Liberation of Nina Fontaine