



Unwillingly
FOUR

KOROLEV BRATVA BOOK THREE

BROOK WILDER

This is a work of fiction. Any names, characters, places, events, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons—living or dead—is entirely coincidental.

UNWILLINGLY OURS copyright © 2023 by Brook Wilder and Scholae Palatina Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embedded in critical articles or reviews.

Book 3 of the Korolev Bratva trilogy

Cover by Angela Haddon Book Cover Design:
<http://www.angelahaddon.com/>

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book uses Russian naming conventions. Formal greetings by Russian characters will use a patronymic, which is composed of a first name and the character's father's name.

Aleksey's formal name is *Aleksey Fyodorovich*, which means Aleksey, son of Fyodor. His sister Alyona's formal name is *Alyona Fyodorovna*, which means Alyona, daughter of Fyodor.

Russian names also use diminutive names to show closeness and affection—such as parents to children, friends to friends, or loved ones to each other. Alternatively, it can be used as an insult by someone who should otherwise greet the person in a formal setting.

Aleksey's diminutive name is *Alyosha*, and Alyona's diminutive name is *Alya*.

The *Korolev Bratva* series can be enjoyed alone on its own, but reading experience is greatly enhanced if you've read the *Suvorov Bratva* trilogy beforehand, as some characters and events are referenced. You can read book 1 of the *Suvorov Bratva* – Dark Promise –today (free on KU):

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BG7BQJGR>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

UNWILLINGLY OURS

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Chapter Forty-Six](#)

[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[OTHER BOOKS BY BROOK WILDER](#)

UNWILLINGLY OURS

Chapter One

Elia

The car bumped along the road and sent another sharp jab to my bladder. I shifted on the leather seat and then shifted some more. Occasionally, I cast a furtive glance toward my captor, Svetlana.

“Quit squirming,” she ordered, turning toward me in the process.

I fought the urge to shudder at her scarred and disfigured face.

“I need to pee,” I said.

It was the truth. I hadn’t gone to the bathroom since I managed to escape the shootout at the safehouse with Lana, and now my bladder was starting to feel like an overfilled water balloon.

But there was another reason that I wanted to stop. I needed to get away from Svetlana. She had threatened to carve my baby out of me when the time came. Having seen what she was already capable of, I knew deep in my heart that this was no empty threat.

I couldn’t risk letting her take me to whatever destination she had in mind. Because the moment she did, Aleksey would never be able to find me until she wanted him to.

And by then, it would already be too late—for me, and for my baby.

“I really need to pee,” I tried again. “Please.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t have to,” I sighed. “But if I pee all over these nice leather seats, you’re going to be sitting in it along with me.” I paused to let the words sink in. “And who knows what other complications might happen to me and the baby.”

That last part *was* bullshit, but I was banking on her not knowing that. Her frown deepened, and I could see the indecision building in her eyes. Finally, she cursed under her breath and looked at the back of the driver’s head.

“Stop at the next gas station.” She turned her gaze back to me. “Listen to me and listen well, pretty bitch,” she warned as she turned the knife in her hand so that I could see its glint. “Do not test me.”

I didn’t react, my heart beating a thousand times a minute at the thought of tasting freedom once more. I was only going to have one chance at this.

The SUV finally started to slow and I sat up straighter in the seat, my hands clasped tightly in my lap as it took the next exit toward a rundown gas station with only two pumps and not much else.

It was exactly what I was looking for, mainly because in old places like this, the bathrooms would be outside and not watched by any cameras.

When the car stopped, the driver unlocked the door, stepped out, and made his way over to my side. Cool air slapped me in the face as the door opened. I unbuckled my seat belt to get out, but that was when Svetlana grabbed my arm with a gnarled hand. Her sharp nails dug into my flesh.

“You better not be lying to me,” she hissed.

I nodded and she released me. I didn’t bother looking at the indentations her nails left on my skin as I stepped out. It felt good to get out of the stifling SUV for a while and get the blood flowing back into my legs.

Briefly I thought about Lana and how she had been left on the side of the road by Svetlana’s men. Despite what my best friend did, I still worried for her. Was she okay? Would someone find her?

“You have five minutes,” Svetlana said as she exited the vehicle as well, putting her giant sunglasses back on to mask her face. “Make them count, pretty bitch.”

I stayed rooted to the spot, my arms cradling my belly.

“What?” she snapped.

“It’s just ...” I bit my lower lip in an attempt to look as sheepish as possible. “I’m also kind of nauseous. I don’t mean to impose, but ... could you get me a bottle of water? Or a ginger ale?”

I couldn’t see her expression behind those sunglasses, but from the way her tongue quickly traced the outlines of her

shredded lips, I knew she must have been fuming underneath.

“Fine,” she said finally. “But you try anything, and I promise I’m going to make you regret it.”

“I won’t,” I lied, heart hammering at my chest.

The door to the bathroom was already unlocked when I got there. I grimaced at its filthy interior as I sat down on the toilet and quickly did my business. When I was finished, I pulled the door slightly ajar until I could see the SUV in the distance.

Svetlana was nowhere in sight and the driver leaned against the hood, a cigarette in his lips but his attention not in my direction.

This was my chance.

My heart stuck in my throat, I eased the door open and slid around it, heading toward the wooded area behind the station. I had no idea where I was or how I was going to get help, but the more distance I put between Svetlana and myself, the better chance I had at getting away.

The trees started to get closer and I kept myself from breaking out into a run, knowing that the sight of me running toward the woods might spark some sort of attention. My five minutes had to be up, which meant Svetlana would be coming for me, and the moment she didn’t find me in that bathroom, the hunt would be on.

Huffing, I crossed from the uneven pavement to the edge of the grass that would lead me into the woods. Almost there. But

right as I was about to reach the trees, I felt a familiar iron grip on my arm as Svetlana stepped out from behind a tree and grabbed me.

“Got you!” she snarled, her sunglasses no longer on her face. Surprisingly, there was a ginger ale in her free hand.

My breath caught in my chest, and panic rose up in my throat.

“I warned you, didn’t I?” she asked. “I told you not to try anything, didn’t I?”

With my ruse exposed, there was no point in playing the scared, helpless woman anymore. I lifted my chin and met her gaze head on.

“What did you expect?” I challenged her. “That I wouldn’t try to escape from you? That I’d just let you take me away and steal my child from me?”

“Of course not, pretty bitch.” She let out a chuckle as she tossed the ginger ale away. “I would have been disappointed if you hadn’t tried.” She gestured back toward the direction of the SUV. “Now move.”

Emotion clawed at my chest, but I refused to show anything to Svetlana, my fists tight at my sides as I walked back to the SUV and climbed inside. As soon as the doors slammed shut, Svetlana turned toward me, a twisted grimace of a smile curling on her face.

“You didn’t hold up your end of the bargain,” she said. “But I will.”

I drew in a breath and steeled my face so that I wouldn't betray the fear trickling down my sides. She drew out the knife again, and this time, she pressed the sharp edge against my face. I clenched my jaw to keep myself from uttering a single sound. I wasn't going to give her that satisfaction.

"Aren't you even a little bit curious about what I'm about to do?" she leaned in close and whispered, the twisted smile never leaving her face.

"Do it, you bitch," I bit out. "And cut the theatrical bullshit."

She turned her head and let out a dark chuckle. The blade slowly began to move. Tears welled up in my eyes from the pain, but I refused to let them spill.

Tarallos are made of stronger stuff, I reminded myself.

When she saw that I had no reaction, the smile finally evaporated from her face. With a frustrated snarl, she yanked on the blade. I couldn't help but cry out as I felt blood rolling down my cheek.

"Have you tasted your own blood inside your mouth before, pretty bitch? Because I have." She slowly pushed the tip of the knife between my lips.

"Let this be a lesson to you," she said. "And if you try something like this again." The monstrous smile returned to her face, and her lone green eye looked feral. "I'll start doing to you what they did to me. You understand?"

I nodded.

She handed me a tissue. “Good.”

I wiped at my face, wincing at the pain, and looked at the bright red blood staining the tissue as the scenery zoomed by outside the SUV. I was playing a dangerous game with a woman who had already killed numerous times before, including Aleksey’s father.

But I had something she wanted, something she wanted badly.

And as long as she wanted that, she wouldn’t kill me. Not yet.

She would find every excuse under the sun to hurt me, but I would be kept alive. And as long as I was alive, I could find a way out.

Drawing in a shaky breath, I pressed the tissue to my cheek and started to plot my next escape in my head. I wasn’t going to give up. I wasn’t going to let this woman—no, this monster—steal my child from me. The moment I did, I would be dead and would never have a chance to hold the child inside me. This child was the future, was everything good that Aleksey and I had never had in our lives.

I just had to be smarter next time.

Chapter Two

Aleksey

“Well?”

The man looked up from the laptop, sending a nervous gaze in my direction. “I need a few more minutes to run the trace. It’s really not that easy, especially when the phone’s not actively calling.”

“How much time?” I demanded.

“Five minutes?”

“I’ll put a bullet in your head if it’s not done in two,” I threatened and then walked away.

Picking up my glass, I made my way over to the windows of the safe house that my sister had been taken to, looking at the gray afternoon that was starting to take shape outside. The weather matched my mood.

Vova had pulled as many men to him as possible, and we all rendezvoused at the safe house that Kurbashy took Alya to. Once we were there, he went and grabbed a hacker who was good at tracking cell phones.

While Elia didn’t have hers, I had Lana’s number. For the last ten minutes, the tracker had been hard at work trying to trace her location.

Seconds passed by like hours. The longer we waited, the more danger my wife was in. Her screams echoed throughout my mind constantly, my entire body tense with what Elia could be going through.

A million different thoughts raced through my mind. But above all were those same haunting words from Svetlana.

Let's run away together, Aleks. Just you and me.

For ten years, I had hoped against hope that she was still alive. I had prayed for the chance to apologize and atone for what had happened to her. But fate, it seemed, had a twisted sense of humor. My prayers had been answered in the worst way possible, and now Elia was paying the price for my sins.

“Got it!”

I turned around and found Vova giving me a thumbs-up as he turned the laptop around from the hacker to show me the blinking dot on the screen. “The signal looks stationary. Wherever they are, they’re not moving.”

My heart skipped a beat. Stationary?

“No time to waste.” I drained the contents of my glass and slammed a new magazine into my gun. “Let’s go.”

The car zoomed through traffic as I tapped my knee, running each possible scenario through my mind about what I might

find. Was Elia still with Lana? Was she hurt? Or something worse?

I took a breath and pushed that last thought out of my mind. I couldn't think about that right now. I wanted to watch her belly swell with our child. I wanted to see her cradle the baby and give me that smile that I knew she kept only for me.

It was about another twenty minutes before the car slowed, and I saw a car pressed up against the guardrail. Miraculously, an emergency crew hadn't made its way out there yet, nor had any police.

My heart ratcheted up a few notches and I stepped out of the car before it came to a complete stop, pulling my gun out of its holster in the process, praying that whatever I found would not confirm the worst-case scenarios that had been running nonstop through my head.

What I found was Lana Keller with her arms and legs tied up and propped against the overturned car. Her eyes narrowed as soon as she caught sight of me. Disgust and relief surged through me when I saw her.

If Lana was pissed off at me, then that could only mean Elia was still alive the last time she saw her.

"Hello, Keller," I spat.

"Korolev." She nodded.

I shoved my gun back in my holster. "Where is she?"

Lana glanced down at the ropes keeping her bound. “Get me out of these and I will tell you what you want to know.”

The balls on this bitch! “I should kill you and leave your fucking body for your friends to find.” I crossed my arms over my chest.

Lana’s eyes flashed with anger and a bit of hurt. “I could say the same to you.”

Snorting, I glared at her. “You’re in no position to make any kind of threats to me, Keller. So why don’t you tell me where Elia is so that I can do my job and protect her?”

“You think you can protect her?” she taunted back, her laugh hollow. “You can’t protect her! Elia is heading for prison because of what *you* have done, Aleksey. I’ve been—” She pressed her lips in a tight line, clearly thinking carefully about her words. “I’ve been trying to keep her from going down with you. She doesn’t deserve it, and you don’t deserve her.”

“You’re right,” I bit out. Elia was everything that I wasn’t. “I don’t deserve her. But that doesn’t mean I won’t go to the ends of the fucking earth to find her. Where is she?”

Lana swallowed, clearly surprised at how I agreed with her. I didn’t *deserve* Elia. I didn’t deserve for someone to care for me like she did, to love me. Because in spite of the monster that I was, she truly still did love me. I felt it in her touch and saw it in her eyes. No matter what I did to her, she always found a way to forgive me.

If that wasn’t love, I didn’t know what was.

“That crazy bitch took her,” she finally said.

Those words sent ice seeping into my bones. A part of me suspected that was the case when I heard Svetlana’s voice taunting me on the phone. But having Lana confirm it to my face made it so much worse.

“Just say the word, Aleksey Fyodorovich.” Vova stepped up and pressed a gun against Lana’s head, his voice low and determined. I knew that he wanted blood on his hands. My entire crew did. And as much as I wanted to see Lana Keller’s brains splattering on the highway, that wasn’t what I *needed* to do to get Elia back.

“Not yet, Vova,” I said and knelt down in front of Lana. “She’s coming with us.”

Her jaw dropped. “You can’t be fucking serious.”

“Here’s how I see things turning out.” I pulled a knife out of my pocket and started cutting away at the ropes binding her arms. “You help me get my wife back, and in return, I promise that you won’t take a permanent bath in Lake Michigan. You don’t help me, and I’ll let Vova do what he’s been itching to do since the moment he saw you.”

“Do you have any idea how much trouble you’d be in?” She rubbed her reddened wrists once they were free.

“Funny thing about that, Keller,” I said as I worked on the ropes around her legs. “I’m already in a world of shit. Without Elia, I’m as good as dead. And as far as I see it, you have no

idea of where Elia is any more than I do. Killing you won't get me any closer to finding Elia, but it'll make me feel better. Which is why I think you'll be interested in what I have to offer you."

"What makes you think I'm willing to work with you?" She pushed herself up to her feet as soon as her legs were free. Vova raised his gun and aimed it squarely at her chest.

"Because," I said. "The most stable partnership is born out of mutual interest. And right now, we both have a mutual interest in finding Elia."

Still rubbing her wrists, she glared at me. "Fine," she finally said. "Name your terms."

"Call off Berkowitz and whoever else you've wrangled together," I said. "Tell them that I'm your man on the inside. That I've always been your inside man."

"Really?" Lana scoffed. "Are you really about to use your missing wife to strike a deal for yourself? You know, just when I thought you couldn't sink any lower—"

"I don't give a shit what he believes," I interrupted her. "But to find Elia, I can't have the law breathing down my neck while what remains of the Tarallo Mafia is kicking at my door. Which brings me to my next term."

"Go ahead." She rolled her eyes.

"You're going to be my point of contact with the Tarallos," I said. "Talk to your buddies in the DA office. Get them to

contact every Tarallo lawyer they can find. Shouldn't be too damn hard with how much work you seem to be putting in. Same script each time—Aleksy Korolev wants to talk. But only when I give you the signal.”

“Anything else that'll help me commit career suicide?” She crossed her arms.

“Actually,” I replied. “There's one final thing.”

I stepped over to her, pulled out my phone, and took a selfie of the two of us. Neither of us looked happy, but that wasn't the point.

“You motherfucker,” she spat.

“Trust me, Keller,” I said. “This hurts me as much as it hurts you. I've just broken the one cardinal rule of organized crime. When the rest of the Bratva hears of this, they're going to take my head.”

“I don't want street justice for you,” she said. “I want real justice.”

“Unfortunately for us both, street justice for me is going to be the best offer you're going to get.” I tucked the phone back into my pocket, walked over to my car, and opened the door. “Clock is ticking, Keller. You in or you out?”

“Fuck you, Korolev,” Lana swore.

Yet nonetheless, she walked over, paused to cast another angry glare at me, and got in.

Chapter Three

Elia

Three days later.

I fidgeted with the sleeve of the jacket I had been given, grateful for a shred of warmth against the chilly air.

Svetlana had taken me to a cabin in the middle of the woods, and for the last three days, I had been left alone.

My room had all the comforts of a prison cell. The only furniture inside was a single twin-sized bed. There was no TV, no books, and no radio. The bathroom down the hall had its door removed. It was there that I finally got a chance to see what Svetlana's knife had done to my face.

But even without looking, I knew that it would leave a permanent scar.

As soon as we arrived, Svetlana took a photo of my face on a vintage Polaroid camera and scribbled something on the back. Then, she and her companions left. For the last three days, I had been left to my own thoughts.

I tried to open every window and found that they were all locked. Not that it mattered. The windows all had bars on them. All the doors locked from the outside. Apart from some sandwiches and water in the fridge, there was nothing else to eat or drink.

Like I said.

All the comforts of a prison cell.

Sucking in a breath, I looked at the scenery outside. It was a perfect fall day that normally would have warranted a cup of coffee and a roaring fire. The thought of something so ordinary nearly made me cry.

It was something I wanted to experience with Aleksey. With our baby in what had seemed like a certain future not so long ago. Yet somehow, that future dangled precariously on the edge of a cliff, waiting for someone to give it that one final push toward the inevitable plummet of doom.

“Your daddy is coming,” I said out loud to the bump in my belly. “I promise.”

In my isolation, I had started to talk to my baby. It was the only way to keep myself sane. It made me still feel human. It gave me hope.

But as soon as those words left my mouth, dread settled in my stomach.

I had no doubt that Aleksey was coming. Svetlana had taken a photo of my face for a reason. She wanted to goad Aleksey into acting. And if she had meticulously planned out her revenge for ten years, then Aleksey would be walking into a trap.

I took a deep breath and looked up at the mirror. It was up to me to stop her from springing that trap.

Absentmindedly, I reached up to open the bathroom mirror for what felt like the millionth time.

“Ouch!” I drew my hand back.

A bead of blood peeked its head out of the tip of my finger. There must’ve been a small chip on the mirror. I leaned in closer and sure enough, a tiny sliver of the mirror’s edge was missing, and in its place was a small but razor-sharp edge. Curiosity drove me to kneel down awkwardly and look around on the floor until I found the chipped piece of glass.

It was a tiny little sliver, no larger than the edge of my pinky nail. Picking it up, I tested the tip with my thumb and winced as it effortlessly drew another pinprick of blood. As I stared at the oozing crimson bead, a smile slowly made its way to my face.

Have you ever tasted your own blood inside your mouth before? Svetlana’s voice echoed as I looked at my reflection in the mirror, my eyes focused on the angry red gouge she’d left on my face.

She had underestimated me, I realized, the same way that I’d always been underestimated. She thought I was just some spoiled Mafia princess who would fold and cry at the lightest sign of hardship.

Bitch, you have no idea.

Svetlana returned that night with a bag of sandwiches and a case of ginger ale. With great difficulty, she sat down at the only table in the cabin and removed her wig, revealing patches of missing hair and smooth skin that looked suspiciously like burn scars.

“What?” she hissed when she caught me looking.

I shook my head and cast my eyes down sheepishly. I needed her to keep believing that I was still her scared captive who’d been cowed by her display of violence in the car.

“Just surprised, that’s all,” I replied softly.

“By these?” She reached up and touched the smooth skin. “Not all hair grows back, pretty bitch.”

I nodded, keeping my thoughts to myself. There was no reason to give her an excuse to hurt me tonight. Slowly, I reached for a sandwich and a ginger ale. As soon as I grabbed the can, Svetlana snatched it from me.

“What are you—” I exclaimed before I could stop myself.

“You think I’m a fool?” she asked as she cracked the seal and poured the ginger ale into a plastic cup. “You think I’ll just let you have a piece of aluminum unsupervised?” When she was done, she crushed the can, placed it back in the bag, and handed the plastic cup to me. “Here.”

“Thank you.” I accepted the cup and took a sip, relishing the sweet, bubbly flavor. Svetlana kept her gaze trained on me the entire time, as if she were trying to read my mind.

To her credit, I hadn't even thought about the possibilities of using the can as a weapon. My mind turned toward the tiny sliver of glass that I'd hidden in a folded square of toilet paper in my pillow. What if she had planted that for me to find?

Her eyes narrowed. "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," I lied quickly. "I just ... I'm worried about the baby. I mean, I'm not fussy, but all these processed meats can't be good for fetal development."

Svetlana remained silent. Her gaze didn't change, and I took another sip to hide my nerves as I read her reaction. I had what she wanted, and her reaction now could determine whether my plan was going to work.

"If you have specific requests," she finally said, "I'm all ears. I'm not a monster, Elia."

Liar. "Thank you." I nodded. "I could really use some homemade pasta. Or even just a salad."

"I'll see about bringing some the next time I come by."

That got my attention. "You're not staying?" I blurted out.

She cocked her head curiously. "And why would you want me to?"

Quickly, I looked away, my mind racing to come up with excuses. I decided to tell her the half-truth. Like my father had

said on occasion: the best lies always had a kernel of truth

“Because it’s lonely here,” I admitted. “I have nothing and no one.”

She considered my argument for what felt like an eternity. Finally, she reached inside of her bag, and to my surprise, pulled out a Kindle.

“Here.” She slid it toward me. “Not much on it but some trashy romance novels, but it should be enough to keep you from losing your mind completely.”

“Oh!” I nodded quickly. “Thank you so much.”

“Anything else?”

“Just one thing.” This was it. This was my chance to put my plan into action. “Can you stay here tonight? Just to remind me that there’s another person here?”

She ran her tongue along her shredded lips and her lone good eye narrowed slightly, as if she was mulling over all the possibilities of what I might be planning. I waited with bated breath, ginger ale half-raised toward my lips and my sandwich forgotten.

“Fine,” she finally said. “But you won’t find me here in the morning.”

Relief flooded through me, followed by a sharp stab of adrenaline. My trap was set, and soon it would be time to

spring it.

Chapter Four

Aleksey

I sighed as I sat up in bed and looked at my watch. A little after midnight.

Time to get up.

I looked out the window at the familiar view from my penthouse and wearily got up. Grabbing the cold espresso on the nightstand, I gulped it down without second thought.

After the temporary truce I negotiated with Lana, I had sent out the word to my brigadiers and ordered them to regroup back in the penthouse. Not because I particularly wanted to or because it was safe.

But because I needed Svetlana to find me.

The first moment I stepped back inside had sent a hollow wave of emptiness crashing into me. I had gotten so used to Elia's presence that it was jarring to step in and not see her. The familiar smell of her cooking didn't greet me when the door opened. The familiar haphazard mess of ingredients and strewn about magazines wasn't there. The blanket on the love seat that was so frequently crumpled was folded in a neat square.

Everything about the place looked like the way I had it before she was a part of my life.

Blank, empty, and lifeless.

She was my everything, and now she was gone.

Even as busy activity quickly resumed in the penthouse, there was nothing that could fill the gaping hole in my chest. Whenever I laid down in the now empty bed and closed my eyes, my brain tortured me with images of Svetlana inflicting the same sadistic anguish on Elia that she herself had suffered.

I hadn't been able to sleep at all for the past three days, keeping myself awake on a dangerously heavy diet of espresso.

Lana had held up her end of the bargain, and Berkowitz begrudgingly took her word at face value. He was willing to hand over some of the contact information for the Tarallo lawyers that was on file at the New York DA office. In exchange, I had provided them with enough information on Svetlana's activities as the Bogatyr. The messages through the photos. The people she had killed. The threats she made.

Now, it became a game of insufferable waiting.

Lana was waiting at the kitchen island when I stepped out of the bedroom. My brigadiers had been less than enthused about having her around. But apart from a few grumbles and whispers, they were still in line.

For now. But every once in a while, I caught them throwing a long angry glance at Lana, and then a furtive one toward me. Dissent was brewing underneath the surface. I could feel it. The faster I could get Elia back, the faster I could get Lana out of my business.

“Can’t sleep?” she asked.

I shook my head. She slid a cup of coffee my way. I nodded in appreciation, took a sip, and blanched. She’d put sugar in it. Shaking my head, I set it back down.

“Any updates from the lawyers?” I asked.

“If there are, they sure as shit haven’t told me.” Lana shrugged. “Look, this might be a crapshoot. And we should be focusing on the important task at hand. You know, the one that I actually agreed to, not whatever bullshit you’re trying to engineer for your Bratva.”

“Elia,” I agreed, nodding. But there was no way to find Elia if most of my resources were tied down by fighting. Every day my brigadiers brought me more names of men who’d been wounded or killed. Every day I saw the escalating violence on the news. Hell, the mayor was starting to talk about bringing in the National Guard if things didn’t settle down soon.

“I still think a missing persons report would go a long way.” Lana drained her coffee. “I don’t know why you refuse to go down that route.”

“How many missing persons do you ever find? How many just disappear into the bureaucracy?” I shot at her. “It’ll take too long.”

“And this won’t?” She glared.

She had a point, but I wasn’t about to admit it. I took another sip of the disgustingly sweet coffee, wishing Boris was here. If

nothing else, to be someone that I could talk to that wasn't Lana fucking Keller. But Boris was still in the hospital, fighting for his life. I had sent someone to keep an eye on him. But so far, the only thing I'd heard was that his vitals were still not stable enough for the doctors to risk waking him up.

Even Uncle Misha ... I shook my head. *Not now. Not yet.* I couldn't spare the thought, not when so many other things demanded my attention.

Just then, the whir of the elevator came to life. One of my guards from downstairs, Petya, stepped through.

"Aleksey Fyodorovich," he greeted me. There was a rattled look in his eyes. That was odd. Petya never looked rattled.

"What?" I asked in Russian. Whatever he was going to tell me, Lana didn't need to hear it.

Unexpectedly, he replied in English. "A boy came up to me and handed me this. It's for you."

He extended his hand and held out a card. It was a cheap Hallmark card that you could buy from any convenience store. On the front was a pair of baby shoes and a familiar handwriting that I hadn't seen in ten years:

Dear Aleks,

"What did this boy look like?" I took the card from Petya. "What was he wearing?"

“Dressed all in black and wore a scarf over his face,” he replied. “I didn’t get a good look at him, Aleksey Fyodorovich.”

“Very well.” I swore inwardly. “*Spasibo*, Petya. Dismissed.”

Petya nodded and stepped back into the elevator. As soon as the doors closed, Lana got up from her seat and made her way over.

“What is that?” she pointed at the card.

I licked my lips. “A message from Svetlana.”

Slowly, I opened up the card and both of us gasped. It was like any other message from Svetlana: a Polaroid photo with a message on the back. But this time, there was a second message written on the card, endlessly repeating as it filled the entirety of the white space:

She stole what was mine, so I’m taking what is hers.

Chapter Five

Elia

I stared at the tiny sliver of glass in my palm. It was late, and I could hear Svetlana's snores rising and falling in a consistent rhythm down the hall. Now was my chance. But the longer I looked at the sliver and considered what I knew I needed to do, the more nervous I grew.

What if it didn't work? What if she saw this coming?

No ... I shook my head. I couldn't afford to doubt myself now. Turning my head toward the hallway, I listened for Svetlana's snoring. It kept to the same rhythm as before. I looked back down at the sliver of glass.

Tarallos are made of stronger stuff.

My free hand caressed my belly and for a moment, it was as if I could feel my baby's own fearful heartbeat at what I planned to do.

"Don't worry," I whispered. "Mommy will find us a way back to Daddy. And then Daddy will keep us safe."

With that final affirmation, I bit the pillow, opened my legs, and stabbed the sliver into the visible blue vein of my inner thigh, close to my sex. Tears welled in my eyes as I dragged the sliver around to widen the wound.

I pulled my hand back and stared at the blood that now covered my fingers. Wiping the sliver of glass away on the side of the bed, I smeared more blood along the inside of my

thighs, the rough sheets of the bed, and along the edges of my labia.

Svetlana was still snoring.

Gathering my strength, I arranged my face into a look of panic, took a deep breath, and shrieked.

Svetlana came slower than I expected. But as soon as she walked into my room, turned on the lights, and saw the blood along my thighs and the sheet, annoyance faded from her face. Her single eye widened in surprise and shock.

“What happened?” she asked, a hint of panic rising up in her voice.

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “I was asleep when the pain woke me up and next thing I knew, there was ... there was all this blood.”

Mouth still agape, her eye moved between the blood and my face, as if she were searching me to see if I was lying. I wrapped my arms around my belly and bent over.

“It hurts ...” I gasped, letting my hair fall across my face to shield my expressions. “It hurts so much. Please. I need to see a doctor.”

“I can bring one out here,” she said. “It should only take a few hours.”

“I can’t wait a few hours!” I pleaded as I surreptitiously moved my finger toward my fake wound to spread it open a little more so that blood would continue to flow. The pain left sweat dotting my forehead. “It hurts so much! Please!”

Emotion warred in her eyes. A savage surge of satisfaction shot through me. She believed me. And then she said the one word that left my heart racing in anticipation.

“Fine,” she snarled as she swung into action. “I’ll drive. Let’s go.”

As we drove, I continued to shift in my seat to keep the wound open so that the bleeding would continue. I wasn’t out of danger yet, not until I could be alone with a doctor. I didn’t know how much blood I was losing, but I was willing to bear the cost.

Something told me that if my bleeding stopped, then my punishment from Svetlana might be something far worse than a cut on my cheek.

“How are you feeling?” she asked curtly as she waited at a red light.

I faked a labored breath and nodded, knowing that whatever I said would only invite scrutiny and add unnecessary complication.

“Hang on.” She turned to me. “We’re almost there, Elia.”

In that moment, she almost sounded sincere—like she cared about what happened to me. We drove in silence the rest of the way to the hospital. When the illuminated sign of the emergency room came into view, my relief faded and panic rose up again. What if Svetlana accompanied me? What if I wasn't seen first?

Svetlana pulled the car up to the driveway, put on her sunglasses and mask, and stepped out. A moment later, she helped me out of the car and into the emergency room.

“Help!” she shouted. “We need some help here.”

A nurse made her way over. “What happened?”

“I don't know,” Svetlana said. “My friend is pregnant, and she just woke up bleeding. She needs help right away.”

The nurse looked at me, and I returned her gaze with a wordless plea. *Please believe her. Please.*

“Ma'am,” she said. “We'll need to assess her situation first. In case you haven't realized, there's been a massive uptick in gang violence over the last several days. GSWs are going to take priority here.”

Svetlana's grip on my arm tightened angrily and I cried out in pain.

“Listen here, you bitch!” she snarled at the nurse. “If anything happens to her or her baby, you will regret it.”

“Is that supposed to scare me?” The nurse rolled her eyes.
“Like I said, GSWs take priority, so unless she’s got a nine-millimeter hole in her that didn’t exist when she woke up this morning, she’s just going to have to wait her turn.”

Panic took hold of me.

I couldn’t afford to wait. If anything, my bleeding might have stopped by now. I had to think of something fast. Cradling my belly, I let my legs go soft and collapsed to the ground, taking advantage of Svetlana’s iron grip on my arm to cushion my fall.

“Elia!” she shouted as she tried to keep me upright, but her legs weren’t strong enough and she fell to the ground with me.

The emergency room suddenly erupted into chaos as the nurse that had greeted us suddenly sprang into action.

“Code R55. I need a crash cart and a bed, stat!” she shouted.

Kneeling down, she held out her hand at Svetlana. I opened my eyes just a sliver so that I could see what was happening.

“Ma’am,” she said firmly. “I need you to take a seat over there. We’ll take it from here.”

Relief returned to me when I felt Svetlana’s grip loosen from my arm. And just like that, she stood up and walked over to the row of seats.

The nurse bent down close to me, the warmth of her face tickling at my nose. I tugged at the hem of her pants and let out a quiet whimper.

“You’re okay, sweetie,” she said. “You’re going to be just fine.”

“I ...” I breathed, drawing her face closer to me.

She turned her ear toward me, and I knew this was my moment.

“She kidnapped me,” I whispered to the nurse. “Help.”

The nurse’s eyes quickly glanced toward Svetlana, and she held out her arm again. “Ma’am, I need you to stay right where you are. I’m taking your friend to observation. We’ll send someone once we can stabilize her.”

Then she turned back to me, leaned down, and whispered the sweetest words that I had heard in the last three days.

“Don’t worry, sweetie. We’re going to keep you safe from her.”

Chapter Six

Aleksey

I stared at the photo of Elia. She was leaning back from whoever was taking the photograph, hands raised as if in protest. Her face was pale, and there was a haunting look of disgust and fear.

And the deep gouge on her cheek—angry and red.

Rage built in my heart as I stared at the photo, my brain urging me to turn it over, but my hand refusing to cooperate. I was furious for a multitude of reasons, but above all else, I was furious at myself.

I had allowed this to happen. I had allowed her to end up in Svetlana's hands.

“Aleksey.” Lana's voice snapped me to reality, and I realized her hand was on my arm.

“There's usually a message on the back of the photo, right?” she asked evenly.

I could detect the light quiver of emotion in her voice, but she kept a professional face. In that moment, Lana Keller became worthy of a modicum of respect.

Slowly, I flipped the photo around to reveal its message. It was an address far outside of Chicago. There was no other message, but there didn't need to be.

I reached for my phone, but Lana refused to let me go and pushed my arm down.

“It’s a trap. You know that, right?” she asked.

Frustration shot through me. Of course I knew that. But what was I supposed to do, just stay here while Svetlana did God knows what to Elia?

“As much as I’d love to watch you eat a bullet from this Svetlana,” she continued without waiting for me to respond. “This whole agreement on my end kind of all falls apart if you’re dead. I made a deal with Berkowitz about you, not your gang.”

“It’s not a gang,” I corrected her.

“Not the argument to be had right now, you asshole,” she hissed. “So if you want us to keep backing off, you need to stay alive. And that means you can’t go in guns blazing.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Keller?” I wrenched my arm free.

“You let *us* handle this,” Lana explained. “Leave it up to the professionals. You know, the ones who actually operate on the side of the law. The ones with some fucking accountability instead of whatever fucking bullshit you’re going to pull.”

I scoffed. “You think I’m going to trust the fate of my wife to some trigger-happy Chicago cops? No fucking chance.”

“I trust them more than I trust any of your thugs!” she shot back.

“Listen here, Keller.” Rage multiplied, and I held up my finger in her face. “If you think this agreement means you can come and insult my honor—”

“Stop wasting my time with this big tough-guy act,” Lana interrupted me. “The longer we spend arguing about this, the worse it’ll get for Elia.”

She had a point, which was probably the most frustrating part. Conceding defeat, I nodded.

“I know,” I sighed.

Just then, my phone started ringing. I looked down at it. It was a hidden number. I drew my lips into a thin line as I stared at it. There could only be one person who would call like this. I picked it up.

“Svetlana, listen to me!”

“Aleksy?” Elia breathed on the other end.

My knees went weak upon hearing her voice, and I braced myself against the counter of the kitchen island. *She’s alive!* But the relief was quickly replaced with dread. How? Where was she? Was this another trap from Svetlana?

“Elia!” I replied quickly. “Where are you?”

Lana looked at me at the mention of Elia's name. All traces of anger and confrontation faded from her eyes as she leaned in. I put the phone on speaker so that she could also hear.

"I'm at Holy Cross hospital," she said. "They're keeping Svetlana distracted, but I don't know for how much longer. Please hurry!"

My heart was racing as the SUV tore down the road toward Holy Cross hospital. It was about a forty-minute drive to the outskirts, but the drive took less than twenty. Lana sat beside me in the SUV, and both of us were on edge as the entrance of the hospital came into view.

As soon as I arrived, I immediately walked up to the receptionist.

"I'm looking for Elia Tarallo," I said. "She was brought here earlier tonight. I'm her husband."

"Tarallo?" the receptionist asked after she typed in the name. "I don't see a Tarallo in here at all."

My heart dropped. This *was* a trap. I knew it.

"What about Korolev?" I asked. "And Elia is spelled kind of weird. E-L-I-A."

"Uh-huh, and how do you spell that last name?"

“K-O-R-O-L-E-V,” I said.

The receptionist nodded and entered the updated information. I took a deep breath as I waited, unsure if it would come back with a result.

“Oh yeah, there she is,” the receptionist said. “She’s in the maternity ward. Room 516. Now, I need you to sign this form to let us—”

I didn’t bother listening to what else she was saying. My feet were already carrying me toward Elia. A few minutes later, I stood in front of the closed door to Room 516.

I raised my hand and knocked on the door gently. At first, there was no response, but a second later, the door opened a crack and I saw a nurse peek out at me.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“I’m looking for my wife, Elia,” I replied.

“Aleksey?” Elia’s familiar voice rose up from behind the door and sent a jolt running down my body.

The door swung open and there she was, wearing a flimsy hospital gown. That angry red line on her face squeezed at my heart, and my feet began moving of their own accord. I pushed past the nurse at the same time Elia jumped off the bed and rushed into my arms.

She buried her face in my chest, and I felt her trembling as my arms wrapped protectively around her tiny frame. My hand ran through her wild and frazzled hair, and my nose greedily drank in the familiar scent that was so uniquely her. Relief, anger, anxiety, and God knows what else mixed together in me, and it took every fiber of my being to stand there with her.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered into her hair. “I’m so, so sorry.”

She looked up at me, and her big eyes were swimming with tears. Without thinking, I placed my mouth on hers and felt her returning the gesture without hesitation. She was here. This was real. My tongue pushed past her lips into the corners of her mouth. Her body melted into mine. A familiar heat stirred inside of me, and we only broke apart when the nurse gave us an awkward cough.

I pulled back and traced the angry red line on her face. Helpless fury burned inside of me at what Svetlana had done to her.

Elia saw the anger in my face and planted a tiny kiss on my palm as I continued to stroke her face.

“I’ll be fine, Aleksey,” she whispered. “You’re here now, and that’s the only thing that matters.”

Elia turned around. “This is my husband,” she explained to the nurse. “He’s here to take me home. Honestly.”

“Are you sure?” the nurse asked her. “It’s not my place to ask, but when the ER tells us what you told them, I just have to check.”

Smiling, Elia's fingers snaked into mine.

"I'm sure," she replied as she squeezed my hand. "He's the last person in the world who would hurt me."

My heart skipped a beat, and my stomach lurched at those words.

Hand in hand, Elia and I walked out of the exam room. I wanted to ask how she ended up here of all places, how she escaped Svetlana, and what had happened to her. But I knew those questions would have to wait for another time.

Right now, I was just glad she was here next to me.

But suddenly, I felt Elia stop as we walked down the hallway. I turned around and saw fear bubbling behind her eyes. Following the direction of her gaze, my eyes landed on a figure hidden under a pair of giant sunglasses and a mask.

My heart rate quickened. *Could it be?*

The figure saw us, and slowly, she reached up to remove the sunglasses that hid her face. I drew in a sharp breath when I recognized her—even under all the horrific scars, I saw the mutilated beauty that was once there.

I also saw the infinite pain in her lone green eye. An eye that used to haunt me in my darkest nightmares with its missing twin.

“Svetlana ...” I whispered.

“*Privyet, Aleks,*” she said as she approached us with a lopsided gait where there used to be a graceful and confident stride. I felt the facade of my strength crumbling at the sight of my own inability to protect her.

Instinctively, I moved between her and Elia. Svetlana stopped in her tracks, and a single tear welled from the corner of her lone green eye.

“You bastard, Aleks,” she whispered in Russian. “You bastard.”

“Svetlana, I’m sorry,” I said.

“No.” She shook her head. “No, you’re fucking not, Aleksey Fyodorovich.”

“I am,” I repeated, pleading. “And it’s the God-honest truth. Svetlana, I looked for you after that night. I swear. I looked for you, but I couldn’t find you.”

“Liar!” she snarled as she started lumbering toward us again. But her eye was no longer looking at me. It was drilling into Elia.

“Svetlana, don’t do this,” I warned her as I hid Elia behind my body. “Svetlana, whatever problem you have, it’s with me. Not with her!”

“My problem with *you*,” she said as tears streamed down her face, “is that I spent ten years hiding behind your shadow instead of stepping out to remind you of what your father and his men did to me! Or have you forgotten that, Aleks? While you were fucking all of those pretty girls over the last ten years? While you were fucking *her*.”

I felt Elia’s hand squeezing insistently around mine. I knew that she wanted us to leave, but I couldn’t tear myself away. The horrid, twisted figure that used to be the Svetlana I remembered compelled me to stay—silently demanding that I pay her the respect that had been denied for ten years.

Slowly, she reached up, removed her mask and wig, and rolled up her sleeves to show me the extent of her injuries. The burns, the cuts, the scars . . .

The way her lips had been shredded and cut apart.

I felt my body tremble at the sight of what my father did. In that moment, it was as if I had been transported back in time to that horrible night ten years ago—forced to watch helplessly as Svetlana shrieked for me to save her.

“You forgot me, Aleks.” Tears streamed down her ruined face. “You abandoned me. You left me.” Her single green eye shifted slightly toward Elia, who moved out from behind me despite my best attempts at shielding her, and switched to English. “The same way he will forget and abandon you.”

“That’s not true,” I asserted.

“Ha!” Svetlana laughed. It was a mirthless bark of a laughter. She rolled her sleeves back down and placed her wig back on.

“Remember this face, pretty bitch.” Svetlana’s lips split open in a grotesque smile as she talked past me. “Because when all of this is said and done, you’ll *wish* that you looked as good as me.”

“Svetlana, please,” I said.

“Svetlana is dead,” she cut me off as she switched back to Russian. “She died ten years ago because of you. I am what is left, and I will take everything that you owe me, Aleksey Korolev.”

Chapter Seven

Elia

I watched Svetlana walk up to Aleksey, whispering words in Russian that I couldn't hear even if I could understand them. Her tone was soft, almost affectionate. Occasionally she would switch back to English, only so that I might understand the threats that she directed toward me. But otherwise, she continued to whisper to Aleksey in Russian.

And whenever the switch back to Russian happened, I saw the way her gaze would soften when she spoke to Aleksey. Jealousy scorched my heart. To my own horror, Aleksey made no attempt to move at all as Svetlana approached us. He remained rooted to the spot.

Why won't he move? My fingers clutched at his sleeve. Please, Aleksey! Please! We need to go! We need to get out of here! Please don't let her get close to me!

But the words refused to come to my mouth. Helpless, I was forced to watch as Svetlana's grotesque figure stood perilously close to Aleksey. I was forced to watch as her gnarled hand softly touched the spot on his chest where my head so frequently rested. I was forced to watch as she slowly reached up to cup his face.

And then I saw the glimmer of a tear edging the corner of his eyes, and I felt a monster clawing at my own insides at the sight.

Then she had the audacity to stand on her tiptoes—swaying from the effort—and brush his cheek lightly with her shredded lips.

Shuddering, she turned away, a tear rolling down her face as she looked at both of us and switched back to English.

“I waited ten years to do that.” She closed her eye. “I suffered for him. I killed for him. I put you in his bed for him. And what have you done for him? Spread your legs like all those countless other pretty bitches in his life? You’re nothing to him compared to me.”

Perhaps it was because she was no longer speaking Russian, or perhaps it was because my anger and jealousy could no longer be restrained. But in that moment, I found my voice again.

“I gave him love and a future,” I said hotly. “And all you’ve done is burn his world down.”

Her terrible green eye turned to me, and the softness she reserved for Aleksey evaporated. In its place was nothing but pure, implacable hatred for me.

“I haven’t even begun to burn his world down, pretty bitch,” she said. “And don’t you dare think that I didn’t plan for you to engineer at least one successful escape.”

I felt my heart skip a beat at her words. Did she plan for *this* as well? Was this all just another trap that I walked into? As self-doubt ate away at me, Svetlana stepped back from me and Aleksey, the smile never leaving her face.

“Just you wait,” she said sweetly as she turned her face toward me. The sound of slapping boots rose up the stairs. “Do you imagine that the Korolev men will continue defending you

once they learn that their pakhan has been taken into custody because you begged him to save you?”

Before I could answer, three police officers rounded the corner. I gripped Aleksey’s sleeves at the sight of them. There was one for each of us...

“Svetlana Yefimov,” one of the cops said unexpectedly. “You are under arrest for the kidnapping of Elia Korolev and conspiracy to commit murder. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you ...”

The look of surprise that suddenly took hold of Svetlana’s face was the sweetest thing I had ever seen. A savage surge of triumph joined the other mixed emotions warring inside of me.

Panic rose on her face as two cops forced her arms down, and she recoiled, face twisting in panic when another cop positioned himself behind her. Her chest began heaving from hyperventilation the moment a pair of handcuffs clicked around her wrists. When the cops gripped her shoulders, she shrieked at them to let her go.

Guilt rushed through me at the sound of her gut-wrenching scream. She screamed as if they were going to hurt her.

She’d spent ten years doing everything she could to never allow herself to be helpless again. And suddenly in the span of ten seconds, her illusion of power shattered. And just like that, she was that scared girl forced to endure all the terrible things she experienced all over again.

It was something I understood all too well. And in that moment, I pitied her—even after everything she forced me to

do.

But just then, I saw another person walk up after them. Someone whose presence flooded me with equal parts relief and dread.

Lana.

My grip on Aleksey's sleeve tightened as I felt the strength sap from my legs. Did she come to arrest me once again? Was I about to trade one prison for another?

Yet Aleksey's face didn't change when he saw her. He didn't look angry like I thought he would. He didn't even look surprised. Instead, he exchanged a curt nod with my best friend as the three cops busied themselves with Svetlana.

Lana approached both of us and Aleksey stepped aside.

She opened her arms, and without another thought, I hurled myself into her embrace. Unable to hold back the tears anymore, I started sobbing into her shoulder as she squeezed me back.

"I thought you ..." I choked out. "I don't understand ... I'm ... I'm ..."

I couldn't form coherent words anymore as emotions overwhelmed me. All I could do was cry uselessly in Lana's embrace. Her hand rose up and gently stroked my hair.

“You’re okay, El,” she whispered into my ear. “I got you, girl. I got you.”

When I finally managed to break away from her, the cops had already led Svetlana away. I stared at the two most unlikely partners in the world—my best friend and my husband—and suddenly realized just how lightheaded I was.

“I’ll give the hospital staff the briefing and follow up on anything else they might need,” Lana said. “And then you can go. There’s still a lot of shit on the table that needs to be cleared. But the important thing is that you’re safe. And if there’s a single breath left in my lungs, I’ll make sure that it stays that way.”

“When did this happen?” I turned my gaze to Aleksey as my fingers found his. “*How* did this happen?”

“Later.” He smiled as he squeezed my hand. “But right now, let’s get you home.”

Home.

That single word sent tears to my eyes again. I held onto him as we waited for Lana to give her statement. For the first time in a very long time, I felt like I had found the happiness that I was looking for. Slowly, I felt a smile make its way onto my own face.

It remained on my face as we stepped out of the hospital and into Aleksey’s car, and never once faded, even as he pressed his lips against mine.

Chapter Eight

Aleksey

Elia was back, and it took every ounce of will for me to keep my composure around her. I had so many questions for her, each one more difficult than the last to ask. After a few minutes of driving in silence, I finally couldn't hold back anymore.

“How did you convince her to take you to the hospital?” I asked.

“I had to fake an emergency.” Elia bit her lower lip, searching for the right word.

Slowly, she told me about the place that Svetlana kept her in and about the sliver of glass she found in the bathroom. When she told me how she had to hurt herself to convince Svetlana that she suffered a miscarriage, my fingers gripped the steering wheel so tightly that my knuckles turned bone white.

But as much as it pained me to listen to Elia's escape, I couldn't help but admire her at the same time. My cunning, determined wife. She was like a wolf who chewed off her own leg to escape a trap. And she did it all without the knowledge that any of it would work.

When silence descended between us again, I took a long, shuddering breath.

“I'm sorry you had to go through all of that,” I said. “It's my fault. I should've listened to you back at the mansion. I should've sent someone else. I should've—”

“No,” she interrupted me. “No, it’s not. You went after Alya because that’s what a big brother does. Luca would’ve done the same for me if he was in the same position. You did nothing wrong.”

“I left you undefended.” I shook my head. “I should’ve brought more men to the mansion.”

“Stop it, Aleksey,” she said. “You can’t keep beating yourself up for the mistakes of the past. What matters is that we’re together again, here and now. And as long as we’re together, there’s nothing that the two of us can’t handle. The past is the past; there’s nothing you can do about it other than learn from it.”

I nodded as I took in her words. She was right. The past *was* the past. And no matter how deeply the past could hurt us, there was nothing we could do to change what happened.

“And besides ...” she continued. “What’s the deal with you and Lana? Just a few days ago, you had no problem with putting a bullet in her head. And now you guys are ... friends?” She turned to me. “Frenemies?”

“Had to twist her arm a bit.” I smiled wearily as I answered.

“I bet you did.” Elia raised an eyebrow. “How?”

“Nothing escapes you, does it?” The smile on my face widened.

“Quit stalling, Aleksey.” She smirked in response. “And just tell me how you managed to convince the one person who spent her entire career trying to put you behind bars to take your side.”

“After Svetlana took you, I traced Lana’s phone and found her tied up by the side of the highway,” I answered. “We both agreed then and there that we had a mutual interest in getting you back.”

“Smart,” she said. “Mutual interest ...”

“... forms the bedrock of a stable partnership,” I finished for her. “From there, I made a few more demands.”

“Oh?” Elia asked. I had her full attention now. Whatever fear and apprehension had been in her eyes faded like morning mist in the sun. Now, the only thing in her big eyes was curiosity.

“First,” I said. “I demanded the contact info for the Tarallo lawyers from the New York DA. I needed to negotiate some kind of ceasefire between the two sides so that I could have more resources to devote to finding you.”

“And now that you’ve found me, I don’t imagine Lana will be particularly happy about that little arrangement anymore.”

“No.” I shook my head, sighing. “I don’t imagine she will be.”

“Okay, what else?”

“Second, I asked her to tell Berkowitz that I was her man on the inside of the Bratva,” I replied. “That I was always her inside man.”

“Why?”

“I needed Berkowitz to back off.” I shrugged. “And in the moment, it was the best course of action.”

“I can’t imagine the rest of the Bratva is okay with that kind of a deal.”

“No,” I admitted. “They won’t be.”

The truth was, signing any kind of deal with Lana Keller was always going to bring some form of blowback against me. Already I had caught brigadiers casting long and suspicious glances at her. I was certain that once our fight with what was left of the Tarallos was over, I would have to deal with an uprising in my own ranks.

“Was there anything else?” she asked.

“Just that,” I replied. “What do you think?”

“I think,” she closed her eyes, “that it’s too late for either of us to think about these things. And I think that I would like something good to eat.”

“Got anything specific in mind?”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” she answered. “But I could really go for a real Chicago deep-dish pizza.”

“Who are you?” I laughed, feeling the tension slowly unwind itself from deep in my stomach for the first time in days. “And what have you done with Elia Tarallo?”

“Korolev,” she corrected me softly. “Elia Korolev.”

My heart skipped when I heard my last name falling from her lips. Silence descended between us again, as both of us absorbed the full weight of what she’d just said. *Elia Korolev*, I repeated in my head. Something primal triggered in my head, and I was filled with an overwhelming desire to protect her. To keep her safe from anyone who might hurt her.

“Any other requests?” I cleared my throat.

“Actually.” She looked at me, a playful smirk on her lips and a devious glint in her eyes as her delicate fingers danced their way along my thigh. “I have two. And lucky for you, I think you’re going to like what I’m about to request.”

My cock slowly stirred to life at her touch. “Is that right?”

“First.” She leaned in close, her breathy voice—heavy with lust and need—tickling my ear. “I want a nice long shower.”

“And then?” I breathed.

“And then.” Those deft fingers unzipped my pants, wrapped their way around my throbbing member, and gave me a long,

teasing stroke. “I want you to make me scream.”

Chapter Nine

Elia

The familiar path up to the penthouse sent shivers of anticipation down my spine. No matter how hard I gripped Aleksey's hand, I couldn't chase away the fear at the back of my head that my eyes would suddenly fly open at any moment to the dark, empty room that Svetlana kept me a prisoner in. I was also slightly apprehensive about returning. I hadn't been back here since that night we departed for the mansion. I wasn't sure what I'd find inside.

But as the elevator slowly rose toward the top floor, I forced all of those thoughts from my mind and focused on the warmth radiating from Aleksey's hand. On the entire drive back, he had refused to let my hand go, almost as if he had the same fears as me.

Neither of us was prepared to accept that this was indeed real.

And neither of us was prepared to believe that Svetlana was now safely detained by Chicago PD.

When the elevator finally dinged and the doors opened, I half expected there to be a flurry of activity. Instead, there was nothing but blissful silence.

The familiar sights of the penthouse greeted me, welcoming me back like an old friend. Everything was more or less exactly how I remembered it, apart from papers lying around and the slight scent of stale coffee that hung in the air.

As soon as the elevator doors closed behind us, Aleksey spun me around and pulled me into a deep, sensual kiss. His tongue swept into my mouth and I greedily returned the gesture. The smoldering ember of desire that had been heating up since the moment his voice sounded from the other side of the door at the hospital roared to an open flame.

His hand roamed down between my body, tracing the delicate contours of my curves until it stopped at my ass. He deepened the kiss, draining the air from my lungs as he squeezed and eliciting a moan from deep within my core. I pressed my hand against his chest, pushing him back just enough for him to look down at me with ravenous hunger in his eyes.

“Shower,” I whispered.

He smirked, nipped my neck with his lips, took my hand in his, and led me to our familiar bathroom and turned on the water.

When he reached for his shirt, I stopped him with my own hands, shaking my head. “Let me.”

His eyes heated with intensity as I undid the buttons, my heart hammering in my chest. Aleksey’s body was riddled with scars. I had memorized the distinct geographies of his body. Yet every time I exposed it, I was hit by the same surge of desire to run my hand along its familiar hard lines.

Pushing the shirt off his shoulders, I threw it on the floor, my eager hands going to his waistband. “I want you naked,” I told him, my breathing coming in pants at the thought. “I want to touch you all over.”

“Then go ahead,” he hissed, allowing me to undo his trousers and push them over his hips. His cock sprang out, hard and thick, and I drew in a sharp breath.

Good God.

Instead of touching him, I allowed my hands to fall to his shoulders, tracing the grooves of his muscles down to his chest, then over his abdomen.

“Is this what you want?” I asked huskily, pressing my lips to his pec and planting one kiss after another down his rock-hard body as my thumb drew small, torturous circles around the head of his throbbing cock. “My tiny little mouth wrapped around this big hard cock?”

He let out a choked laugh. “That’s exactly what I want.”

Pausing, I looked up at him. “Is that all?”

“No.” His hand combed through my hair and tucked a strand behind my ear so that he could look into my eyes. “I want so much more than that.”

“Then tell me.” I took his steely hard cock in my hands and gave it a teasing squeeze.

He shuddered, throwing his head back.

“I want to lose myself in you,” he growled, his eyes closed as the steam of the shower rose up all around us.

I knew how he felt. I lost myself in him every single time we came together. Carefully, I lowered myself to my knees, bowing before my husband in what some might call submission. But what they didn't know was that here was where I held the power. Here was where I held complete control. And if I wanted to, I could bring *him* to *his* knees.

When my lips wrapped around the tip, his hands tightening their grip in my hair.

“Elia,” Aleksey gasped.

The way he said my name was the sweetest sound and spurred me on to tease him. Slowly, I took his length all the way into my mouth. My hands gripped his hips as my tongue swirled around the sensitive head and long, smooth shaft as his salty musk filled my mouth. In another long, teasing motion, I pulled back, urging him to move into my mouth.

Aleksey wasted no time doing so, his own fingers tightening in my hair as his hips started thrusting into my face. His precum mixed with my saliva, and I swallowed audibly, refusing to let even a drop spill out from the corner of my mouth. My hands moved from his hips to his thighs, and I raked my fingers along his skin. He gasped appreciatively above me and his motions grew more erratic.

Just as I sensed he was nearing the point of no return, Aleksey carefully dislodged himself from my mouth, a grin on his face. “No,” he said, extending a hand. “I want to lose myself inside you.”

My entire body trembled at the thought as I allowed him to help me off the floor, his hands working feverishly as he removed my clothing. The bathroom was already heated from

the steam from the shower, and my skin shivered in response to his caresses as he peeled my clothing from my body.

“Mine,” he said to me, his fingers hooking on my panties and easing them down my legs. “All of you. Mine.”

Aleksey threw my panties on top of the growing pile of clothing in the bathroom.

“Spread your legs for me, Elia.”

A shiver ran down my spine. My cheeks heated, and I did as he asked. Now it was his turn to kneel.

As Aleksey lowered himself to his knees, his warm hands found their way down my hips, until they stopped at the space between my legs. But suddenly, he stopped.

“Elia.” He looked up at me. His eyes were filled with concern. “Are you sure you can do this?”

I realized that he was looking at the spot where I had drawn blood in my bid to escape Svetlana. The look of concern in his eyes was like a splash of cold water. I took a deep, shuddering breath.

“Yes,” I told him. “I’m not made of glass, Aleksey. I know you can’t hurt me.”

He kissed his way along my thigh until his breath hung hot and heavy before my clit. Warmth returned to my core, and I closed my eyes as his fingers parted my folds.

Then his tongue touched my clit and set every nerve in my body aflame. Oh! I had missed this in the short time that we were apart. I turned my face heavenward as a long moan tumbled from my lips. My fingers gripped his hair, pulling him closer to me as I swore softly with every breath from the overwhelming pleasure. My body was tight with need. I loved it when he touched me like this. His tongue swirled around my clit, teasing me higher and higher as my pleasure soared in the steamy heat.

Aleksey slid a finger inside. Instinctively, I clenched around it. A light tremor shook through my legs as he began to move. Between his finger and his tongue, I wasn't going to last much longer. That was what he did to me.

That was why I loved him. "Aleksey ..." I gasped, begging.

He didn't let up and I whimpered, my fingernails digging into his skin.

"Don't stop."

He rewarded my begging by picking up his tempo. Soon, I was crying out in pleasure, my body bucking against his tongue as the first shuddering orgasm tore through my body. My blood sang in my ears as he removed his finger and pressed his lips against my sex. His tongue lapped at my folds, taking me higher and higher until I was slipping down the wall against his mouth.

Aleksey let me ride his face to the end. When my body was limp and shaking, he rose, gathered me close, and moved me into the shower. Under the searing spray, he captured my lips

with his, allowing me to taste my own arousal that coated his lips.

“Was this what you wanted?” he murmured, his hands framing my face as his cock probed my slick entrance.

“Yes.” I gripped his strong arms. “Please.” I needed to feel his closeness, the one thing that no one could take from us.

“Please.”

Aleksey gripped my hips, sliding me up on the tile. I wrapped my legs around him and lowered myself on his cock. The familiar sensation of being filled stole my breath away as he pushed through the wetness to a place that only he touched—a place that only he was allowed to touch. Another lusty moan punched its way from my throat as I brushed my hand over his forehead.

Our eyes met, and the only thing I could see in them was tenderness and love.

“Whatever happens,” I whispered, my hand moving to cup his face. “I will be here, Aleksey. I won’t ever let you go.”

His jaw tightened and he leaned forward, brushing his lips over mine tenderly. “And wherever you go, I will follow.”

I wanted to say more, but he started to move and chased away all thoughts from my mind. His lips pressed against mine, and we kissed each other as if we’d never get the chance to do so again. Another orgasm swelled, rose, and crashed into me. Then another, and another. Each one more intense than the last.

Aleksey's hand raked down my body, finding my clit as he pumped into me, teasing me until I was sobbing through the endless waves of pleasure that blended into one. He peppered kisses on my face, my eyes, down the side of my neck while he fucked me with a relentless abandon. Finally, he tensed up against me and with a loud, raspy roar, I felt him come undone inside of me. Delicious wet heat surged into me, splashing my walls as he came.

I clung to him for all that it was worth, praying that this moment might never end.

I needed him just like he needed me. As I cried out again in my own shuddering pleasure, I pressed my lips against his skin and rested my head against his shoulder. He tightened his grip on me in response and I knew that nothing else needed to be said.

This was everything both of us wanted.

Everything both of us needed.

Chapter Ten

Aleksey

I woke with a start. It took me a moment to register that Elia's body was pressed against mine as she snored lightly in my embrace. My body had been conditioned by the last few days to wake up around midnight and seek out coffee. I buried my face in Elia's hair, inhaling her scent again to remind myself that she was here and that this was real.

But in the dark silence, punctuated by Elia's soft snoring, a different image swam to the forefront of my mind—an image that I tried my best to forget.

Svetlana's face. The scars, the burns, the patches of skin where her beautiful hair had been, and that single terrible green eye.

She had haunted me from the moment Elia concluded that Svetlana was the Bogatyr, to the moment of hearing her voice on the phone, and to the moment of actually seeing her—disfigured and broken—in front of me.

For ten years, I thought she was dead. And now, in less than a week, it was almost as if reality itself had shattered in front of me. It had been impossible to keep her from my mind, even when I was buried deep inside of Elia.

When she had shown me the extent to which my father and his men had broken her, I felt myself being dragged through a range of emotions. Guilt. Self-loathing.

And above all else, disbelief.

It didn't matter to me that I wasn't the one who left her broken and battered on the ground that terrible night. It didn't matter to me that Elia told me that whatever happened to Svetlana wasn't my fault.

There was nothing in this world that could make me shake off the belief that I *was* responsible for what happened. That if it hadn't been for me, Svetlana Yefimov would never have been forced to endure the horrific torture that my father and his men inflicted on her.

Which was why even now, with Elia's soft body warming me, I felt an indescribable coldness taking root in my core.

I was trapped alone with my own thoughts and my own guilt, and nothing—not even Elia's love—could chase that away. A familiar horrible thought rose up again.

What if I never stopped loving Svetlana?

I closed my eyes and tried to force myself back to sleep, but all I could see was Svetlana's face. Those shredded lips that split open like unfurling flower petals each time she spoke. Her whispers to me in the hospital, moments before she kissed my cheek, rose up again in my ear like a soft breeze rustling through tree branches.

I thought it was my hate for you that kept me alive for all these years. But now ... all I can think is that I was so wrong. You belong with me. Not with her. Kiss me, my dearest. Kiss me and all of this will fade like a bad dream in the morning sun. Come fly away with me. Just you and me.

I refused. But did I refuse because I truly loved Elia? Or did I refuse because I could no longer love Svetlana? I pulled Elia closer to me, closed my eyes, and inhaled her scent deeply again as I asked myself the most deeply disturbing question yet.

Did I refuse Svetlana because she was no longer beautiful?

I tried to conjure up my memory of Svetlana before that horrible night ten years ago, a memory of when she was still the rebellious girl who stole my heart. I imagined it was *that* girl who begged me to leave in the hospital. I imagined it was *that* girl who stood on her tiptoes and lightly brushed her whole and unbroken lips to my cheek.

I imagined. And guiltily, my heart skipped.

My eyes flew open and I rolled away from Elia. She muttered something soft and incomprehensible, but otherwise remained fast asleep. But the damage had been done. My heart had moved for Svetlana, and that realization shook me to my core.

Wearily, I sat up, swung my legs over the edge of the bed, and stood up. I couldn't. I shouldn't. I glanced down at my sleeping wife, the living, breathing woman who held my heart in her hands and my heir in her belly. My eyes settled on the long angry mark on her face, and reality crashed into me like a truck.

Svetlana is dead, I reminded myself. The girl you loved is gone. She died ten years ago. Now, what stands in her place is something twisted and monstrous. You didn't kill Svetlana Yefimov. The Bogatyr did.

It was exactly as Elia had said. The past was the past, and there was nothing I could do about it other than learn from it. I couldn't protect Svetlana from the horrors of the Bratva life. But I could still protect Elia. I could still protect our child.

I sat back down on the bed and watched Elia. My future was here with her, and not in the past with the memories of a dead girl. Slowly, I reached out and slipped my hand into hers, and my heart skipped when she gave my fingers a light, gentle squeeze.

It took me another few moments before I realized that my phone was rattling outside.

Reluctantly, I peeled myself away from Elia, casting a long glance at her curled form one more time before I stepped out. The glittering lights of Chicago greeted me through the massive windows of the penthouse, and I picked up my phone to see who was calling. It was one of my brigadiers—Gregor Konev. I swore inwardly. He was one of the last people I wanted to talk to right now.

"Dobri noch, Gregor Ivanovich," I greeted him.

Gregor was one of my father's most ruthless killers. A man with a penchant for great violence and a talent for inflicting pain. He had been there that night ten years ago. Not as a victim with Svetlana, but as her chief tormentor. I despised the man, and he despised me. His loyalty to me was a courtesy only on account of his loyalty to my father, and his own warped sense of honor.

Nothing more.

I kept him at arm's length, and he knew it.

“Danya is dead,” he said matter-of-factly. “I need more men, Aleksey Fyodorovich.”

I frowned. Gregor was always reckless with the men under his command. Under normal circumstances, I would've sent him raw recruits. If he had asked, I would have told him that he was the only one who could shape them into ruthless instruments of violence for use later. Which was the partial truth, of course.

But now I didn't have raw recruits to send him, and his recklessness was starting to take away my good soldiers.

My loyal soldiers.

Soldiers that I needed

“I have no more men to spare for you, Gregor Ivanovich,” I replied coldly. “Learn to make do.”

“I urge you to reconsider,” Gregor said lazily. “Each of my boys died taking down at least two of theirs.”

“I believe you.” I gritted my teeth. “But my decision is final, Gregor Ivanovich.”

“Very well,” he answered. “I will do as you command, Aleksey Fyodorovich.”

“See that you do,” I said. “Is that all?”

“It is, Aleksey Fyodorovich,” he drawled. “Are the brigadiers still meeting in the morning?”

“They are,” I answered.

“I will be there,” he said. “And perhaps then I can plead my case to you, or anyone else who cares to listen, in person.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Oh, and pay my sincerest respects to Elia Ludovicovna.” Gregor chuckled. “I also wish to personally commend her tomorrow on the quality of her father’s men. Have a good night,” he said. “Aleksey Fyodorovich.”

Chapter Eleven

Elia

I woke with the sun in my eyes.

It took me a few moments to realize where I was. For a few brief terrifying moments, I thought I was back in the cabin again and that the last twenty-four hours had been nothing but a dream. But slowly, my breathing returned to a normal pace as I took in the familiar sight of the bedroom I shared with Aleksey.

This was real. I was back. I was home.

Aleksey wasn't in bed. I looked over at the clock and saw that it was a little after ten. Rubbing my eyes, I swung my legs off the bed and froze.

There were voices outside, and they were speaking in English. Curious, I got up and pressed my ear to the door. The sounds were muffled, but I could still pick out words here and there.

“You will not speak to her, Gregor Ivanovich, and you will not get more men. Even if you fight Shishkin for them.”

I held my breath as I listened. One voice belonged to Aleksey, and another was unrecognizable. But whoever it was, they sounded big and mean. And they were talking about me.

“Very well, Aleksey Fyodorovich,” this Gregor person replied. “Oh, one more thing. I heard from someone in the police

station that an old acquaintance was brought in. Someone that I thought died ten years ago.”

My eyes flew wide open. He was talking about Svetlana!

“As I understand it, while we were busy dying in the streets, *she* took Elia Ludovicovna from under your nose.”

“What’s your point, Gregor Ivanovich?”

“Well.” Gregor chuckled darkly. “It’s only fair that the boys and I pay the cunt a visit in her cell. For old time’s sake.”

My jaw dropped. Was Gregor one of the men who’d been there that night? In a way, I supposed I shouldn’t have been shocked that someone from that night would still be a member of the Bratva. But the fact that one was here in this house, under my roof ...

A shiver ran down my spine when I realized what he was implying.

I couldn’t allow it. I refused to stand by and do nothing as this monster continued to talk.

“You can’t!” I ripped open the door and stomped out into the hallway.

And found myself face to face with what looked like a dozen or so of the most terrifying-looking men I’d ever seen. My breath hitched in my throat and I froze in my spot.

One of them—a large bald man with a menacing scowl on his face—turned to me, and his eyes quickly gave my body an up and down.

His shiny scalp reflected the bright light of the morning sun. The tattoo of a cross peeked out from behind his ear. He was tall and muscular, and his menacing presence made me want to take a step back. His worm-like lips twisted into a smile, and I crossed my arms defensively.

There was something about his presence that made me immediately uncomfortable and instinctively not want to be anywhere near him.

“Ah,” he spoke, and his voice was that of the man I had heard behind the door, Gregor. “Welcome back, Elia Ludovicovna. Your father’s men were brave. They fought well. And they died. My respects to them.”

A circle of cold laughter rose up.

“I heard what you’re planning to do,” I snarled at him. “You monster!”

“Oh?” He chuckled. “And what did I suggest?”

“Enough, Gregor!” Aleksey hissed.

Gregor simply waved his hand in dismissal. But none of the other brigadiers shifted in reaction. Something was about to happen. Something terrible. I glanced around nervously and tried to stay calm. But fear and anxiety were beginning to take

hold. My arms moved to shield my belly as Gregor drew himself up to his full height and leveled a meaty finger at me.

“Tell me, Elia Ludovicovna,” he said. “Did that cunt give you that scar?”

My hand rose up and brushed the angry wound. A dull pain reminded me of its presence. But I refused to acknowledge Gregor’s words.

“Don’t you wish you could return the favor?” He smirked darkly. “Just say the word, Elia Ludovicovna, and we will make it so.”

“No,” I said firmly. “You will not lay a finger on her!”

He looked at me quizzically, as if it was the most absurd thing he’d ever heard, and turned back to Aleksey.

“I don’t understand, Aleksey Fyodorovich.” He shook his head. “The cunt took your wife, cut her face, and yet we are to simply stand here like bitches?”

“Don’t call her that!” I clenched my jaw and forced out the words. “Don’t you dare call her that.”

As much as I despised Svetlana, she was still a human being. I refused to allow him to talk about her that way. Whatever happened to Svetlana now, I wanted it to be done in accordance with the law and not in accordance with the capricious cruelty of a brute like Gregor.

“That’s enough, Gregor!” Aleksey bellowed.

Gregor turned his attention back to Aleksey, his beady eyes narrowing. “You can’t expect us to keep fighting for you endlessly, *Alyosha*. Not if you refuse to take retribution on the bitch who carved your wife’s face. Not if you keep working with the same people trying to put us away.”

Not only did most of the other men not move, but some even nodded in agreement with Gregor. Aleksey saw this too, and his stance shifted ever so slightly.

“My decision is final, Gregor,” Aleksey said. “You’re dismissed.”

“Where’s your sense of honor?” Gregor replied as he stood up. “Your sense of pride? You’re soft ...” he continued, voice dangerous and silky. “I can’t believe I didn’t realize that until now. But I suppose all this time, you always had another Korolev to hide behind.”

“Get. Out,” Aleksey said. “*Eto moi prikaz.*”

“You think that just because you can say those words,” Gregor chuckled darkly as he slowly walked to the elevator, “they’ll mean something? I sent men to die for you. But neither you nor your little wife have the balls to do what’s necessary, *Alyosha*.” He looked at the other men. “As for the rest of you, think about if this is the kind of pakhan you want to die for.”

The elevator door opened, and Gregor stepped in. Then, slowly at first, a few of the other brigadiers got up and followed Gregor. Aleksey looked on in disbelief as one after another followed, until only a handful of them remained.

“So be it.” Gregor smirked. “I’m sure I’ll see you all soon enough.”

Chapter Twelve

Aleksey

Later

I dismissed the rest of the brigadiers soon after Gregor left. I didn't want to see any of them at the moment. My focus turned toward Elia. I didn't blame her for what happened, because I knew that I would've made the same decision without her.

There was no way in hell that I would have allowed Gregor to do what he wanted to Svetlana.

But my single moment of chivalry might have just cost me my Bratva. Without another word, I poured myself a large glass of whiskey, then decided to forgo the glass and took the bottle with me as I made my way out to the balcony.

By the time I came back inside, it was dark outside. Elia was back in our room, and I was forced to be alone with my thoughts. I glanced at my phone on the table and felt a surge of adrenaline shoot through my body, chasing away the alcohol, when I saw the name on the caller ID.

Lana.

There were three missed calls, and a text that said, "Call me as soon as you see this."

Whatever this was about, it couldn't be good.

Sighing, I returned the call. She picked up almost immediately.

“About fucking time, Korolev,” she bit out.

“Hello to you too, Keller.” I felt myself bristle at the hostility in her voice. “What’s so important that you couldn’t wait?”

“Svetlana just got released on bail,” she replied. “She’s out in the wind.”

What? My eyes went wide and I collapsed on the couch.
“How?”

“Believe me,” Lana sighed. “I’m just as shocked as you are. I’m down at the police station right now, trying to get as much information as I can. But Chicago PD is being real tight-lipped about this. They won’t even talk to my boss.”

“They’re ignoring Berkowitz’s calls?” Now *that* surprised me. It wasn’t every day that law enforcement was at each other’s throats. “Did they explain why?”

“If they won’t talk to my boss, you think they’ll talk to me?” Lana scoffed on the other end. “So far, the only info I got is that they set bail at three hundred thousand, and some scumbag lawyer paid it. All in cash, I might add. Once that was paid, they had no legal grounds to hold her here for the night.”

My brow furrowed. *Cash?* There weren’t a whole lot of people or organizations in Chicago capable of coughing up that much money on short notice.

“Who was this lawyer?” I asked. “Did you get a name?”

“Matvei Glazov,” Lana replied. “Sounds Russian. You know who that is?”

I felt the strength in my leg give way when I heard that name. My heart hammered in panic as a bead of cold sweat trickled down the side of my rib cage. Not only did I know who Matvei Glazov was, I knew who he worked for.

Me.

It seemed that Gregor had gotten to him as well. Whether he had threatened Glazov or simply found a sympathetic ear, I didn't know. And truthfully speaking, it didn't matter.

“Keller,” I started slowly. “I can't believe I'm saying this, but you need to get out of there before it's too late.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” She sounded annoyed. “Who is this Glazov?”

“Matvei Glazov is a criminal lawyer who works exclusively for the Korolev Bratva,” I explained. “He's who we call whenever any of us run afoul of the law.”

But there was something else that I wasn't about to reveal. Glazov was also our main point of contact within the Chicago police department. He was the one who made sure money flowed to the right hands, threats were delivered to the right heads, and secrets were buried in the right places.

“So why the fuck is he bailing out Svetlana?” Lana asked.

“Haven’t you heard yet?” I said, a sad smile slowly making its way onto my face. “My own brigadiers walked out on me. They got sick and tired of watching me work with *you* to save Ludovico’s daughter. All while they were dying in the streets fighting Ludovico’s men. They got sick and tired of me holding back their leash. If this is going in the direction that I think it’s going, then shit is about to get real messy, real fucking soon.”

The silence on the other side was damning. Finally, Lana started speaking again. “All right, I’m heading out now. What else do you need me to do?”

“You?” I laughed. “There’s not a goddamn thing *you* can do to stop what is about to happen. If my own brigadiers have decided to turn against me, and if they have the lawyer for the Bratva on their side, then I’m as good as dead.”

“Well, I have some other updates,” she said. “Figure you might want to hear them personally. I’m coming over.”

“Wait!” I shouted. But it was too late. The line had already gone dead.

“Aleksey?”

I spun around. The balcony door was open. Elia stood there, cradling her belly. Her eyes saw the phone in my hand, and her expression shifted as she slowly pieced together what must have just taken place.

“You need to get in touch with Alya,” Elia said. “You don’t know who you can still trust.”

“Vova would never ...” I shook my head in shock, the wound of betrayal still fresh on my mind. “He’s loyal. He stuck by me this entire time. He listened when I ordered him not to kill Lana by the side of the road.”

“Aleksey.” Elia’s hand found mine. “I know you want to believe that. I do. But you can’t risk that.” Her free hand cradled her belly again. “*We* can’t risk having you divide your attention between worrying about Alya and us.”

She was right. I couldn’t risk that. So, I called my sister, and prayed that she would pick up. The elevator door dinged, and Lana stepped through the doors. Her face was pale, and she had bags under her eyes. Her mouth opened to say something, but Elia held up her hand and stopped her.

“Hi, it’s Alya! Shoot me a text!” my sister’s voice mail message greeted me. My blood ran cold.

I tried again. And again. But every time, the same result. The phone rang until the voice mail message came on.

Pacing, I did the next best thing. I called Vova.

He picked up on the second ring.

“Aleksey Fyodorovich,” he said in his usual clipped tone.

“Where is my sister?” I hissed.

“She’s in the shower, Aleksey Fyodorovich,” Vova answered.
“What is happening?”

I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard that.

“We have traitors inside the Bratva,” I explained. “She is in danger. Bring her here.”

“It will be done,” Vova replied.

“Good,” I said. “Keep me updated. Trust no one.”

I hung up the phone and turned to Elia. “She’s fine. Vova is bringing her here.”

She nodded. “That’s good.”

“So,” I said, turning to Lana now. “What is this other update that you think I want to hear personally?”

Without missing a beat, she pulled out her phone. “I got the contact info for one of the Tarallo lawyers, and this one is willing to talk.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” I reached for the phone, but Lana kept it out of my reach.

“He won’t talk to you,” she said as she turned her eyes to Elia.
“But he’ll talk to her.”

Chapter Thirteen

Elia

“Me?” I asked, incredulous that I would be the one the lawyer wanted to speak with.

“Like it or not,” Lana replied as she slid her phone to me. “You are still Ludovico’s daughter. The Tarallo name still means something.”

The number was already programmed into the phone. My thumb hovered over the call button. Just a simple push, and I would be on the start toward negotiating an end to the senseless bloodshed that had taken hold of this city.

But I couldn’t make the call, because I also understood the implication of what it would mean. Once I made the call, I would be forever drawn into this life. There would be no more backing out.

No, not just drawn into it, but be the center of it.

“Elia?” Lana looked at me expectantly. “Are you okay?”

“Lana,” I said. “Do you remember the night before I left New York? When all I wanted was to find a way out?”

“I do.” She nodded sadly. “And I know this isn’t what you wanted. But things have changed. Hell, El, if you’d told me all those months ago that I’d be sitting here in Aleksey Korolev’s penthouse, urging you to make a deal with your father’s men to help him, I would’ve said you were out of your goddamn

mind. But what other choice do we have right now? I promised that I would do my best to protect you. And this might be the best shot to do that right now.”

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to,” Aleksey said, his large hand resting on my shoulder.

“Thanks.” I nodded. “But Lana is right. Things have changed, and I need to do this.”

And with that final affirmation, I pressed the call button. The phone rang a couple of times, and then a professional voice answered.

“This is Mark Schubert. Whom do I have the pleasure of speaking with?”

“Mark,” I answered. “This is Elia Tarallo. You knew my father, Ludovico.”

“Yes, Ms. Tarallo, I did,” he answered. “How can I help you?”

“I need you to get me in touch with whoever is in charge of my father’s men.” I jumped right into it. There was probably a set of protocols that I ignored, but we were rapidly running out of time. “Tell them I need to speak with them, face to face.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about, Ms. Tarallo,” Schubert replied. “I mostly handled your father’s real estate and business contracts. Now, if you’d like to discuss how your inheritance of said assets will be handled, I’d be more than happy to walk you through the process. But other than that, I don’t think I can help you.”

“Please, Mark,” I said. “I know you know what I’m talking about. And I know you know who you need to contact.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.” His voice hardened. “Your father worked in real estate, with additional investments into the businesses of the properties he managed.”

I bit my lower lip. He was forcing me to play the game. If he outright revealed to me the names of whoever controlled the remnants of the Tarallo Mafia, then he risked exposing himself as a criminal.

I had to change strategies. I had to speak in the coded language that Schubert was goading me toward.

Think, Elia, think. What is he trying to tell me?

Then it dawned on me. It was simultaneously so simple that it almost seemed absurd. I knew how I needed to rephrase my question.

“Mark,” I said. “When my father married me off to Aleksey Korolev, I know his business partners were not pleased with the arrangement, especially given what the implications would be for any assets that might’ve passed to me. It was my understanding that he never intended for any of those assets to be passed out from the Tarallo family business.”

“That’s correct, Ms. Tarallo,” Schubert answered. “And given the tragic nature of your father’s unexpected passing, there was quite a bit of confusion among his business partners.

Especially in regards to assets that your father had not specifically outlined in his will when he was alive.”

Now we were starting to get somewhere.

“Those assets are exactly what I’m asking about,” I said slowly. “I know about my personal inheritance. But given that I am the only child left of my father, I need to know who I can speak with about the assets that were not explicitly outlined in his will. So that I can make the necessary arrangements and dispel any misunderstanding that might have arisen since my father’s passing.”

Across the kitchen island, Aleksey cocked an eyebrow as an impressed look rose up on his face. That look sent pride coursing through my body, and I felt the corner of my mouth lifting up into a smile in response.

“I understand, Ms. Tarallo,” Schubert finally answered. “But your father had quite a number of business partners who held a controlling interest in these non-explicitly outlined assets, and not all of those people are immediately available due to their busy schedules. If you can provide me with some specific details about which potential assets, I can have the persons responsible contact you.”

“Yes!” I beamed. “I’m thinking specifically about the assets related to Chicago. Do you have any idea who you might need to contact for those?”

“I do, yes.”

My breath hitched. We were getting somewhere. “Can you let them know that I want to meet with them to discuss how those

assets will be divided? It's just that ...” I took a deep breath. “We've all lost so much since Father passed, and things have gotten so chaotic lately that it would be good to sit down and hash out the details before they get worse. Do you understand what I'm saying?”

“Yes, Ms. Tarallo. I understand perfectly. When do you need them to contact you?”

“As soon as possible, please.”

“I can have them reach out to you in twelve hours,” Schubert said. “Is there anything else you need from me, Ms. Tarallo?”

“No, Mark.” I shook my head. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“My pleasure.” He smiled through the phone. “Do you have a number that they can reach you at?”

“Tell them that they can come directly to my residence here in Chicago,” I replied. “I'm sure they already know where it is. Tell them to inform the guards that they are my guests.”

“Very good, Ms. Tarallo,” he said. “Before I go, I just want to express my condolences for your father. Ludovico was a complicated man, and though he may not have shown it, he loved his children dearly. He would be proud of you, Elia.”

And with that, the phone call ended.

“Whoever is in charge of my father’s men will be coming here soon.” I handed the phone back to Lana and turned to Aleksey. “We need to get ready.”

“I’ll let the guards downstairs know.” He nodded and pressed his phone to his ear.

Chapter Fourteen

Aleksey

Twelve hours later

I had to give it to Elia. Not only did she masterfully communicate what needed to be said to the lawyer that Lana found, but she also managed to arrange a meeting on short notice. And if there had been anyone from law enforcement or the New York DA office listening in, there was nothing suspicious at all about the conversation.

All of it proved that Elia wasn't just clever or cunning.

She was brilliant.

The three of us were still in deep discussion about what needed to be said when my phone buzzed. I looked down at it, expecting that it was Vova calling to give an update. Instead, it was Petya.

“*Chto?*” I answered.

“Apologies for the disruption, Aleksey Fyodorovich,” Petya answered. “But there is someone here to see you. He says he’s a guest of your wife.”

“Send him up,” I said. “And send someone up with them.”

“It will be done.”

A moment later, the elevator whirred to life. Elia's hand found its way to my shoulder, and her touch calmed my beating heart. Unease snaked into my bones at the lack of word from Vova about Alya. The two of them should've arrived by now. Or at the very least, he should've given me an update. Even as the doors of the elevator opened, an irrational part of me thought that it would be Vova and Alya stepping through them.

Instead, the doors opened to reveal a stranger, with Petya following hotly behind.

I gripped Elia's hand tightly as the stranger strode through the elevator door into the penthouse. It was the second time that a Tarallo man had breached the sanctity of this space. Remembering the violence that had taken place the last time something like that happened, my fingers twitched instinctively.

Nervous unease clawed at my insides as I scanned his body for any uncharacteristic bulges where weapons might be hidden. But underneath their jackets, it was difficult to see.

The last thing we needed was to turn what was supposed to be a civil negotiation into a bloodbath. Though, if there was a time for this Tarallo man to go back on his word and kill me, now would be it.

Which meant that whatever courtesy he might have harbored for the integrity of this meeting was reserved for Elia. Not for me. That thought did nothing to dispel the unease intensifying inside of me.

When the man saw Elia, his eyes quickly flew to the bulge in her belly. His expression didn't change. Instead, he bowed

deeply, with his palms facing out to show that there were no weapons in his hands.

“Ms. Tarallo,” he said. “It is good to see you safe and sound.”

He stood up straight, turned his eyes to me, and there was no mistaking the disdain behind them. “I cannot say the same for you, Korolev.”

“Likewise.” I nodded, and then switched to Russian as I addressed Petya. “You searched him?”

“He’s clean,” Petya replied.

“*Khorosho*,” I said. “Dismissed.”

Petya gave a curt nod, stepped back into the elevator, and left the four of us alone.

“Who are you?” Elia spoke up. “I don’t think I’ve ever met you before.”

“Carlos Serrano,” he replied. “I was only recently made a capo by your father.”

“Thank you for coming, Carlos.” Elia nodded and held out her hand.

Without missing a beat, Carlos stepped forward, dipped his head, and kissed the ring on her finger. The ring that signified that she belonged to me. Unease returned in me again. It was a

gesture that looked so natural on her, almost as if she'd been practicing for it her entire life.

Carlos eyed the three of us. "If I may speak frankly, Ms. Tarallo," he finally said, his eyes lingering on me. There was no hiding the disgust behind them. "I had to verify Schubert's words for myself. Please understand that this meeting is out of courtesy for your father and your brother's memories. You are not our don."

"I'm not," Elia replied coldly. "But I am still a Tarallo by blood. And you will do well to remember that, Carlos, lest I retract the hospitality my husband has so graciously extended to you."

Carlos's eye twitched slightly, but otherwise his expression didn't change. He raised his hand and pointed it at Lana. "And what is *she* doing here, Ms. Tarallo?"

"She is the one who enabled this meeting, and she is also my guest," Elia replied. "But she will not be a participant in our discussions. Now, if you're quite finished interrogating me about who I choose to have in my own home, then perhaps we can start talking about the important issues at hand."

He ground his jaw and rubbed it with his hand.

"Very well, Ms. Tarallo," he finally said. "Would you care to sit? Given your condition?"

I bristled, clenching my hands into fists to keep myself from launching across the room at him. This seemingly innocent question was nothing short of a test. He was trying to see if Elia would allow him to take control of the conversation.

“I will not have you tell me what to do in my home,” Elia hissed. “And if you attempt to do so again, I will have you thrown off this balcony without hesitation.”

Pride washed over me at how Elia rebuffed the attempt. I felt my fists slowly relax. She knew what she was doing. I needn't be worried about it.

Carlos must have also sensed the same thing and bowed his head. “Apologies, Ms. Tarallo. I should not have made the presumption.”

“Enough,” she commanded and gestured to the living room. “Come and sit. We have much to discuss and not enough time to discuss it all.”

Lana took the elevator downstairs while the three of us walked into the living room. Elia took her seat directly across from Carlos, and I stood at her back. My arms crossed over my chest, but every nerve in my body was ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. If he so much as twitched in the wrong direction toward her, he would be dead before he even got out of his chair.

“As you are aware,” she started, her hands clasped in her lap. “The Tarallo Mafia and the Korolev Bratva are at each other's throats. Bodies are piling up, and the violence shows no sign of ending.”

“A war your husband started,” Carlos pointed out.

“A war that you can help end,” Elia rebutted. “You and your men were willing to burn this city down to save me from the one man that I didn’t need to be saved from. And now that I’m asking for your help, you’re more interested in bringing up past grievances?”

“Forgive me, Ms. Tarallo,” Carlos said. “But these past grievances that you speak of are the deaths of your father and your brother.”

“And do you think the river of blood that you’re spilling in these streets will bring them back?” she asked. “Would you continue dying on behalf of the dead, instead of fighting to defend the living?”

Carlos opened his mouth to retort, but nothing came out.

“Both organizations have been fooled by the Bogatyr for ten years,” she continued. “She is the one who engineered the conflict between us. She is the one who persuaded my father to marry me to Aleksey. She is the one who tricked Aleksey into ordering the death of my father. She goaded all of you into coming here to prolong this fight. She is the one who continues to fan the flames.”

“She?” Carlos cocked an eyebrow.

“Her name is Svetlana Yefimov,” I spoke up. “She’s stalked me for ten years, and plotted the destruction of my family at the same time. She killed my father, my mother, and my uncle.”

“Sounds like I ought to be sitting down with her,” Carlos smirked. “And not with either of you.”

“You could,” Elia retorted. “But you would be wasting your time. She doesn’t care what happens to the Tarallo Mafia any more than you care about what happens to the Korolev Bratva. And do you know what her biggest advantage is?” Elia leaned forward. “She knows you have no respect for her, and that disrespect is what allows her to operate undetected. Alone, she was able to pit two organizations against each other. And by fanning the flames, she will soon bring down the wrath of law enforcement on all of our heads.”

Carlos was silent. Whatever arrogance he had brought with him to this meeting faded as he considered Elia’s words.

He wiped his palms on his pants. “And what could you bring to the table?” he asked, his eyes glinting. “Word on the street is that your husband no longer even maintains control over the rest of his Bratva. There are reports of Korolev men shooting at each other in the suburbs of Chicago when they’re not shooting at us.”

“It’s not what Aleksey or I can bring to the table.” Elia leaned forward. “It’s more of what we can give you when the guns fall silent. Think about it, Carlos. If you help us bring down Svetlana and crush the rebellious elements within the Korolev Bratva, then there could be peace—lasting peace. My husband has no desire to expand in New York, not when everything he needs is here. And that means there would be no one standing in your path back home to stop you from taking over.”

She smirked. “To stop you from doing what my father never could. Isn’t that worth a consideration?”

He nodded slowly, and her smirk turned into a beautiful smile.

“Do you remember what the ultimate purpose was for my wedding to Aleksey?”

“A peace offering between the two sides,” he answered.

“No.” Elia shook her head. “Not an offering, an *alliance*.”

Her words were right on target. Those were the very words that I would have said myself if the tables were turned. She was right about the dynamics of the power at play, and I could see the gears turning in Carlos’s head.

He was starting to consider her offer very seriously.

After what seemed like an endless moment of silence, Carlos took a long breath. “And what would be the terms of this alliance?”

“We can spend time hashing out the details at a later time,” Elia replied. “But right now, it’s more important that we stop the fighting long enough for Aleksey to re-establish control over the Korolev Bratva. Father was wise enough to see the benefits of an alliance, so much so that he was willing to give me away for it. If this is how you choose to honor his memory, he would be ashamed of you all.”

“You are right,” Carlos finally said. “Your father would be ashamed of this. He went to his enemies in the past to garner support for his cause.”

“Then do as my father would’ve done,” Elia said. “Do the right thing and end this fight so that we might focus on the fight that matters. So that we might have a future.”

Was she talking about our two organizations or our marriage? I remembered what seemed like so long ago, when I believed that she was a viper in my bed sent by her father to distract me while he plotted his vengeance. And while Elia might have hidden the truth of what her father thought from Carlos, she appealed to the man’s honor.

And that was enough to get him to stop and listen.

“I’m not asking for your loyalty.” Elia gave him a small smile. “I’m asking for your help in taking down the one person who actively plotted against my father’s vision. Against your don’s vision. I’m asking that your men—no, *our* men—stand up against an enemy that grows stronger like an untreated cancer with each passing day. If we allow her to continue as she is, soon, she will run us all out. And then where will we be, Carlos? There will be no more Korolevs. There will be no more Tarallos. Everything that my father worked for, everything that he sacrificed, everything that *I* have sacrificed, will have been for nothing!”

Carlos dropped his hand, eyeing my wife. “And what do *you* expect to gain out of this, Ms. Tarallo? Are you eyeing the empty seat that your father left behind? Do you intend to rule over us?”

“I told you, I want peace,” she offered, resting her hand on her stomach. “I want a future for my child. I want a future with my husband. I don’t care about ruling. Because I know there are others, like you, that are far more capable of doing that.”

I exhaled a breath I didn't realize I was holding at her answer. To be the head of a Mafia was lucrative for anyone. There were perks that came with it, perks that people often did not even think were possible. Perks that, if she had them, would allow her to do whatever she wanted.

Yet she had just told the man before her that she wanted none of it. I knew she was sincere about it. I knew that it was her dream to fade into nothing but mundane normality. That all the money and riches and power meant nothing to her.

The only thing she wanted was to be a regular person.

"That's commendable." Carlos chuckled. "Given who your father was, Ms. Tarallo. It takes a special kind of person to turn down power, especially the kind of power that you speak of." He turned his gaze toward me. "I wonder, what does your husband think? Does he agree with this?"

"Without question," I answered. "My heart belongs to her. What she desires is what I want."

"You would give up all that her father bequeathed her?" Carlos tilted his head. "In exchange for what exactly? For us to kill your own men? Forgive me, Aleksey Korolev, but that sounds almost too good to be true."

"It's the truth." I shrugged. "Whether you believe it or not is up to you. My wife has no reason to lie, and I have no reason to undermine her."

"Remarkable," Carlos breathed. "A marriage of true partnership. And if I may be so bold, one of true love."

My heart skipped. Love. But it was the truth, wasn't it? I had taken so much from Elia. I had made her feel the hurt of losing her family members repeatedly until she was the only one left. And in a cruel twist of irony, the fates had forced me to live the same trauma. Hell, the fates had nearly taken her away from me for good.

Yet she still remained at my side. She was still willing to fight for me and our future. If that wasn't love, what else could it be?

"Will you pass along our offer to your men?" Elia asked. "Will we finally put an end to this pointless war that has wasted so many lives?"

"I will." Carlos rose to his feet, brushing off his hands. "And I will be in touch with an answer soon. You are full of surprises, Elia Tarallo."

"Korolev," she corrected him. "My name is Elia Korolev."

"Of course." Carlos dipped his head once more. "Apologies, Mrs. Korolev."

Elia gave him a nod, and I helped her to her feet. She extended her hand and Carlos took it into his. Then, unexpectedly, he offered the same hand to me. An agreement had just been hammered out, and it was all done by my beautiful, brilliant wife.

It wasn't until after Carlos stepped into the elevator and we were alone once more that Elia decided to speak. "Well," she

said. "I guess that went well."

"Well?" I said honestly. "You were amazing. Where did you learn to negotiate like that?"

"Do you really have to ask that question?" She let out a little laugh. "I am my father's daughter, after all."

I blew out a breath. "You're right."

Elia pulled her hair out of the ponytail, letting it fall around her shoulders, and I stopped to watch, the tightness in my chest growing stronger. I struggled to keep my emotions in check. She was my world, and I had nearly lost her. I would have gone fucking insane if she were still in Svetlana's grasp.

I reached for Elia before I realized what I was doing and spun her toward me, seeing the surprise on her face.

"What's wrong?" she asked immediately, concern crossing her expression. "Aleksey?"

I couldn't speak. I wanted to feel her close to me again, to know that what we were fighting for wasn't just a fucking dream for me. My hand slid to her hip and she frowned. "Aleksey, we don't have time for that. There is so much to do, so much to prepare for."

I pulled her flush against me and her protest died in her throat as she felt my cock pressing into her.

“I need you,” I said roughly, my voice full of emotion that I couldn’t form on my own lips. “More than you ever know.”

“Aleksey,” she breathed, tilting her chin up until all I could see were her luscious red lips.

I knew I had her then. With a growl I swept my arms under her knees and pulled her to me, grinning as she squealed with laughter. “Lana is coming back up soon!” she squealed as I carried her to the bedroom and laid her down on the bed.

“She can keep waiting,” I told her, yanking my shirt out of my pants and pulling it over my head. I wanted to lose myself in her warmth, forget for a little while about how close I came to losing her.

I wanted to be reminded that she loved me despite my faults against her and her family.

Her family.

Elia’s smile faded somewhat as I dropped to my knees before her, doing something that no pakhan ever did.

“I’m so fucking sorry,” I said, placing my hands on her knees. “For everything that I did. For killing your brother. For ordering Uncle Misha to kill your father. I took every fucking thing away from you. Yet you are still here with me, even though I don’t deserve it.”

“Oh, Aleksey.” Her expression softened as she reached out, cupping my cheek lightly. “There is no need to apologize.”

She drew in a breath. “You can’t take back what you have done to my family or to me.”

I swallowed hard, surprised by how emotional she made me. She brought me to a place where I felt comfortable sharing my power, where I felt at ease with her being at my side as an equal. Never had I wanted someone in my corner until her. She was the person that I loved. Now and always.

“But we can move forward,” she continued, her eyes misting over. “For our future together. This alliance with my father’s men is the first step in accomplishing that. I need you in my corner, Aleksey. I need you to understand.”

I didn’t let her finish, pressing my lips to hers.

Just then, the elevator doors opened with a ding. I ignored the sound and continued to kiss Elia until Petya’s voice—panicked and urgent—floated to my ear from the living room.

“Aleksey Fyodorovich!” Petya said. “We have a problem!”

Swearing inwardly, I pulled away from Elia, my cock straining against my pants, and walked outside. Petya stood there with Lana, his face ashen white as he held out a phone.

“It’s for you,” he said, voice shaking.

Dread rolled down my spine as I put the phone to my ear.
“Hello?”

“Alyosha!” my sister shrieked through the phone, sobbing.
“Help!”

“Alya?” I shouted. “Where are you?”

But she didn’t answer. Instead, another voice taunted me through the phone.

“I warned your pretty bitch, didn’t I?” Svetlana said. “I haven’t even begun to burn your world down. If you’re quick enough, Aleks, I might even leave enough of your precious little sister for you to bury.”

Chapter Fifteen

Elia

I watched the range of emotions shift and transform on Aleksey's face as he held the phone to his ear. He paced back and forth across the living room, shoulders hunched and pain in his eyes as he struggled to absorb the news being delivered to him.

There was only one thing in the world that could've elicited such a response from him, and my own sorrow for him deepened as I watched him helplessly react in rage. I wanted to hold him and tell him that everything would be all right. But it would be a lie, and both of us knew it.

Reaching out, I offered him my hand, but he didn't take it.

And it was in that moment that I saw how utterly broken my husband became. I stood there in silence, giving him the space that he needed to come to terms with the horrible news that he had just heard.

Finally, he hung up the phone and looked at me with hollow eyes.

"Svetlana has my sister," he said. "She told me that I have six hours to make a trade with her if I want her back."

"I'm guessing she wants to trade Alya for me?" I asked gingerly.

“She does.” He nodded. “But I won’t do that. I won’t give you back to her.”

“But you can’t give up Alya either.” I reached for his hand again. He hesitated for a moment as his eyes searched my face, but then his fingers laced with mine, and a small sense of relief flooded through me.

“We can’t just sit here and do nothing,” I said. “There has to be a way. A way to get Alya back without sacrificing me. A way to protect all of us.”

“I know, but how?” he sighed, frustration snaking into his voice. “You know as well as I do that this is just another trap that she’s laying for us. Like the last time it happened. And now she has the Bratva’s lawyer, and most likely the brigadiers who abandoned me.”

“But we have each other.” I gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. “And as long as we’re together, we can figure it out. We can find a way to beat her.”

He looked at me, eyes flickering with hope and admiration for a brief moment before those faded again.

“We don’t have enough men.” He shook his head. “Gregor took more than half of the brigadiers with him. And you heard Carlos. My own men are shooting at each other when they’re not shooting at Tarallos.”

As soon as Aleksey mentioned Carlos’s name, my eyes lit up. “That’s it!” I exclaimed, mind turning with possibilities. “That’s our solution!”

“What are you talking about?” Aleksey’s eyes narrowed.

“Okay, hear me out.” I took a breath to rein in my enthusiasm. “Svetlana most likely expects you to charge in, guns blazing. If anything, all of her plans revolve around her knowing that your own brigadiers and lawyer have abandoned you. But what she doesn’t know—”

“Is that Carlos has agreed to a ceasefire with you.” He finished the sentence, and his eyes widened at the realization.

“Exactly!” I clapped my hands together. We were one step closer to finding a solution. I could feel it. “None of her plans will involve dealing with the Tarallo men coming to our aid. If she doesn’t expect them, she can’t plan for them.”

“But how many do you think you can rally together on short notice?” he asked.

I fell silent at his question. That was true. How many *could* I rally together on short notice? I wasn’t even sure that news of the ceasefire had been passed along to the rest of the Tarallos yet. It could take hours—days, even—for the shooting to stop. And by then, it might be too late.

“If I might offer something?” Lana spoke up.

Aleksey and I looked at her.

“Look, maybe I can pull some strings and see if Berkowitz is willing to move some additional resources,” she offered. “If you want, it’s possible to spin this as something that’s

tangentially related to both the Tarallo and Korolev cases that are still open. From what I can tell, it doesn't sound like Alya's involved in the day-to-day operations of the Korolev Bratva."

"She was never involved." Aleksey gritted through his teeth. "I made sure of that."

"Then that's even better," Lana said. "If she's not involved with the Bratva, Chicago PD might even be amenable to lend a hand in tracking the source of the call. Like it or not, they have a hell of a lot more resources than you and they're going to be a damn shade faster than anyone you find. But here's the part that you're not going to like."

Aleksey opened his mouth to say something, but I held my hand up to stop him. I wanted to know what Lana was about to suggest, because we needed something, and we needed it fast.

"Chicago PD most likely won't be amenable to throwing their manpower around to help either organization," she said. "Which means you'll need to offer someone up in compensation."

"Even for you." Aleksey shook his head. "That's cold."

"Are you really saying no to this?" Lana crossed her arms. "This is your sister we're talking about here, Aleksey. Your only living family member at this point. Are you really about to trust her fate to a bunch of criminals?"

"I'd rather do that than put my trust in the hands of a bunch of cops," Aleksey snarled. "How do you think I found you?"

Lana rolled her eyes. “Only because Svetlana wanted you to find me. I’m sure of it.”

“I don’t want cops involved anymore, because every time they are, things have a way of magically becoming worse,” he shot back. “And how will it look for us—for Elia’s credibility—if we get the Tarallos to help us only to sell them out the next moment? No, Keller. I’m not going to agree to this.”

“Aleksey is right.” I stepped in before Lana could offer a retort. “Until peace between Tarallo and Korolev is finalized, we can’t be talking about working with law enforcement or the possibilities of breaking this fragile peace. It’s just too risky right now.”

“Are you hearing yourself right now, Elia?” Lana gaped. “You can’t seriously be suggesting what I think you’re about to suggest, right? I’m begging you right now, please don’t dig this pit any deeper than you’ve already dug it!”

“Lana,” I said. “I know you’re trying to help. Believe me, I know that. But you have to see it from our side as well.”

“I’m trying ...” Her shoulders slacked and the fight slowly ebbed away. “But it feels like I’m watching you clinging to the edge of a cliff, and every time I reach out to pull you up, you slap my hand away.”

I nodded, knowing exactly what she was talking about. But this was the unfortunate position that all of us had been forced to take. If she had come just a few months earlier, then I would’ve taken up her offer to help without question. But now?

Now, we had to do this the other way, the way that would have us all labeled criminals.

“I know, Lana,” I said. “And I appreciate everything you’ve done for us. But I think it’s time for you to go.”

“Elia ...” her eyes shimmered.

“It’s not because I’m forcing you to leave,” I continued. “But it’s because the longer you stay here, the more it’ll complicate your own career. You can’t spend your entire life worrying about me. We’ll be fine, I promise.”

“You don’t know that.” She shook her head defiantly. “You can’t know that!”

“I don’t.” I shrugged. “But I do know that there will be a time for you to deliver what you’ve promised me and Aleksey. I don’t know when that time will come, but it is coming. That’s why it’s time for you to go. The longer you stay here, the harder it’ll be for you to deliver on your promise.”

Slowly, understanding made its way to Lana’s face and she knew what I was implying. Tears welled in her eyes, and she took a tentative step forward.

I closed the distance to meet her halfway, and she hugged me tightly. “Please stay safe,” she said, voice shaking. “Don’t you dare get hurt out there, girl.”

I smiled sadly and hugged her back. “I’ll do my best,” I replied.

She nodded and she pulled back to look at me, smiling through her tears. This wasn't goodbye. Not yet. This was nothing but a temporary separation. At least, that was what I kept telling myself, even though a tiny part of me felt that this could very well be the last time I ever saw her. Suddenly, I was flooded with emotions. I wanted to tell her to stay, that I had changed my mind, and that I needed her help.

But the words never came. The words weren't allowed to come.

Tarallos are made of stronger stuff, I reminded myself.

And if there ever was a time that I needed to be a Tarallo, now was it.

“Take care of yourself, Elia.” She wiped her eyes and then turned her gaze to Aleksey as she called the elevator. “And you better do your goddamn best to keep her safe. Or you'll have me to answer to. Good luck. Both of you.”

Stoically, Aleksey gave her a quick nod. Lana gave me one long final look, took a trembling breath, and walked into the elevator.

Chapter Sixteen

Elia

“Are you ready for this?” Aleksey asked, giving my hand a gentle squeeze when he sensed the tension in me.

“I’m ready,” I reassured him, heart hammering at the fact that I was able to pull this off. I felt like my brother would have been congratulating me on this accomplishment if he were still alive.

Aleksey had contacted his loyal brigadiers at the same time that I reached out to Carlos. We gave them the same instructions of meeting at the penthouse in one hour. And for good measure, we told them that the other side was coming as well.

It was time for peace talks to begin. At first, I was afraid that Aleksey’s brigadiers might push back against this suggestion. But to my surprise, he told me that they had bitterly swallowed their pride and agreed to it—even if they grumbled a bit first.

Hard times really did make strange bedfellows.

As much as this ceasefire wounded everyone’s pride, they were also all wise enough to understand that this wasn’t an opportunity to be passed up. Especially not with Svetlana and the greater part of the Korolev Bratva’s strength turned against us.

And now, as I stood there with Aleksey—hand in hand—we waited for each agonizing second to pass us by. I took a deep

breath, trying to calm my nerves. Aleksey pulled me closer to him and pressed his lips against my forehead.

“I love you,” he whispered.

I turned toward him, smiling. “I love you too.”

How odd that this was the first time we ever said those words to each other and heard the same response back. We’d felt it, we’d lived it, yet we had never said it out loud. Not until this. Not until now.

The elevator whirred to life and arrived with a ding. The two of us stood a little straighter as the doors slowly opened. I felt my heartbeat slowly picking up pace as I waited to see who would step through. Aleksey’s hand gave mine another reassuring squeeze.

When the doors opened fully, five men stepped through. Two of them followed Carlos, and I recognized them from my father’s past meetings. The other two nodded at Aleksey, clearly his brigadiers.

The Tarallo men bowed their heads at me, looking past my husband. This show of disrespect did not go unnoticed by his brigadiers, whose jaws clenched the sight.

“More are coming,” Carlos explained. “Couldn’t fit all of us in the elevator.”

I nodded and pointed to the living room. “Have a seat.”

A few minutes later, the large living room felt quite crowded as it filled with rough-looking men. The line between Korolevs and Tarallos could not be more noticeable. Neither side seemed like they wanted to be anywhere near each other. I couldn't blame them. There was a time when I couldn't stand the thought of being next to Aleksey.

And now, I couldn't bear the thought of being away from him.

Aleksey and I folded our hands in front of us, taking care to show the glimmering wedding bands that signaled our union. *Let them see*, I thought.

"Thank you for coming," I said. "I know both sides have had our differences and misunderstandings in the past. But it is time for us to move forward."

"That's putting it lightly," someone muttered.

A dark ring of chuckles rose up.

"Yeah," a brigadier said. "You expect us to just forget all our boys that these bastards put in the ground?"

"Don't act like you're innocent, you Russian fuck!" one of the capos pointed out.

"The fuck you say to me?"

I exchanged a helpless look with Aleksey, realizing that there was just simply too much bad blood between them as they started shouting among themselves. The invisible line that

separated the two sides suddenly felt fragile—almost nonexistent—as the men came closer and closer to throwing fists in addition to words.

“That’s enough!” I said.

But my voice went ignored over the shouting. That was when Aleksey joined his voice to mine.

“ENOUGH!” he bellowed.

The men stopped and turned toward him. But he looked at me instead. And that was when I realized that they were all looking at me, waiting for me to speak.

“We didn’t call you here to fight,” I said. My voice felt quiet in comparison to Aleksey’s, but I pressed on. “We called you here to end the fighting. There is a greater threat hanging over all our heads. This war has gotten law enforcement’s attention in both New York and Chicago. It has caused a split among the Korolev ranks. And if we keep squabbling like this, we’ll be picked off, one by one, until none of us are left.”

As I spoke, I felt confidence seep into my voice, buoyed by Aleksey’s presence.

Nobody raised their voice at me. Nobody muttered any other snide comments. I had their attention at last.

“When my father agreed to marry me to Aleksey, he saw value in putting aside our differences so that we might work with each other instead of against each other,” I continued. “And I know that it may feel like Aleksey has breached that contract.

But he was fooled, as we were all fooled, by a common enemy.”

“The same enemy who gave me this.” I reached up and pointed to the scar on my face. “The same enemy who now holds my sister-in-law—a girl who’s wronged no one.” I looked at the Korolev men. “The same enemy who took your brothers and turned them against you.” I looked at the Tarallo men. “The same enemy who used your don’s name to start a war that buried countless of your men.”

I looked past them and addressed them all equally. “Tarallos and Korolevs alike have bled and died because of this enemy who calls herself the Bogatyr. But no more. Today is the day that we let the past stay in the past and look ahead to the future.” I took Aleksey’s hand in mine, but kept my eyes trained on the men before us. “Our future.”

“Will you share that future with us?” I asked them. “Or would you prefer to continue fighting for a past that will never change?”

The men remained silent as they looked around the room at each other and considered my words. I saw Carlos exchange a knowing glance with a brigadier before his eyes settled on me once more.

“She is right,” he said. “And for the sake of the blood flowing through her veins, we will pledge our loyalty to her, the last heir of Don Ludovico.”

I loosened a breath as his words washed over me. I never wanted to be in my father’s place. I wanted nothing to do with the Mafia. That wasn’t my life or my future. Yet somehow, Carlos had placed a crown upon my head.

“But,” Carlos continued, directing his gaze to Aleksey. “We will not pledge our loyalty to him. He is our enemy, a Korolev. No matter who he is married to. The men will never follow him to war. He will never be trusted.”

“Say my name, Carlos,” I commanded.

“Elia,” he replied, and then stopped as he mulled over the next word. Finally, he ground out. “Elia Korolev.”

“If you can pledge your loyalty to me, a Korolev,” I reminded him, angered that my father’s men seemingly refused to put aside their differences with Aleksey’s. “Then you can pledge it to my husband as well. The two of us swore an oath to each other. We swore that we would stand by each other, that we’d weather any storm together, and that we would not part from each other until our deaths. What you swear to me, you swear to him.” I turned to the Korolev men and repeated the words that I heard so often from Aleksey’s lips. “*Eto moi prikaz.*”

Grins rose up on the faces of Aleksey’s brigadiers, but they were not the grins of dismissal. Slowly, one by one, they dipped their heads, nodding.

“The Bogatyr and the Korolev traitors are our real enemies,” I reminded them all. “After we recover Aleksey’s sister from their grasp, the two of us want nothing but to see them all stripped of power.”

“And dead,” my husband added, his voice hard with emotions.

“That’s a very pretty argument, Elia Korolev,” Carlos said, looking at Aleksey uneasily. “But I’m afraid there’s still one complication.”

I felt my stomach drop, wondering what I might have overlooked. “And what is that?”

“You have our loyalty, but you do not have the right to issue us commands,” Carlos explained. “Without an initiation to bring you into our ranks, your orders hold no weight, and we are under no obligation to obey them. I’m sure our new partners in the Korolev Bratva agree, even if they are reluctant to say it out loud before their pakhan.”

Oh, I was well aware of that. They had made my brother go through his initiation before he was allowed to command. The only thing that I knew about the initiation was that the details were almost always left up to my father. And he always chose terms that would test his men’s loyalty.

“No,” Aleksey spoke up. “I will not allow you to put my pregnant wife in any sort of danger for the sake of some ritual! She has given you her word. That will be enough.”

“Forgive me, Pakhan Korolev,” Carlos stated. “But if you wish for Tarallo men to obey your wife’s commands, then your wife must demonstrate her resolve as befitting one who would command us. She is well aware of that.”

“It’s true,” I said softly and grabbed Aleksey’s hand. “It has to happen.”

I didn’t know what they would make me do, but nothing could be harder than what I had already gone through. Whatever it

took to cement their support and allegiance, I was willing to do.

Aleksey looked down at me, and I saw the murderous look in his eyes. If I let him go, he would destroy the men in this room without any sort of concern for what happened next. I appreciated his desire to protect our child and me. But that wasn't what I needed from him right now.

"Aleksey, please," I begged him. "This is what we need. Without their support, we can't take on Svetlana and your traitorous brigadiers. You know that."

The fire grew in his eyes and he finally sighed, running a hand through his hair. "What does she have to do?" he asked Carlos.

Carlos shook his head, his gaze softening as he looked at me. "You know you have to agree first before I can share the details."

A low growl came from my husband, and I wrapped my arm around his so that he wouldn't lunge at Carlos. I knew that to him, this looked like an unreasonable request. But Carlos was doing everything by the book, so that no one could come back later and say that he had cut corners for me. Aleksey's response right now wasn't helping anyone.

"I know," I said, hoping that my husband could forgive me in the end. "And it's okay." I turned back to Carlos. "I agree to the initiation. What must I do?"

Carlos clasped his hands together; there was no trace of excitement on his face. "You must kill an enemy."

The blood drained from my face and the world spun at my feet. Kill someone?

“No,” Aleksey erupted, grabbing my hand. “Absolutely not!”

“Give us a moment,” I called out as he all but dragged me toward our bedroom. I dug my heels against the floor and forced him to stop.

“Aleksey,” I said, knowing the moment we walked out of this meeting without me accepting the terms of initiation, everything would be off the table. “We need to talk about this.”

He swung around. My heart stuttered in my chest as I took in the deathly hard look in his eyes.

“Talk?” he asked, his voice trembling. “They’re asking you to kill someone, Elia. And you have no idea what that’s like.”

He turned to Carlos. “What about me? I need no initiation to issue commands. Ask any man here if I’ve ever held back from my share of bloodletting.”

“Unfortunately, Pakhan Korolev.” Carlos bowed his head. “It was not you who swayed us to your cause, but your wife. It is not you whose orders we will follow, but hers. And for us to do so, she *must* prove herself worthy of following.”

Even though I wanted to scream and run the other way, I nodded and looked back to Aleksey. “It’s the only way. Let’s talk about this, Aleksey. Just you and me.”

He blew out a breath, releasing my hand, and gestured to our bedroom. “Then let’s fucking talk, Elia.”

Chapter Seventeen

Aleksey

There had been only a handful of times in my life that I wanted to murder someone with my bare hands for speaking. Right now, I felt like I could do that to Carlos for even suggesting that my wife kill someone.

Initiations for the Korolev Bratva worked differently. We had no need for these brutal new world traditions. Ours had been forged in the prison camps of Russia. A man was made to strip and display his tattoos before a panel of brigadiers and the pakhan. He would be questioned about the source of the tattoos and what he had done to earn them.

There was a simple elegance to it. To say nothing about the civility of it all. And

But this ... Demanding that my wife—my pregnant wife—kill someone to prove her worthiness to lead them? It was unthinkably barbaric.

Elia pulled me into our bedroom. The moment I shut the door, I tried to rein in my anger.

“You aren’t doing this,” I said. “I won’t let you.”

Elia let out a hollow laugh, her face still pale from what had been asked of her. “I don’t think I have much of a choice anymore, Aleksey.”

I grasped her upper arms, careful not to bruise her, and looked deeply into her eyes.

“You don’t know what it’s like to take a life,” I said, my voice trembling. “And see it fade from someone’s eyes. It changes you. Forever. I can’t let that happen to you.”

I had been there. Every life I took was etched on my black soul, whether the person was my enemy or not. Every life I took weighed on me. And the first one was always the hardest, not that any of the others were ever easier.

A glimmer of tears crossed her eyes before she blinked them back. “I don’t want to kill anyone either, but we need their help. We need this. If this is the price that I must pay, then I’ll do it.”

“Elia,” I pleaded. “You don’t understand. This is a price that you don’t want to pay.”

“We need my father’s men if we want to face off against Svetlana,” Elia said softly. “If we want to get Alya back. And they won’t obey my commands until my initiation is complete.”

“But once you go there,” I said hoarsely. “You can’t go back, Elia. It’ll take everything good about you and break it into a million pieces that you’ll never be able to put back together. Once you’ve put blood on your hands, you’ll never be able to wash it off.”

“But I will have you with me.” Her mouth tightened and she stepped back, holding her hand out to me. “And that’s all that matters.”

I looked into her eyes, saw the determination behind them, and realized that there was no way she would back down from this. Slowly, I took her hand in mine, nodded, and felt my heart breaking at what she was willing to commit herself to.

Carlos and the Tarallo men were waiting when we walked back into the living room, their gazes wary and inscrutable. “Well?”

Elia lifted her chin. “Who do I need to kill?”

Carlos bowed his head solemnly, as did the other Tarallo men. I felt a slight appreciation that they at least took this seriously. That it wasn't just some bravado for show.

“One who has raised their hand against us and drawn the blood of Tarallos,” Carlos finally said, sliding a quick glance at me.

“Sounds like you already have someone here in mind.” Elia crossed her arms. “Tell me.”

In that moment, I realized Elia would make a good leader of the Bratva if she chose to do so. It wasn't her refusal to back down but the way her voice demanded attention in spite of her stature. She reminded me so much of her brother, who was always at the head of the men he led and commanded respect so effortlessly from them.

I hated myself for taking him away from her.

Carlos's jaw tightened. "Gregor Konev," he finally said.

I felt the pit drop away from my stomach at the name. Gregor Konev wouldn't be an easy target at all. As brutish and dismissive of his own men's lives as he was, he would never risk his own on the front lines. If he had gone with Glazov to bail Svetlana out of jail, then it was likely that wherever he was, so was Svetlana.

"This is absurd," I said.

"Why do you say that?" Carlos asked.

"Because if you had spent just a few minutes asking me instead of forcing my wife to do this bullshit initiation ritual, then you would've learned that Gregor Konev most likely went with Matvei Glazov to the Bogatyr," I replied. "Which also means that if Elia is to kill Gregor, then we will have our shot at killing the Bogatyr as well. And if that were the case, then you would've already been working with us and obeying our orders."

"Pakhan Korolev," Carlos said slowly. "Our two organizations may have agreed to a ceasefire. We may even have shared mutual interests. But we are far from obeying your orders. And until your wife has been initiated, there is nothing that guarantees that such an arrangement will remain in place."

"Is that a threat?" I balled my hand into a fist.

"Aleksey, please," Elia said. "We can work with this. I have no problem killing Gregor, and I think both of us can agree on that." She turned to Carlos. "Can my initiation trial include any of Gregor Konev's men if he is not present?"

Carlos contemplated the option, but slowly, his opinion shifted.

“It can.” He nodded. “I shall inform our men.”

Just then, my phone started ringing. I looked down at the caller ID and felt my blood pressure spiking in response.

Speak of the devil ...

I picked up the phone. “Gregor, you piece of shit.”

“Put me on speaker. I assume you’re with the rest of the boys or with your pretty little wife.” He chuckled. “I want them to hear this.”

Laying the phone on the table, I turned on the speakerphone. Tarallo and Korolev men alike fell silent as Gregor’s voice boomed out in the living room.

“Tell us your name,” he said to someone on the other side.

“Alyona Fyodorovna Korolev.” My sister’s voice sounded weak, like she was struggling to breathe. I felt my knees weaken at the sound. Were it not for Elia holding my hand, I might have crumpled in that moment. A murmur rose up among my brigadiers, and someone swore quietly.

“Tell them where you are.”

“The warehouse on Lake Michigan. Just past Millennium Park.”

“Very good, Alyona Fyodorovna. Now tell them what will happen to you if your brother doesn’t deliver what he’s supposed to deliver alone.”

“Please ...” Alya begged, whimpering. “Please don’t hurt me anymore.”

Something struck her—whether Gregor’s hand or something worse, I would never know—and she cried out in pain from the blow.

“*Suka!*” Gregor roared. “Tell them!”

“They,” Alya stuttered. “They’re going to do to me what they did to Svetlana. And then they’re going to kill me.”

“That wasn’t so hard, was it, bitch?” Gregor spat in Russian before he switched back to English. “You know her location. You know what will happen to her. You know what we want. Clock is ticking, Alyosha. You have one hour.”

Alya gave another bloodcurdling shriek of pain, and then the line went dead.

Silence descended on the room. My fist was clenched so tightly that I could feel my fingernails digging into the palm of my hand. After what felt like an eternity, Carlos broke the silence.

“We will go with you, Pakhan Korolev,” he said solemnly.

“And when we bring back your sister, it will give me the greatest pleasure to put Gregor Konev, or any man under his command, on his knees and watch Elia Korolev wipe the life from his eyes.”

Chapter Eighteen

Aleksey

Thirty minutes later

As I approached the warehouse, the solitary streetlamp illuminated the surrounding area and cast long shadows across the ground. The warehouse's large metal doors were closed, and I heard nothing except the sound of my own heartbeat drumming in my chest.

I slowed my pace, determined to make as little noise as possible as I approached. If Svetlana wanted me dead, she would've shot me here and now.

Behind, the joint forces of Tarallo and Korolev men were already moving into position. No entrance was left unchecked, and there would be no escape for whoever was inside. I checked my watch. We were still ahead of schedule.

I reached the doors and hesitated for a moment, gathering my thoughts—mostly to stop thinking about what Gregor and his men had done to Alya. Then, with a deep breath, I raised my fist and knocked loudly on the metal doors.

Silence.

I reached up and tried again, my heart thundering in my chest. Then I heard it: the sound of footsteps approaching. The doors swung open, and Gregor's ugly face greeted me.

“Right on time, Alyosha,” he taunted. “Show me those hands.”

I held out my hands to show him that I had no weapons.
“Where’s my sister?”

I wanted to look back at the other men hidden in the shadows or otherwise give them some kind of signal. But I couldn’t risk giving these men an excuse to do further harm to Alya.

“Where’s your wife?”

“Let me see Alya first, and then I’ll hand over Elia.”

Gregor’s eyes narrowed at me for a moment, then he shrugged and opened the door to let me in. As soon as I stepped forward, the door slammed shut behind me. Gregor shoved me forward, past the aisles of boxes until I saw her, surrounded by several other men. All of them former Korolev soldiers. All of them had once pledged their loyalty to me.

I felt my heart racing with anger. Alya was sitting in a chair, her arms and legs tied securely to its frame. Her hair was matted against her face, and there were patches of blood on her shirt.

“You piece of shit, Gregor.” My hands balled into fists as he snapped his fingers.

Someone stepped forward and placed a chair opposite of Alya. Gregor roughly forced me to sit. As soon as I did, ropes bound my arms and legs the same way as they did Alya’s. I struggled against my restraints, but it was no use.

Gregor stood back. “It’s a regular family reunion,” he sneered as he grabbed a fistful of Alya’s hair, yanking her up so that

she could look at me and so that I might see what they'd done.

My heart ached when I saw her swollen eyes and split lips.

“Alyosha?” she sobbed. “Why are they doing this to us?”

“Let her go, Gregor!” I struggled against the chair again.
“She’s just a kid! She’s not involved in any of this! Let her go and I’ll stay here!”

“Oh.” Gregor knelt down beside Alya and stared at me, a mocking expression on his face. “Oh, now this is familiar. I feel like I’ve seen something like this before. Now, where did I see this?”

“Fuck you!” I roared helplessly. “Fuck you!”

“Now I remember.” Gregor slapped a palm to his head and laughed. “I’d almost forgotten. You got to hand it to her, Alyosha.” He grinned as he shook Alya’s head slightly, eliciting another whimper from her. “That bitch was a good fuck. Real shame that we fucked her up so badly. When I saw her in jail, I couldn’t even get a half chub going.”

“But this one?” He forced Alya to look at him. “I don’t think I’m going to have that problem with this one.”

“Let her go, Gregor,” I gritted out. “Let her go and you can do whatever the fuck you want with me. You can hand me over to Svetlana. You can kill me. I don’t care. But just let Alya go.”

“All you had to do was bring your pretty little wife,” Gregor said. “But instead you came alone. And now ...” He stood up and rolled up his sleeves, revealing his sinewy arms. “Poor sweet Alya is going to suffer for *your* crimes.”

“I will gut you alive if you hurt her!”

Gregor didn't even bother answering. He pulled back his fist and slammed it into Alya's stomach. She cried out in pain and I screamed helplessly in my chair, forced to watch this just as I was forced to watch Gregor gleefully torture Svetlana ten years ago.

He grinned as he turned back to me. “Here's what's going to happen,” he responded. “Because you came empty-handed, this is going to end with the last two Korolevs dead and no one left to challenge us.”

“What did Svetlana promise you?” I asked softly. I had to keep him talking. Each moment he spent talking and gloating was a moment that he wouldn't be able to hurt Alya. And every second that passed by without me leaving the warehouse was another second in the countdown before the combined Tarallo and Korolev forces stormed the building.

“Everything,” Gregor growled. “Svetlana promised us free rein of this city, more money and bitches than your family ever tossed our way. Why the hell wouldn't we take her up on that offer?”

“Because it's not real, Gregor Ivanovich,” I said. “Svetlana has no power. She can't promise you anything!”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Gregor shrugged. “Once you’re dead, Svetlana will have Glazov draw up new documents. We will inherit everything that we bled for, everything that your family sucked away from us like the leeches that you were.”

“And you think Svetlana will reward *you*?” I asked. “The most brutal and sadistic of her tormentors that night ten years ago?”

“It doesn’t matter if she rewards me or not. Glazov is the one who has the ultimate power,” Gregor countered. “You see, you taught me something when you were busy cooperating with that cunt from the New York DA’s office. You taught me that with a good lawyer, you can do anything you want and get away with it.”

He knelt down in front of me, grinning. “If Svetlana thinks she can control us, then she’s sorely mistaken. And if she thinks she can double-cross us ...” His face darkened. “I will not hesitate to finish what I started ten years ago.”

Just then, I heard another noise. The sound of a metal door being kicked open. Gregor looked to the side with surprise, his face twisting in a snarl when he realized what had happened. He pointed to the door and the other man who’d tied me down drew his gun, firing wildly into the dark.

Suddenly, the sound of gunfire filled the air. Armed men swarmed into the warehouse. Taking my chance, I slammed my forehead against Gregor’s. Stars exploded in my vision as the traitors’ weapons chattered to life in response. I saw Shishkin swing around the corner, only to crumple to the ground when a hail of bullets slammed into his chest.

Gregor roared to action, drawing his gun and ducking behind an aisle. He fired blindly in the din, running for an exit as

bullets cracked overhead.

I rocked in my chair, taking advantage of the temporary reprieve and trying to reach Alya. I had to bring her down to the ground before she got caught up in the crossfire. Alya turned her eyes to me, and I opened my mouth to comfort her.

In the corner of my eye, I saw another traitor raise his gun and point it at Alya.

Suddenly, it was as if the entire world existed in slow motion. The muzzle kicked up as a ball of flame erupted from its tip. A single bullet spun lazily from the barrel. I felt its heat graze across my face and for a brief moment, I could see the notches of the bullet as it twisted in the air.

Helpless, I watched as the bullet buried itself in Alya's heart. Her body jerked to the side and then she toppled backward in the chair before I could hit the ground.

I felt a scream of anguish punch its way through my throat. Strong hands cut away the ropes tying me down and I rushed forward. I rushed over to Alya, and her lifeless eyes stared back at me. My baby sister had been taken away for no good reason other than to hurt me. I felt like someone had ripped out my heart and flung it away, leaving behind an emptiness that threatened to crush me.

Someone's hand touched my shoulder, but I pushed it away as I shook Alya's lifeless body, screaming at her to wake up.

But she was gone.

She would never grow old. She would never find a man to marry. Never have children of her own. She wouldn't meet her niece or nephew. She wouldn't ever get the chance to spoil them rotten.

The hand touched my shoulder again, and I turned around to see Elia's tearful eyes looking at me.

It was only then that I realized the warehouse was silent.

Slowly, I turned around and saw that one of the traitors was still alive. The same one who had killed my sister. Carlos and another Tarallo man held him motionless. I turned back to Elia and saw the gun in her hand.

My hands shook. I wanted to say something. I wanted her to give me the gun. But she didn't. Instead, she stood up, walked over to the man, pressed the gun against his temple, and pulled the trigger.

Chapter Nineteen

Elia

The car door opened and I stepped out, following Carlos into the nondescript building before us. We were in a neighborhood in a Chicago suburb that I didn't know about. The buildings here squeezed together, and for a moment I could fool myself into believing I was back in Brooklyn.

Aleksey was not with us. He'd gone back alone with Alya's body.

When we stepped into the building, there were men with guns everywhere, as if they were waiting for the fight to come to them.

We walked down a narrow hallway to the back, where a steep set of stairs took us deeper into the bowels of the building. My mind was numb, my body moving on pure instinct.

And my heart ...

My heart was broken as my mind replayed the awful cry of anguish from my husband's throat when he saw his sister die before his eyes.

Tears crowded my eyes, but I blinked them back. Now was not the time for tears. That time would come later.

Finally, we reached the basement. The men inside looked expectantly at me as Carlos led me to the center. There was a low murmur throughout the room. I lifted my chin, staring at them head on.

Tarallos are made of stronger stuff, I reminded myself, when all I wanted was to throw my arms around my husband and cry with him in mourning.

“Friends,” Carlos said. “It is done. Elia Korolev has completed what was asked of her.” He met each man’s hard gaze around the room. “I saw her kill with my own two eyes.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, trying my best to put out of my mind the image of Aleksey slumped over the body of his sister, of him gently undoing the ropes that had bound her to the chair, of him closing her lifeless eyes, and of him scooping her up in his arms to carry her out of that warehouse.

And even though my hands were dry, I couldn’t help but feel Alya’s blood on them. I wanted nothing more than to scrub my hands under hot water until they were pink and raw, but I knew I could never get that feeling out.

I now understood what Aleksey meant.

My breath hitched in my throat as I looked over at him. He stared forward, eyes blank and expressionless.

“She has done what is required of her,” Carlos continued speaking. “Fit to stand as one of us. And having witnessed her resolve, I declare her fit to take up the right to command us as the heir of Don Ludovico in our war against the Bogatyr and the traitorous members of the Korolev Bratva.”

I had done it. I had gotten the men that Aleksey and I needed. But there was no sweet taste of victory, only bitter ash at what

it took us to get there.

“Elia Korolev.” Carlos stood before me. “I ask that you give your blood in service of the Mafia.” He held out a dagger and passed it to me, handle first. “A single drop will do.”

I stretched out my finger and brushed the sharp tip of the dagger across the surface. The steel pierced my skin, and a bright red blood drop followed.

“She has given her blood,” Carlos declared. “And in return, we will give ours if she so demands.”

One by one, the entire room dropped to one knee, their heads bowed and their fists over the heart.

It was a bit unnerving as I watched the process, tucking my finger inward to keep it from throbbing. I hadn't expected any sort of display like this. And in spite of the harrowing events that I had just witnessed and the emptiness that threatened to overwhelm me, there was also a drop of pride.

“Rise,” Carlos commanded.

In unison, the men stood up.

“I need to go home,” I murmured to Carlos. “I need to be there for my husband.”

Sympathy and understanding crossed his expression, and he nodded. A moment later, he escorted me to the waiting SUV.

“I will be in touch,” I told him. “With plans.”

“Madam Korolev,” he started. “Svetlana and all the traitors will pay for what happened today. I promise you.”

“Thank you, Carlos,” I said, my chest tightening. “Thank you.”

The SUV took me back to the penthouse. In addition to Petya, there were other men standing guard downstairs. Tarallo men. Respectfully, they stepped aside to allow me into the elevator.

When the elevator came to a halt, but before the door opened, I drew in a breath, trying to find the strength for Aleksey and what he was feeling right now.

He had lost his mother, his uncle, and now his sister. And even though I knew what it felt like to lose a sibling, I had never had the misfortune of seeing Luca die in front of my eyes.

Aleksey was standing out on a balcony when I entered, a drink in his hand. He was still wearing the clothing from the warehouse, the one with Alya’s blood smeared all over his shirt.

“Aleksey,” I said softly as I stood next to him. “What can I do?”

“Do?” He refused to look at me. “There’s nothing you can do, Elia. Nothing at all.”

I wanted to absorb some of his pain, to touch him, but instead I stood there, waiting.

“Is this how you felt when your brother died?” he finally asked. “Like your chest was caved in? Like you’d never be able to smile again?”

“Something like that,” I admitted.

“I should’ve gone after her earlier,” he said. “I shouldn’t have waited so long.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” I turned and touched his shoulder, feeling the tension under my hand. “Svetlana was never going to release her to us.”

“Now I know how it felt,” Aleksey continued, looking down at his glass. “When you were forced to marry me.”

I wasn’t sure where he was going with this, so I stayed silent, letting him talk it out.

“You felt helpless,” he said, his voice trembling. “The same way that I feel helpless now. My sister is gone. I’m all alone.”

“We still have each other.” Tears crowded my eyes and I squeezed his shoulder. “And we will avenge her. Not just her. But your mother and Uncle Misha too. Even if I have to kill him myself.”

Aleksey finally met my gaze. His eyes were hollowed and red-rimmed. There were no emotions in them. Just a haunting emptiness.

“You sound like I used to,” he said. “Bloodthirsty. Bent on revenge.”

“It’s necessary at times,” I replied.

I was. Svetlana had overstepped his bounds by dragging Alya into this mess and subjecting her to the tortures of Gregor Konev. I hadn’t heard anyone say that Gregor had been found, which meant that he must have found a way out.

I wasn’t about to let either of them get away with it. Whatever shred of pity I might have once felt for Svetlana burned away. Now, all I wanted was for her to die.

Aleksey continued to look at me. But he said nothing as he set the glass on the table next to him.

My heart broke for him. I had never seen Aleksey look so defeated. Pain and hopelessness were written in his eyes. The sight of him like this left me frightened.

I didn’t know how to handle a vulnerable Aleksey.

When he brushed past me, I let him, wrapping my arms around the bump in my belly and wishing I could perform that same gesture on him. This war had always been personal, whether it had been my family against Aleksey or him against Svetlana.

But tonight, it had taken a darker turn that no one could have expected.

Now we were all trying to process Alya's death and where we could go from here. What was on my mind terrified me. I wanted revenge. I craved the feeling of my enemy's blood splattering on my hands, and I didn't care how it happened. I shook my head.

I had killed. But what if this wasn't the end?

I shuddered.

What if I wanted more deaths?

Later, I waited as long as I could for Aleksey to come to bed that night, but as the clock moved to midnight, I could barely hold my eyes open. My hands had been washed and scrubbed. But somehow, they still felt sticky and dirty. I could still hear my husband's anguished scream for his sister, her lifeless eyes haunting me.

Finally, he stepped into the room. His hair was disheveled and his eyes still hollow. I stood up from the bed as he slowly shed all of his clothing. Before I could react, he closed the distance until he towered above me. The same blankness that I saw in his eyes the morning of his mother's funeral returned.

But this time, he didn't take me into his arms. He didn't push me against the wall. Instead, he reached his hand out, like a

man drowning at sea, reaching toward the first ship he saw.
His fingers trembled.

Slowly, I took his hand and held it tightly in my own. I looked into his eyes. His lips moved, and a quiet plea tumbled from his quivering lips.

“Please,” he whispered. “Help me.”

Chapter Twenty

Elia

I led him to bed and gently pressed my lips against his. His mouth on mine was still at first. Then, slowly, I felt him return the gesture. His lips inched against mine, moving almost reverently as life slowly returned to him. But the passion that had been a hallmark of his kisses was not there. He reacted purely on instinct.

Even when I slowly helped him down into the bed. Even when I sat on his lap. Even when I brought his hand up against my body to caress the bump in my belly where our baby was.

“Aleksey,” I breathed as I cradled his face, and his eyes shimmered in the dark.

He turned slightly, and the hurt in his eyes sent a shiver down my spine. I pressed my lips to his again and pushed my body against his, my heart aching as he finally began nipping at my lower lip. My hands threaded through his hair and I deepened our kiss, feeling his pulse pick up slightly.

His hand gently rose up and held my waist, but never inched higher. Tears welled in my eyes as I inched forward until he was on his back. My soul broke for him, but I held my own pain in check as my tongue swept into his mouth.

Bit by bit, I felt the familiar passion return. His tongue slowly coaxed against mine and his hand finally rose up, smoothing along the expanse of my back until he pulled me close to him. My partner, my equal, my love.

My hands continued to cradle his face as I kissed him, and all the while, chaotic conflicting emotions warred in my heart. The pain of seeing him like this. The ache of knowing what caused it.

But above all else, the hate.

Hate for those who dared to hurt him—to break him—like this.

So, silently, I kissed him back, hoping that he could feel what was in my heart. I was never going to let him go. Not now. Not ever. I didn't care what might happen next; all I knew was that I held him in my hands.

And as long as he still reached up to hold me, then there would still be a chance for us. And so, I clung to him, refusing to let go, as my hand slowly moved down to the space between his legs and found his slowly rising cock.

Wrapping my fingers around the warm, pulsating flesh, I gave it a light squeeze and Aleksey broke the kiss, gasping lightly. The hollowness was still there in his eyes, but if I looked hard enough in the dark, there was also a glimmer of that familiar fire.

“Elia,” he choked, voice heavy with emotions.

I brushed the corner of his lip with mine, a sad smile curving on my own face. “You don't have to say anything,” I whispered softly against the prickly stubble that peppered his chin.

I pressed a quick kiss to his forehead before backing away. I rose slightly as I kissed my way down his beautiful face and his strong jaw. Pausing at the crook between his neck and his shoulder, I allowed myself a brief moment to feel his thundering pulse against my lips before I pressed my lips against his muscle-corded chest.

My tongue rasped across his nipple, and I heard a tremulous sigh flutter from his lips. My hand gripping his cock started moving, and my heart skipped when I felt him hardening in my hand. Musky wetness began to slick my fingers, and I made my way down the sharp contours of his defined body.

Along the ridges of his abs, I planted one kiss after another, my tongue traversing the familiar terrain. My breasts dragged along the length of his body as I tugged him slowly but steadily, and I felt his precum slowly coating my chest as I moved.

I heard his breath quicken as I moved further down to the furrow between his torso and his legs. His scent hung heavy in the air, and I felt my own wetness pooling between my legs as I came closer and closer to his throbbing member.

But this wasn't about my pleasure. It was about his.

"Elia," he said again and I looked up, heart in my throat at what I might find.

His eyes were still dark, but the familiar glimmer was more apparent. Keeping my eyes on him, I took him into my mouth, feeling him pulsing in my mouth as I tasted the musky saltiness that was so uniquely him. The irresistible taste that was reserved for me and me alone. My tongue swirled around

the thick head and I refused to look away, even when his hand threaded in my hair.

Softly, a groan slipped past his lips. Our eyes remained locked as my head bobbed up and down. Hungry pleasure demanded release between my own legs. I let my jaw go slack and sank down further along his thick length. Salt and musk filled my mouth, chasing away all thoughts from my brain as I continued to work his lengthy shaft. My hands rested against his powerful thighs and pushed them open to give me better access.

A ragged gasp blew past his lips and finally, he broke our eye contact as he grabbed a fistful of my hair. His cock grew harder in my mouth, and I could feel him tensing up as he slowly took control. His hips buckled and thrust. I knelt dutifully between his legs as he slowly took control back and began fucking my mouth.

I greedily swallowed the mixture of saliva and precum filling my mouth. He was grunting and panting above me as he forced his cock deeper into me. I raked his thighs with my nails, urging him to release. Whimpers and groans accompanied each thrust. I buried my nose into the tuft of hair above his cock, inhaling his intoxicating scent as I felt my own desire rise to a crescendo that demanded its own release.

A low growl rumbled from his chest as he held me in place and released the first ropery spurt of semen—thick and salty—deep into my throat. I ran my hand up along the hard muscles of his body as I swallowed him loudly, refusing to allow even a single drop to escape the corner of my lips.

“Elia ...” he rasped as he came down my throat. “Elia ...”

My hands found his shaft and balls, caressing him as I continued to drink him down. Finally, his spasms seemed to end. I slowly released his cock—still twitching with the aftershocks of his pleasure—and slowly kissed my way back up his torso, his chest, his neck, his jaw, and then his lips.

This time, he returned my gesture with intensity, his tongue sweeping into mine as he tasted himself on my lips. His strong fingers took hold of my ass and gave each cheek a delicious squeeze. His cock pressed at my wet entrance, and I felt myself trembling in anticipation of what was to come.

My body was on fire. I gasped and clung to his powerful frame, digging my nails into him as he kneaded the pliant and willing flesh. I gave up all control at that moment, willingly giving in to his touch, surrendering to his needs, and succumbing to our mutual desires.

When he entered me, I gasped. The flames of desire licked at my core. My body, my heart, and my mind wanted only one thing. To feel him inside of me. To have him dominate me. To let him hold me down and use me until the Aleksey that I loved—the implacable pakhan who bent his knee to no one—returned.

When he broke the kiss, I let loose a long, piercing moan. My hips began to move of their own accord as I impaled myself on his cock. His teeth nipped at my neck, my collarbone, and finally at my breasts. I felt him do to me what I had done to him a few moments earlier, but all while his cock began pumping mercilessly.

“Yes,” I whimpered. “Use me,” I begged. “Fuck me!” I cried.

I wasn't going to be able to hold myself together much longer; my knees were already trembling as pleasure threatened to overwhelm me. The first orgasm ripped through me without warning and I shrieked, nearly falling off him as my hips bucked and shook. His strong arms found my shoulders and pulled me to him as he sat up. His tongue swept into my mouth again and I clung to him for dear life, gasping at the force that slid through my body.

My pussy clenched around his cock, squeezing him for release as pressure started building inside of my core again. My legs wrapped around his waist. The sound of slapping flesh and the torrid smell of sex filled the air. Sweat beaded on my forehead. My hands clenched, and I dug my fingernails into his back as his hands took hold of my ass.

The second orgasm hit, and my body felt as light as a feather as I rode him. But he refused to let go. Our lips met again. He muffled my moans, swallowed my screams, and drained the air from my lungs with his kiss.

No one could make me feel this way. I didn't want anyone else.

I wanted my husband, my soul mate, the man I loved more than anything in this world. I felt him slowly returning to life. Aleksey growled as he pounded into me, a sheen of sweat coating his gorgeous body, and I opened my hips wider.

"Elia," he rasped one more time, and I felt him tightening up inside of me.

"Come for me, Aleksey," I begged, my entire body flushed with heat. "Come for me."

And he did just that. Together, we reached the same delicious breaking point. He poured into me with a hoarse shout before he captured my bruised lips in his. Our bodies trembled from the aftershock as he flooded me. I clenched, milking him for every drop and refusing to let go. Not until he finally softened inside of me and slipped out.

It was only when his thumb traced along the edge of my eye that I realized I was crying.

“I love you, Elia,” he breathed. “I love you more than anything else in this world.”

My heart thundered in my chest as I pressed my forehead against his. “I love you too, Aleksey.”

His powerful arms pulled me close to him and I nestled in the space between us, wishing desperately that we could stay like this forever. That we could forget the awful reality that awaited us beyond these walls.

Chapter Twenty-One

Aleksey

Sunrise

I stood on the balcony, watching the sun rise on another day. The weather had turned cold, but I barely noticed it. Elia had fallen asleep in my arms after she'd briefly brought me back to life, but I couldn't bear to close my eyes. Every time I did, I saw the same sickening image of Alya falling backward, of the life fading from her eyes.

So, I got up after Elia started snoring and made my way back out to the balcony. The rest of my body was cold. I wasn't even sure that I was inside a body any longer, feeling oddly detached from reality.

My sister was dead. My family was gone.

I drew in a tortured breath, fighting through the well of emotions that threatened to overcome me once more. I wanted to rage about Alya's death, but there was simply no time. The war took no break, and even as the new day dawned, I knew that fresh bloodshed awaited.

I ran a hand over my face and then folded them over the railing as I continued to look at the bloody sun rising in the sky. Exhaustion pulled on my body. Sex with Elia had been the reprieve my mind craved for. But the moment we pulled apart from each other, coldness seeped back into my bones.

I couldn't hide this feeling away, lock it in like I had done with my other feelings, and move on. It was as if someone had ripped my heart out of my chest and set it on fire in front of

my own eyes. Every moment was a stark reminder of the hollowness I felt inside.

Gregor and Svetlana had taken something from me that I could never get back, and there was no way for me to push past this feeling.

But I had to.

If I wasn't careful, my sister's death wasn't going to be the only innocent life lost. Elia needed me. She needed me to be the Aleksey Korolev that she once hated—the monster she once feared—if the two of us stood any chance of making it out of this war.

My cell buzzed in my pocket and I pulled it out, my expression growing dark when I saw who it was.

“What could you possibly want?” I rasped the moment I answered the call.

“Aleks,” Svetlana replied. “I wanted to let you know that what happened to Alya wasn't personal.”

“Is that right?” I asked through gritted teeth. I wanted to hang up the call, to not even give her the time of day to gloat over what had happened. But I also needed to get into her head, to find out what potential moves I could make against her. She had caught me off guard, but she wouldn't do it again.

She would not be allowed to win this war.

“I had ...” she paused. “I had no idea that Gregor would go this far.”

“Bullshit,” I spat. “You haven’t forgotten what kind of monster he is. You knew, and you handed my sister over to him anyway!”

“The same way your father handed me to him,” she reminded me softly. “Or have you forgotten that, Aleks?”

I sighed and closed my eyes, feeling the cold sunlight wash over my face. “No, Sveta, I haven’t.” And that was the honest truth. One bad act did not justify the other. “But you didn’t turn down his offer, did you?” I asked her after a moment.

“Do you think I had a choice?” Svetlana asked me, her voice quiet and trembling. In that singular moment, she wasn’t Svetlana the Bogatyr but Svetlana the frightened girl from ten years ago who begged me to save her. “Do you think I would’ve willingly allied with the same brute who turned me into this?”

I wanted to say no, but my anger and hatred refused to allow the word to form on my lips.

“You helped him kill my sister, Sveta,” I said instead, shaking my head. “You killed my mother. You killed my uncle. You killed my father. If you’re trying to make me feel sorry for you, it’s not working.”

“I had no intention of killing Alya, Aleks,” she said. “I mean it.”

“LIAR!”

“I’m not lying to you, Aleks,” she insisted. “I would never lie to you. If I wanted to kill her, why wouldn’t I have killed her when I first kidnapped her? I’m not a monster. But Gregor ...” She took a shuddering breath. “You don’t know the terrible things he threatened me with if I did not do as he said.”

“Maybe I should let him do whatever he wants with you,” I shot back coldly, venom dripping with every word. “You’re not the victim here, Sveta. Don’t pretend like you are.”

“I *wish* I was the monster that you think I am,” she pleaded. “But I’m not, Aleks.”

“Stop lying to me.” I closed my eyes. “Just stop it, Svetlana. You killed an innocent girl.”

“And I *wasn’t* an innocent girl when your father handed me to Gregor and the rest of those animals?” she exploded. “You had just as much of a hand in your sister’s death as I did.”

“Fuck you,” I spat. “You cruel, callous bitch! I wasn’t the one who kidnapped her. I wasn’t the one who beat her. I wasn’t the one who *murdered* her!”

“And I was?” she asked pointedly. “I was sitting in jail when Gregor showed up to tell me what he planned to do, what he’d already done. I gave you your sister back in one piece the one time I actually had her in my hands, because I’m not the monster you think I am!”

“And my mother? My uncle?” I demanded. “Or did you somehow not cause their deaths either? I’m sorry for what happened in the past, I truly am. But you crossed a line with what you did last night. Whatever feelings I thought I had for you died with my sister.”

“Is that really what you believe, Aleks?” Her voice grew quiet, but I could hear a sinister edge slowly creeping into it. Svetlana was slowly fading away, and in her place, the Bogatyr was beginning to surface.

“I am.” I stood straighter into the sunrise and felt the first rays of warmth hitting my body. “It’s like what you told me in the hospital. Svetlana is dead. She died ten years ago because of me. I didn’t believe you then, but I believe you now.”

“If I knew you’d be this cruel and heartless,” she seethed as her voice dropped an octave. “Then I would’ve slit that bitch’s throat the moment I took her.”

And just like that, Svetlana was gone. Only the Bogatyr remained.

“You should’ve come for me ten years ago,” I growled. “Instead, you hid in the shadows, and sent countless others to their deaths. I know what you are, Bogatyr. You are a monster, just like me.”

“If I am a monster just like you ...” the Bogatyr threatened. “Then perhaps you should take a good hard look around at what’s left. Because if you think this war can’t get any worse, you are more than mistaken.”

“There’s nothing more you can do to hurt me,” I lied.

“Poor, naïve Aleksey Fyodorovich,” she laughed. “There is *always* more I can do to hurt you. You think that you’ll gain the upper hand by allying with what’s left of the Tarallos?”

My fist clenched against the railing as I listened.

“You should pray that I don’t get my hands on you first, Bogatyr,” I finally said, pulling in my emotion the best I could. “Because I will not kill you quickly. You will suffer for what you have done, and I will be there to see it to the bitter end.”

“You think that you’re untouchable in your tower?” she said. “You think you can keep your pretty bitch from me? I will take from her what you owe me. And when I’m done, I will hand her to Gregor to play with until she’s begging to die.”

“You touch her,” I growled. “And there will be nothing that stops me from peeling your skin from your bones.”

“Does threatening me make you feel good?” she chuckled. “Does it make you feel powerful? Do you feel like you are finally coming into your own again? You have nothing, Aleksey Fyodorovich. Nothing!”

She ended the call, and I had to stop myself from throwing my own phone over the balcony railing. She was goading me to act, I knew that. Or she wanted to see the full extent of what I could do.

But in a way, I had more freedom to act than before. I had practically nothing left, which meant I had practically nothing left to lose.

My family was dead. There was no one that the Bogatyr could rip from me anymore other than Elia, and there was no way I was going to leave her side for even a moment.

There was simplicity in that.

Drawing in a breath, I watched as the sun climbed higher, painting the sky in various colors that Alya would have loved. She had always loved sunrises, telling me that it was another day to make up for the mistakes of the day before. I couldn't bring her back, but I could vow that her death wouldn't be in vain.

As I watched the sun rise, I felt warmth returning to me.

Even if that warmth was a slow-burning hatred.

Elia was finishing her breakfast by the time I walked back inside. Her phone was pressed against her ear, and her brow was furrowed in worry. I poured a cup of coffee to warm myself up, watching her and wondering what I was going to say to her when she finished the call.

“What do you mean, Berkowitz is changing the deal?”

My ears perked up at the mention of the name. If the deal between me and Berkowitz had changed, then that was another complication that we needed to worry about.

I could barely hear the response on the other end.

“That’s impossible,” Elia fired back, her face red. “How can you ask me to do something like that?”

The response was clearly not what Elia wanted to hear either, and her shoulders slumped. “Yeah, well, I’m sorry, too, that you couldn’t change his mind. Do you have any idea how shitty things are over here? She killed Aleksey’s sister. Not soon after you left.”

I sucked in a breath and Elia looked up suddenly. Our eyes met and I saw the anguish in hers, the pain that said she was also reliving what happened.

“Try harder, Lana,” she said softly, her eyes never leaving mine. “Because one way or the other, this war is going to end, with or without Berkowitz’s offer. And I promise you, when it is over, I’m sure he would rather have the original offer intact than to negotiate a new one.”

Lana said something, and Elia’s eyes steeled.

“No, Lana, that’s not a threat.” She sat up just a little straighter. “That’s a statement of fact. I’m telling you again. Try harder.”

She ended the call and placed the phone on the table, blowing out a breath. “I guess you can figure out who that was.”

I sat in the chair near me, spreading my legs and holding my cup. “Let me guess. Berkowitz has cold feet about offering me amnesty?”

“Among other things,” she added, swallowing. “He’s setting some pretty unreasonable demands.”

“Such as?” I asked her.

“He wants the Tarallo men to stay out of New York,” she replied. “Obviously, that’s a problem, after everything I promised Carlos.”

“You did what you had to, Elia.” I took her hand in mine. “Lana is doing the same.”

“Aleksey Korolev.” She raised an eyebrow. “Are you standing up for my friend?”

“Fuck, no,” I growled. “But it’s like you said. I’m just stating facts.”

“I know,” Elia breathed, her expression softening. “How are you?”

“I got a call from the Bogatyr,” I replied.

“What did she say?” Her expression remained unchanged, but I could see something flash by in her eyes briefly.

“She claimed she didn’t intend to kill Alya,” I replied bitterly. “She said that she wasn’t the monster I thought her to be.”

“She’s lying,” Elia said immediately, but cast her gaze down at her empty plate. There was anger and bitterness in her voice, far more than I expected.

I looked back, my eyes drawn to the angry scar the Bogatyr had left on her face. “She said that she’ll take from you what I owe her,” I said. “And then she’ll hand you over to Gregor until you beg her to die.”

“I bet she did.”

In the morning light, she looked tired. Dark circles hung under her eyes, and I worried about her and the baby. I had my share of grief to deal with, but she had two lives to worry about at once.

“Let her make her threats.” She tilted her chin defiantly. “I’m not afraid.”

“You need to rest,” I bit out. As much as I admired the newfound power and strength that she had acquired, I was still worried about her.

“So do you,” she said quietly.

Elia was speaking from her heart, and I wasn’t ready to hear it. There would be a time and place for everything, and right now, we needed to focus on how to corner and defeat the Bogatyr.

“I’ll be fine.” I took a sip of my coffee. “As long as you’re okay, I’ll be okay. I promise.”

She nodded and stood up. I watched her put her plate in the dishwasher before she sat back down across from me. Trouble drummed at my chest. Ever since last night, she had changed as well. I could feel it.

After all, I had done the one thing I swore never to do.

I had put blood on her hands.

And now ...

I wish I was the monster that you think I am. The Bogatyr's words echoed in my ear. Was that what I was doing to Elia? Did I destroy her innocence in the worst way possible when I allowed her father's men to demand that she be initiated?

Was I making a monster out of her?

She was supposed to be the good one in our fucked-up marriage. She wasn't supposed to be bloodthirsty and hellbent on revenge. I was. Yet somehow, I had started her down that path.

Blowing out a breath, I finished the rest of my coffee. Was I about to lose Elia? Not to the Bogatyr but to the monster that she'd been forced to become?

"Aleksy," she whispered. "One more thing."

"Yes, my love?" I asked as I moved to stand beside her.

She reached up, stroking my face, and turned until she was the only thing I could see. She took a shuddering breath, and I saw her eyes shimmering again with tears as she prepared herself for what followed.

“We need to talk about Alya’s funeral.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Aleksey

Two days later

I adjusted the cuffs of my shirt and stared at myself in the mirror, not feeling like the man that was staring back at me. I was tired of funerals. How many times would I have to do this? How many times *could* I even do this? Each funeral felt like someone swinging a sledgehammer against the rock that was my heart. And at some point, I knew that there would be one final swing that would smash it apart.

After much discussion with Elia, I agreed that we needed to lay both Alya and Uncle Misha to rest so that we could move forward with the war. The funeral director tried his best to keep the surprise from his voice when I called again. But I could still hear it.

Elia came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my middle as I stared at the hollow-eyed reflection staring back at me. She pressed her cheek against my shirt and slipped her hand into mine. “It’s going to be okay, Aleksey.”

I nodded wordlessly. My mind still remembered what almost happened the morning of my mother’s funeral. Shame crept up into my thoughts and I chased it away. My free hand rested on the bump in Elia’s belly, and I felt the overwhelming urge to tell her that she shouldn’t be there. The thought twisted my insides.

But I couldn’t risk being apart from her anymore. Not after the Bogatyr’s last threat.

Turning, I faced her, brushing her hair out of her face. “Thank you.”

“Aleksey,” she said, her large eyes teeming with emotions as she searched mine. “Will you be okay?”

“I don’t know.” I pulled her close to me, breathing in her scent as my heart threatened to beat out of my chest. For the first time in my life, I felt safe enough to admit that I wasn’t in control anymore.

Elia didn’t respond; instead, she stood on her tiptoes and brushed her lips to my cheek, her hand caressing my back. “I’m here when you need me. I’ll always be here.”

I tightened my grip on her. I didn’t want to let her go, and I didn’t want to step away from the mirror. I knew that the moment I stepped outside, I would only feel mind-numbing pain.

Elia looked down at her watch and gingerly placed her hand on mine, a solitary tear clinging to her eyelashes. “We should go,” she whispered.

I nodded, and allowed her to slowly lead me from the safety of our home to face the reality of this cruel, heartless world.

It was a beautiful sunny day, but the shadows were already growing longer and longer. There was a crispness to the cold air that portended the coming winter. Elia had helped arrange

everything so that only my loyal brigadiers would be present at the grave site while Tarallo men protected the perimeter.

I had chosen to bury Alya and Uncle Misha next to Mother, as far apart from Father's grave as I could. I knew that was what both of them would have wanted. I kept the caskets closed, not wishing to look upon their faces. The coroner had done his best, but it had been days before we even recovered Uncle Misha's body from the mansion. And I couldn't bear to see what Gregor had done to Alya's face.

The photos that stood at the center of the wreaths both came from my wedding. Uncle Misha had stood along the fringes of the dance floor, a smile on his face as he gazed at Mother. In many ways, he was every bit the father I wished I had, with warmth to offer in place of Fyodor Korolev's cold, unfeeling cruelty.

But it was Alya's picture that felt like a knife to my gut. The photographer had caught her looking backward, a curl of hair swinging by the corner of her eye as she laughed at something someone said. Her eyes were like stars.

She was beautiful.

And she would never grow old.

That thought reverberated in my head as the priest said the solemn prayers to send the final members of the Korolev family to the afterlife. It took everything in me to keep my face composed and my emotions in check. I held onto Elia for my life. If she wasn't there, then I would have collapsed into a mess before the two freshly dug graves.

A part of me wanted nothing more than to wail and show my sorrow to my family, to beg them for forgiveness due to my inability to protect them. But I couldn't show that weakness in front of my men. Only Elia would be allowed to know the depth of my sorrow.

It wasn't until she nudged me that I realized I was supposed to throw dirt into the graves. Bending down, I scooped a handful and tossed the first clump into Uncle Misha's. The dirt landed on the casket with a hollow *thud*.

Be at rest, Uncle Misha. Give Mamechka a kiss for me.

But I couldn't let go of the dirt when the turn came for Alya. My fingers refused to open. It was as if my mind believed that if I didn't do this one act, then Alya couldn't possibly be dead. My hand shook, and no matter how much I willed myself to open my fist, it refused.

"Aleksey." Elia took my wrist and gently held my fist over the grave.

I took a long, shuddering breath. The wind blew gently, and it was only then that I realized my face was wet with tears.

"You have to let go," she whispered gently.

Slowly, my fingers opened, and the dirt slipped out. Bit by bit, then all at once until a film of black earth covered the surface of Alya's casket. My sister was gone.

Goodbye, malyshka. I failed you. And I'm sorry.

Slowly, Elia took my hand in hers, not caring about the dirt that still covered my palm. The sun continued to shine in the beautiful blue sky. Alya would've loved a day like today.

We rode in silence back to the penthouse. My mind remained blank the entire way, and my body seemed to move on its own. It was like I went through the motions, but I wasn't there. When we stepped into the elevator, my hand still had the dirt from the graveyard.

I hadn't been able to let go of Elia. Only when the doors closed did the tears come. Hot drops fell from my eyes, and I slumped down the walls of the elevator. Elia knelt down and cradled my head as I cried, whispering soft words of assurance in my ear that I couldn't hear in the depth of my grief.

When the elevator door opened, Elia slowly helped me onto my feet. Together we walked into the penthouse.

But it wasn't empty like I thought. Someone was here. I froze in my steps when I saw who it was, my heart hammering at my throat. He turned to look at me. His familiar face had aged since the last time I saw him. Gray peppered his hair from the stress of recovery, and he leaned on a pair of crutches.

"Borya?" I asked, incredulous.

"Hey, Alyosha," he said sadly. But just the sight of him sent a flood of relief coursing through me.

I walked up to him and pulled him in for an embrace.

“When did you get out?”

“Less than an hour ago,” he replied. “You want to tell me what the hell has been happening while I was unconscious?”

I pulled back and looked at him. His gaze darted between my red-rimmed eyes, the scar on Elia’s face, and the dirt on my palm. Slowly, realization made its way onto his face and he sat down on the nearest chair.

“Who?” he asked softly.

“Alya.” My voice was barely a whisper. “And Uncle Misha as well.”

“Oh, Alyosha.” He shook his head and placed his heavy hands on my shoulders. “I’m sorry.”

I nodded as I bowed my head. There was so much to discuss with Boris, so much that he had missed since he was admitted to the hospital. I didn’t even know where I could begin. But in that moment, it didn’t matter how or where to start. The only thing that mattered was that he was here.

And that would be enough for now.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Elia

Three days later

I groaned and pressed my forehead to the rim of the toilet. My stomach roiled, but it felt like there couldn't be anything left inside. I knew about morning sickness as a concept, but experiencing it for myself was a whole other level.

"Oh, kiddo," I muttered. "What are you doing to me?"

"Elia?"

Aleksey's voice comforted me from behind as his hand settled on my back. I lifted my head in time to retch once more, bringing up what was left of my breakfast back into the toilet.

"Are you all right?" he asked gently.

"I don't know." I shook my head. "I think I'm ready for this part of carrying a child to be over."

"It'll be over soon," he replied, removing his hand from my back. "Come on. Let's get you into bed. I'll grab you a ginger ale."

I groaned again at the thought of moving away from the toilet but allowed Aleksey to sweep me up off the floor, my legs shaking. "I'm sorry."

“What are you apologizing for?” he asked, sliding his arm around my waist. “It’s not your fault.”

“No, it’s not.” I shot him a venomous look. “I didn’t make this kid on my own.” It certainly didn’t feel fair that women had to suffer while men got off scot-free.

The words came out harsher than I expected, and I closed my eyes as I leaned into Aleksey, my stomach still churning.

He smiled and I took a slow breath, soaking up both the temperature of his body and his closeness. As miserable as I felt right now, this was a welcome change from the insanity that had taken place in the last twenty-four hours. Here in Aleksey’s arms as morning sickness roiled me, I felt like things bore a semblance to being normal.

It was something that I had sorely missed—something that I still desperately wanted.

And something that increasingly felt like it was out of reach.

Aleksey helped me up onto the bed and I touched my stomach, groaning once more. “I’m so over this.”

He pulled the covers over me, touching my forehead. The gentleness of his touch brought tears to my eyes and I had to blink them away. “Just stay here for a bit, okay?” he said as he stepped away from the bed.

“No,” I said weakly, feeling awkward that he was taking care of me like this. “I need to call Carlos.”

I never was one to ask for help all my life, and I knew that Aleksey didn't have much practice in the way of offering help either.

“Relax, Elia.” His eyes darkened, and he looked like I had actually hurt his feelings with my comment. I didn't expect him to take care of me. “Let me take care of you.”

I closed my mouth as he walked out of the room, and pulled the covers up to my chin. It didn't take him long to return with some crackers and a ginger ale.

“Here,” he said, sitting on the side of the bed, pressing some pills into my hand. “For the nausea.”

I took them and sipped the fizzy soda. “Thanks,” I muttered.

Restlessness overcame me. I shouldn't be in bed right now. I needed to call Lana to strategize about how we could change Berkowitz's mind. I needed to call Carlos to talk about what needed to be done about the fight against the Bogatyr.

So many things demanded my attention right now that the last thing I wanted to think about was this pregnancy. Another wave of nausea rippled through my body, and trailing in its wake was guilt.

But what was I guilty of? I wondered. Was I guilty of Alya's death? Was I guilty of neglecting my baby while I focused on commanding my father's men? Or was I guilty of something else? Something uglier.

She said she wasn't the monster I thought her to be.

There was truth in that statement. Svetlana had said that to me as well. But having seen the hurt written across Aleksey's face, and how crushed he was by the seemingly never-ending losses that continued to hit him, I refused to believe that statement. I didn't *want* to believe that statement.

And for that reason, I denounced Svetlana to Aleksey. Because deep down, I *wanted* to see Svetlana as a monster, even though she was likely trapped in Gregor Konev's hands and forced to do his bidding.

Because it meant that I could hate her.

And that I would be fine with seeing her die.

I closed my eyes, and I saw the moment when I pressed the gun against the bastard who killed Alya. I recalled the vicious tremor of *satisfaction* that surged through me when I pulled the trigger and saw his head snap back in death.

The feeling terrified me.

There has been a monster inside of me all along, I thought. And that single act woke it up.

The same question that had haunted me immediately after the execution floated to the front of my mind again. What if I wanted *more*? When would it all end?

I had asked Aleksey that question before our world broke down into madness and death. Now, I was asking myself, and the most terrifying thing was that I didn't know an answer.

That alone both disturbed and disgusted me.

I shuddered involuntarily, and I felt Aleksey's weight sitting on the bed. His hand found mine, and he pressed a stubbled cheek against my forehead. Instinctively, I moved towards his warmth and was unable to hold back the tears from welling up again.

“What's wrong?” he asked gently.

“She's not a monster, Aleksey,” I whispered. “She's just a scared girl who's been forced to relive her nightmares.”

Aleksey pulled away, taking his warmth with him. Suddenly, I felt cold. Colder than I'd ever felt. I was scared to look at him, because I wasn't sure what I'd find staring me back.

“I know you don't want to hear this, but it's true,” I muttered. “There is still some good in her. Buried underneath it all. I know it.”

“How can you say that?” he asked, and I could tell that he was trying his best to keep his voice even. But hardness slipped into his tone all the same. “After everything she's done to you. To us. Elia, she's our enemy.”

“Luca was also your enemy.”

“That's different.”

“Aleksey.” I reached for his hand. To my relief, he took it gently. “She has suffered. You can’t deny that. And in suffering, she’s done everything she could to survive. I know she’s done terrible things, but I can understand why she did them.”

Aleksey looked at me, not letting go of my hand. But I could feel the barrier slowly rising up between us. Panic rose up in my throat, and I swallowed it down. I loved him. I wanted a future with him. I wanted my husband to be on my side and to understand me. But things had somehow become so complicated, and I hated what it was doing to our life.

“Do you remember the first days of our marriage?” I asked quietly.

“I do.” He shifted. “Why?”

I looked up at his stony expression. “Do you remember how much I hated you then?”

His grip on my hand loosened slightly, but he didn’t let go. My lower lip trembled as I continued to speak.

“I wanted to kill you,” I whispered. “I dreamed of killing you, because I wanted to avenge my brother. Every night that you held me down in our marriage bed, I hated myself for being there, for wanting you. Because those moments made me feel like I was betraying Luca’s memory.”

“I thought you were going to kill me, too.” He looked at me for a long moment before answering. “I was certain that you would.”

Sadness crept into my heart at his answer. “And then I fell in love with you,” I admitted as tears rolled down my cheeks. “And I hated myself for that as well.”

His gaze narrowed. “What’s your point, Elia?”

“If I can learn to love you,” I said. “After all the pain you’ve inflicted on me and my family. If I can learn to forgive you.” I sat up a little straighter and pressed my hand to his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart under my palm. “Don’t you think you’re capable of forgiving Svetlana?”

I could feel the wall rising higher and higher between us. He stood up, and my palm pressed against empty air.

“No.”

“Why?” I pleaded.

“Because she hurt you!” He shoved his fingers through his hair. “She threatened to take our child, *our child*, Elia! She threatened to give you to Gregor Konev to torture! I can’t lose anyone else, Elia, not after this. I can’t lose you!”

“And do you think I can bear losing you?” I shouted.

Aleksey tried to say something, but he didn’t. So, he remained silent as pain etched across his face.

“I can understand Svetlana’s pain, I can understand her hatred, and I can understand why she can’t tear herself away from

you,” I said. “Because it’s what I felt. And yes, a part of me desperately wants to hate her. A part of me wants to do nothing but rip her apart, piece by piece. But I understand her, Aleksey, and I know you know that. But that’s not what scares me the most.”

“You’re afraid of losing yourself to our shared hate, aren’t you?” he said softly, as if he could read my mind.

I closed my eyes, squeezing out the tears, and nodded. “Yes,” I admitted. “Because the hate felt so *good*. It felt *righteous*. It made me feel like I was powerful. Like I couldn’t be touched. And I’m afraid that the longer I nurse that hate between us, the more it’s going to burn me up until that’s all I have left. And I know you feel the same.”

Slowly, I felt the barrier start to crumble and fall. Aleksey sat down again and took my hand in his. He pulled me closer and pressed his lips to my forehead.

“I do, Elia,” he admitted. “I felt that. I still feel that. And I feel like I’m losing you. The execution changed you.”

I nodded and allowed him to talk.

“I don’t like what it’s done to you, Elia.” He blew out a breath. “I don’t like the fact that I helped put blood on your hands. But we’ve crossed a point of no return. Svetlana is dead. Only the Bogatyr remains. And the Bogatyr is cruel, vicious, and relentless.”

My chest tightened. His words stung. And on some level, I knew that he was right. But I didn’t want to embrace what it meant—what it implied.

“I don’t want to go down this path,” I admitted. Now that the floodgates were open, they were hard to close. “Please don’t let me become my father’s daughter.”

Aleksey’s hand came up to cup my chin, turning me to look at him. “I won’t,” he said softly, his eyes searching mine. “Because you are your brother’s sister.” He then pulled me back against him. “The best of all of us.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Elia

Svetlana smiled as she forced Aleksey to his knees, blood running from Aleksey's temple where he had been struck. "I don't want to hear you beg, pretty bitch. I want to hear you tell me what you will give me in exchange for dear Aleks's life."

"No," Aleksey said hoarsely, his eyes meeting mine. "Don't do it, Elia. Don't give her what she wants. She won't let me go."

"Please don't," I cried, attempting to get closer to him, but something or someone was holding me back.

Svetlana pressed the gun to Aleksey's temple. "Say it, pretty bitch. I want to hear it out of your mouth."

"I will give you our baby!" I shouted in spite of myself. "Just don't kill him. Please don't take him from me!"

"That wasn't so hard, now, was it?" A smirk crossed Svetlana's face.

"I did what you wanted," I said, my voice catching. "Give me my husband and you will never see us again." We would run, leave it all behind.

"Elia." Aleksey looked at me, hurt and betrayal written in his face. "Why would you do that?"

"I had to," I said to him. "It's the only way I can save you!"

*“But our child?” he asked, his voice heavy with emotion.
“How can you give her our child?”*

*“Because I can’t lose you, Aleksey,” I replied, tears clouding
my vision.*

*Somewhere in the distance, I heard a baby crying. The sound
tugged at my heartstrings. Please forgive me, I begged silently.*

*“How sentimental,” Svetlana interrupted us, never taking the
gun away from Aleksey’s temple. “But it’s too late.”*

*I shrieked as she pulled the trigger. The deafening roar of the
gun echoed in my ears as Aleksey’s beautiful face split open
and fell over, unmoving. Our baby cried, but I couldn’t see
him. The pain in my heart was overwhelming. I fought against
whatever or whoever held me back until I finally succeeded.
Rushing to his side, I knelt down by his body, trying
desperately to put the pieces of his skull back together, all as
our baby continued to cry and scream somewhere in the
darkness.*

Gasping, I woke from the nightmare, my heart racing in my chest. The sky outside was still inky black. Sweat drenched my body, and my hand quickly shot out to the space between me and seized empty air. In a panic, I sat up, a wave of nausea washing over me. Only when the hushed whispers from Aleksey and Boris drifted in from the other side of the door did I feel my heart slowing down.

He wasn't dead. Svetlana hadn't killed him.

Placing a hand over my racing heart, I laid back down on the pillow, letting my body pull itself out of the nightmare. My hand moved to cover my belly, and I mulled over the details of my nightmare in guilt. I had been willing to hand our baby over to Svetlana in exchange for Aleksey. I bit my lower lip, but I couldn't chase the awful sound of our baby crying somewhere unseen in my dream as I handed him over to Svetlana.

"I'm sorry," I whispered as I stroked my belly. "Mommy would never do that to you. Mommy won't let anyone take you away from her."

To my own shock, I felt the baby move in response. My hand flew to my mouth as tears threatened to overwhelm me. Unable to sleep anymore, I threw back the covers and quickly dressed in a comfortable outfit.

After I brushed my teeth and pulled my hair into a high bun on top of my head, I took a deep breath and prepared myself to step out to greet Aleksey and Boris. We had to move forward if we wanted any hope of preventing my nightmare from coming true.

Berkowitz changing the terms of the deal on us was going to be a problem; that was a fact that none of us could ignore. If Berkowitz's demand was that the Tarallo Mafia stay out of New York, then the only course would be for them to reconstitute here in Chicago.

And I had a feeling that was something Chicago wouldn't tolerate, especially not after all the violence that had flared up as a result of them being here.

I reached for the door handle and paused, turning over different thoughts in my head.

There was one additional option—an unbelievably cruel and bloody one. One that I was certain none of us would be willing to accept. But it was simple. Brutally so, in fact:

Have them kill each other and let the remaining ones be taken in by Chicago PD.

No, I told myself as soon as the thought even emerged in my head. This was the monster inside of me speaking. It hungered for more blood, and with each passing day, it nibbled at the edge of my thoughts and fed off my own desire to keep myself and my little family safe.

But why not? the monster purred. *These men were willing to kill your husband. How do you know they aren't still planning on killing him? How else can you get what you want if you aren't willing to do what is necessary?*

NO! I shot back silently. *I won't send men to their deaths senselessly. I don't want more bloodshed than what's necessary!*

This is necessary, foolish girl! the monster snarled. *Do you think you can reason your way out of this? How do you think these men will react if you tell them that they can no longer go home to New York? They'll want something in exchange for their blood, and there's nothing you can offer them but this city.*

“You’re wrong,” I whispered to the monster. “There’s always something else.”

The monster snarled but said nothing. I steadied my breath. Aleksey was right. The execution had changed me, and it was harder and harder for me to keep the darkness at bay.

I found Aleksey talking on the balcony with Boris when I stepped into the living room. I stood there in the living room for a few minutes, watching the two of them talk. Through the glass, he turned and met my gaze. I pushed open the door and stepped outside, wrapping my arms around my waist.

“You should be asleep,” he said.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I told him. “And we need to talk about what to do next.” I looked at Boris as well. “All of us.”

“Let’s step inside. It’s cold out,” he stated, the wind rustling his hair.

I swallowed. “All right.”

Once we were inside, Aleksey immediately turned to me. “So, Borya and I have a plan.”

“Not a very original one, mind you.” Boris shrugged. “But it’s one that should work.”

“A reckless head-on fight against the Bogatyr and the Korolev traitors?” I guessed.

Aleksey nodded. I pursed my lips, feeling the monster stirring to life inside of me. *I told you, foolish girl.*

“That’s what Svetlana and Gregor want us to do,” I reminded both of them. “They expect us to hit them head on, and I’m sure they have some hidden contingency in place for exactly that scenario.”

“What contingency could they possibly have?” Aleksey asked. “They don’t have the numbers against a determined assault.”

“They have your lawyer,” I said. “What was his name again?”

“Matvei Glazov,” he replied.

“If there’s one thing I know from my friendship with Lana,” I said. “It’s that lawyers are the most useful weapons in your arsenal. And I understand the desire to just go full scorched earth against Svetlana and Gregor, but how would that be different from what is already happening? This war can’t keep escalating. Do I have to remind you that the FBI is involved?”

“FBI?” Aleksey turned to me suddenly. “What are you talking about?”

“Lana didn’t tell you?” I looked at him, incredulous at his ignorance.

“No,” he replied. “I was under the impression that she was here to do Berkowitz’s bidding.”

I sank into my seat as the world spun. He didn’t know ... God help me, Aleksey didn’t know that the FBI was involved. I just assumed that he had already gotten that information from Lana when they started working together!

“Aleksey,” I said slowly. “When Lana took me with her from the safe house, she told me that everything between the New York DA and the Chicago DA was being coordinated by the FBI. She told me that there could even be terrorism charges for you if they found any links between the Korolev Bratva and Russia.”

The fight seeped out of Aleksey as I spoke. I could see the walls closing in around him.

“When were you planning on telling me?” he asked softly, the hurt was unmistakable in his voice.

“I thought you already knew ...”

He flashed me a look, and I felt myself recoiling from the intensity that briefly passed through his eyes. There wasn’t just hurt in his eyes. There was also betrayal. And as much as I felt my own indignation at his accusatory gaze, I knew that there was some justification for it.

But then again, it wasn’t like we had had much time for any frank conversations since we were reunited at the hospital. We had lurched from one crisis to another. There had hardly been enough time for us to catch our collective breaths.

“Well,” Boris broke the uncomfortable silence that descended. “That certainly changes the calculus of things. Do our new friends in the—and I cannot believe I’m saying this—Tarallo Mafia know about the FBI being involved?”

“No,” Aleksey breathed. “Apparently my wife is very good at keeping secrets.”

Resentment flared through me and I wanted to say something back, but I didn’t. This was no time for us to snipe at each other like this.

“This changes everything,” I said, my mind turning slowly. “It means that Gregor and Svetlana are only secondary threats. Glazov is the main threat. He can make a deal with the FBI with everything that he knows, especially once Gregor and Svetlana fill him in on any missing gaps he might have.”

“So we need to silence Glazov,” Aleksey said pointedly.

“No.” I shook my head. “Silencing him would do us no good at this point and only strengthen whatever case the FBI might have against you. We need to discredit him. He can’t be seen as someone who is reliable or acting in good faith. We need to show that he’s still actively involved in everything that the Korolev Bratva is doing.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Aleksey replied.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“In the warehouse,” Aleksey said. “Gregor told me that Glazov was going to draw up new documents once I’m dead. That he and Svetlana will inherit everything that belongs to the Korolev Bratva.”

Boris swore in a rapid string of Russian. “That bastard really thinks he can just steal everything *we* built together?”

But an idea was taking shape in my head. An idea that could give us everything we were looking for. I grabbed Aleksey’s hand and gave it an excited squeeze.

“That’s it!” I exclaimed. “That’s our solution!”

“What?” Boris and Aleksey said simultaneously. They stared at me like I was out of my mind.

“If Gregor was telling you the truth,” I said, breathless as the idea crystallized. “Then that means neither he nor Svetlana nor Glazov are aware of the FBI-led investigation. Which means if they go through with stealing the Korolev Bratva from under you, then when the FBI moves in to shut it all down, it’ll be *them* who takes the fall. With a paper trail to prove it!”

“No.” Aleksey shook his head, his voice hard as ice. “I won’t do that.”

I felt my excitement fade at his rejection. “Why not? This is a chance for us to use the law to our advantage for a chance. Work with it and not against it. We can’t fight the FBI, Aleksey, you know that as well as I do!”

“Elia Ludovicovna has a point.” Boris said quietly. “No one can fight the FBI. And if Glazov isn’t aware of their involvement, then that’s a potential weakness we might be able to exploit.”

“That’s not the point!” Aleksey snarled at him.

“Then tell me why you won’t even consider this!” I demanded.

“Because it’s too risky!” Aleksey finally replied.

“And your plan of going head to head against Svetlana and Gregor isn’t?” I shook my head even more. “I want to protect us. I want us to be safe. That’s all that matters. And this plan could work!”

“There are too many moving parts!” He took a step toward me, but I stood my ground.

“For starters,” he said. “We have to allow the Bogatyr and Gregor to do whatever they want in this city. We have to believe that they aren’t aware of the FBI closing in on all of us. And finally, we have to rely on Lana Keller negotiating in good faith through Berkowitz to give us the amnesty we need when it’s all over.”

“And how do you think your father’s men will react to me telling them that our plan is to do nothing after everything the Bogatyr and Gregor have done to us?” He looked at me, eyes heavy with emotions.

“It’s not up to *you* to tell them!” I shouted, feeling anger coursing through me. “It’s up to me! I rallied those men for

you! I killed for you! Don't you *dare* tell me what I can and cannot tell them!"

"You sound just like her." Aleksey shook his head. "Almost word for word."

"How dare you, Aleksey Korolev." I narrowed my eyes and forced the words out through gritted teeth even as I felt myself crumbling inward at his accusation. He wasn't wrong. It was exactly what Svetlana had said to him in the hospital after she kissed him on the cheek.

But to hear him say it and use it as a weapon against me...

It felt almost unforgivable.

"I need to take the fight directly to the Bogatyr, alongside your father's men," he said, voice hoarse as he tried to keep his emotions in check. "Because if I don't, then you will have put blood on your hands for nothing."

"Aleksey." I shuddered as tears sparkled in my eyes. "That's not true."

"You just said so yourself." He blew out a breath. "You killed for me. I let those men force you to tarnish your soul for me. And I will not squander their allegiance to you."

"And if I order them to stand back while you and Boris carry out this foolish plan of yours?" I crossed my arms. "What then?"

“Then you’ll have our child,” he said. “The child who is going to be the best part of me.”

He’s talking like he’s going to die, I thought in a panic. He was all I had in this world, and I wasn’t going to let him sacrifice himself for me or our child.

“You would rather leave me alone in this world without you,” I whispered, “than to have hope in a better way?”

Tears fell onto my cheeks, and he reached up to brush them away with his thumb.

“I’m sorry.” He reached for me and drew me against his chest. “Had you told me about the FBI being involved from the moment I got you back, this might have worked. But now?”

“I need you, Aleksey.” I leaned into his chest, listening to his heart thunder against my ear. I wanted nothing more than to put the two of us in a bubble and forget that everyone else existed. “Please don’t do this to me.”

He drew in a ragged breath. “But what if this plan of yours doesn’t work?”

“We aren’t going to think that way right now.” I reached up and tightened my arms around him, hanging on for dear life. “And you’re going to have to trust me.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Aleksey

I lied awake in bed, staring at the ceiling above me as the sun started to filter through the windows. Elia was curled up at my side, still sound asleep. That was why I hadn't gotten up, even though I'd been awake for hours.

I didn't want to spoil the sleep that she was getting.

She shifted slightly, lips moving soundlessly in her sleep. I brushed my lips over her temple, my hand resting on the curve of her stomach that seemed to grow bigger every single day. Each time my hand moved over the place where our child was growing, I felt an overwhelming need to keep her away from the violence that threatened to overwhelm the walls that surrounded us.

It was deeper than that, so much deeper.

Yesterday's argument had left me shaken. In some way, it felt like we had made real progress about what we could do. But at the same time, it also felt like we were about to take a massive step backward. A sense of unease remained, like an itch that was deep under the skin that demanded relief but could not be reached.

The truth was, I knew that Elia was right about her suggestion. What better way to defeat the Bogatyr and her newfound allies than to use the law against them? But to do that was to go against every instinct of my being. The Korolev Bratva didn't need to take revenge.

I did.

That was the unpalatable reality that kept me awake for hours. I needed to avenge my family, because the bloody cycle of honor and violence demanded it. I'd spent my entire life under the axiom that violence was negotiations by other means. And when the only tool I had was a hammer, everything looked like a nail.

But Elia was different. She'd spent the entirety of her life knowing that violence *wasn't* the only option available to her. And without violence, she was forced to find alternative means to exert her will. There was terrifying power in that, which touched on the heart of the unease that I was feeling.

If we went down this path, if we rejected the violence that I was so familiar with, then who truly held the power in our relationship?

It would be shared, my brain instinctively told me. But the very thought that I might have to cede power to someone else—even if that someone was my wife, my love, the mother of my child—was anathema to the monster in my heart.

I wanted Elia to be safe, and I wanted it to be because *I* was the one that made it so.

It was a terribly selfish position, and I knew it. Yet I couldn't back down from it, because admitting it meant that I would first have to admit that I was helpless and needed others.

Don't be afraid to walk away from a life of bloodshed and violence. Mother's voice haunted me from the depths of my broken heart. *Don't become the monster that your father was.*

Instinctively, I shifted closer to Elia and savored the warmth rolling off her body.

She stirred, and I glanced down just in time to catch her eyes slowly fluttering open to meet mine.

“Good morning,” she said sleepily, a soft smile crossing her face.

I breathed in the intoxicating scent of her hair that was so uniquely hers, temporarily losing myself in the moment of just being next to her.

“Good morning. How do you feel this morning? Any sickness?”

“A little.” She stretched. “But nothing I can’t handle. What time is it?”

“A little after seven,” I answered.

Elia yawned and tried to slide away from me, but I held her tight, not wanting to let her go. I wanted to hold her for just a little longer. Because as long as I held onto her in our bed, whatever fresh hell awaited us today didn’t exist.

“Not yet,” I forced out, slipping my hand into hers as I kissed her shoulder gently. “Just a few more minutes.”

“Hmm,” she hummed softly, relaxing against me once more and pressing her hand to my bare chest. “We can’t stay here

forever, Aleksey.”

But I wanted to. If I had a choice, I’d stay with her like this until the end of time.

“Let’s just forget everything else,” I said. “For just a little bit longer. Please?”

She had changed me. There was no denying it. With her, I had become someone I never would’ve imagined myself becoming. She made me whole. She made me care. But above all else, she made me *feel*.

Elia turned her eyes toward me, worry creeping into them. “What’s wrong?” She pressed her hand to my bare chest.

My heart raced in response to her gentle touch. There was so much that I wanted to tell her. So much I wanted to admit. But I couldn’t. Because the moment I said those things, then I risked losing her. And if I lost her, then my life would fall back into the empty black hole of the past.

And I couldn’t fathom what that would mean.

She pushed herself up until she was sitting on the bed. “You’re still thinking about the plan I mentioned last night, aren’t you?”

I mirrored her action, our hands still intertwined. “Among other things.”

She wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me over until our foreheads touched. “I thought we were partners, Aleksey.”

“We are,” I replied. After our argument yesterday, I didn’t want to fight with her.

Elia blew out a breath, her fingers brushing the hair at the nape of my neck. “Then you know you can talk to me about whatever is on your mind. You brought up good points about all the ways my plan could go wrong, but I think there’s a kernel of a good idea there. It’ll be one that our enemies won’t see coming.”

“You have a lot of faith,” I said.

“In our way of life,” she answered, “what else do we have but faith?”

She drew me in for a kiss and I let myself give in to her. She wasn’t wrong. She was never wrong. And as I felt her deepen the kiss between us, I hoped that she could still keep that faith for the days to come. I hoped that she had enough faith for both of us. Because right now, faith was the one thing I had precious little of after Alya’s death.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Aleksey

I pressed my hand to Elia's lower back as I escorted her into the room where Carlos and the Tarallos were awaiting us. Boris followed dutifully behind, along with a few of my loyal brigadiers. Their presence gave me a welcome sense of normality that I so desperately needed.

Elia nodded at Carlos and the rest of the men in the room as soon as we entered, and they bowed their heads in respect. I kept my expression stony and inscrutable as I took my place behind the chair that she sat in.

My men fanned out behind us.

"There is something that all of you need to know," Elia started out, her voice soft but laced with steel. "Something that I should've informed you all of when you pledged yourselves to me."

"We're prepared to take the fight to the Bogatyr and the Korolev traitors on your command," Carlos said. "Just say the word."

A murmur of agreement rustled through the room like water gurgling in a flowing stream. Elia let out a small breath as she prepared her words.

"We cannot strike just yet," she answered, resting her hands in her lap. "Because the FBI is currently involved in this war."

Those words sucked all the energy out of the room, and crushing silence took over. A chair creaked and someone cleared his throat quietly. My heartbeat pounded in my ears like a steady drum. Finally, one of the Tarallo men who had participated in the assault on the warehouse folded his hands and leaned forward.

“How do you know?” he asked.

He did his best to keep his voice steady, but I could feel the hint of desperation that bled into the edges of his words.

“Lana Keller told me when she tried to arrest me,” Elia replied. “Shortly before Sve—the Bogatyr—kidnapped me. The FBI is coordinating with both the New York and Chicago DA office to slip a noose around all our necks.”

The look on Carlos’s face was murderous as he turned to me. “Did you know about this?”

“No,” I replied. “Keller failed to disclose that to me, and it wasn’t until last night that I learned of this myself.”

“So, we’re all fucked, aren’t we?” someone remarked.

“Not necessarily.” Elia stood. “There is another way.”

“What other way could there be?” Carlos wiped his forehead. “Fighting the FBI is an elaborate form of suicide.”

“Which is why we’re not going to fight them,” Elia replied. “We’re going to side with them.”

Carlos laughed. “Forgive me, Mrs. Korolev, but every man here has done enough to have a personal file. If not with the FBI, then with our respective cities’ police departments. There’s no way that any of us would side with them, even if we wanted to.”

“I’m not working with the fucking Feds,” someone else spoke up. “No fucking way.”

“This isn’t what we had in mind when we said we pledged ourselves to you!” another man rose up and pointed a finger like a dagger at Elia.

And with a single accusation, a floodgate opened. Men rose up from their seats and started shouting. Some at each other, others at my brigadiers, and still others at Elia.

“Enough!” Elia’s sharp tone cut through the din and slowly, order returned to the room. She was standing now, her eyes flashing in anger. “This is ridiculous!”

Boris eyed me, but he kept silent. A small smirk was slowly forming as he watched Elia’s presence demand every man’s attention in the room.

“Nothing will come of this,” Elia replied as the Tarallo men sat down, one by one, “if you continue to argue without listening. Not when the Bogatyr and her allies are trying to wipe us off the map. And not when the FBI and law enforcement are planning to do the same!”

“But—” Carlos started.

Elia held up her hand and they all obeyed. I felt my own lips curl into a smile at how easily—how naturally—she cowed them all. Power was something she wore well. Pride surged through my heart as I watched her. My brilliant, beautiful wife. The one that everyone—myself included at one point—underestimated.

“I have a solution that will move the FBI in our favor without explicitly seeking their help.” She stared at each man in the room, daring them to say something to her.

Some of the men shifted uncomfortably in their seats, but Elia wasn't done.

“Your way has failed. Now it's time to try mine,” she said. “Aleksey told me that Matvei Glazov, the lawyer for the Korolev Bratva, plans on engineering a legal coup of all of the Bratva's assets.”

A murmur rose up among my brigadiers.

“This is the first step in how we will turn the FBI in our favor,” she continued. “Aleksey's brigadiers will vouch for what I'm about to say. A deal has been struck between my husband and Lana Keller of the New York DA's office.”

“Fuck that bitch!” somebody shouted, but there was no one who joined in. Not when they all saw the look in Elia's eyes.

“Are you finished?” she asked, her voice deadly quiet.

There was no response. Boris smothered a laugh as I inwardly grinned. She was amazing. And as much as I didn't want her to be in this situation, Elia clearly was in her element. This was where she belonged—where she was destined to be.

“So, I'll let Aleksey go over the details of the deal he struck with Lana.” She turned to me and, for a moment, I felt like I was intruding. This was her moment, yet she wasn't afraid of stepping aside to share her power with me.

“Elia is right.” I cleared my throat. “I did agree to a deal with the New York DA. The deal was simple; they would reclassify my role within the Korolev Bratva as their inside man. In exchange, she gave me the contact information of Mark Schubert, the Tarallo lawyer who got all of you to show up here. But that deal means we have a direct line to the New York DA.”

“However, there's a bit of a problem.” Elia took over again. “Berkowitz is altering the deal. He wants to make sure that the Tarallo Mafia never returns to New York.”

“Then what about our deal?” Carlos asked, his voice iron hard. “You promised us that when this was all over, we could go back to New York as kings. Now you're telling us that we're not going back?”

“Not for the moment,” Elia rebutted. “But look around you. Both sides have suffered heavily in this war. You know as well as I do that if you go back to New York, you'll be swallowed up by some other organization. Is that what you want?”

“No,” Carlos finally said, clearing his throat.

“I didn’t think so,” she replied.

“So what are you proposing now?” Carlos asked, his face slightly reddened by the dressing down he had gotten.

I crossed my arms over my chest. I was also curious to know what she was about to tell us. Elia had shared many things with me, but nothing of this grand plan of hers. All she had said was that I should trust her.

“I am proposing that when this is all over,” she started. “The Tarallo Mafia and Korolev Bratva are officially dissolved. And in their place comes a new organization. A fresh start, so to speak. The FBI will most likely use the RICO Act to go after all of the legal Korolev assets. And if Berkowitz is providing his assistance, that means all of the legal Tarallo assets are at risk as well. Everything that you have spent years working for is about to be seized, one way or the other.”

“But organized crime is much more than legal assets, isn’t it?” she asked the room. “It’s your personal connections that you’ve cultivated over the years. Favors promised and owed. And above all else, your reputations. Right now, the Tarallo Mafia has carved an impressive reputation in this city. One that smaller opportunistic groups are not likely to rise and challenge, not after what you’ve done to much of the Korolev Bratva.”

“Damn right!”

“And it is the Korolev brigadiers that local criminals know and fear.” She turned to my loyal men. “Not just the Korolev name. Together, neither of you need the legacies of the past. The Tarallos have found a new home here in Chicago, as I

have. And the Korolevs have found themselves a powerful new ally, as my husband has.”

I held my breath as I slowly pieced together where she was going with this. I wanted to say something but held myself back. Anything that I said now would only undermine her authority. And besides, it wouldn't do anything for our situation. Better for me to wait until a better time, a more suitable time, before I asked her true intentions.

“And all of this is predicated on a single thing.” She smiled sweetly. “That the Bogatyr and her allies steal the Korolev Bratva upon Aleksey's death. Real or not.”

“My proposal is this,” Elia said. “We maintain a low level of conflict so that the Bogatyr will continue her attacks, but continue to give ground. This will make her reckless, and it will only draw more attention from the FBI and Chicago PD at the same time.”

Elia paused for dissent and was greeted by rapt attention.

“In the meantime,” she continued. “We start leaking out the location of where Aleksey and I are going to be. We pass all of this information to Lana Keller. This way, law enforcement can move to intercept and round up the entirety of the Korolev traitors all at once. And if Glazov has done what the Bogatyr and her allies want him to do, we can then hand in all of the evidence they need to put them away for life.”

“And once they're in prison, with nowhere else to run ...” Her expression darkened. “*That's* when we silence them for good.”

Elia stood a bit taller. For a second, I saw flashes of the charisma and magnetism of her brother, as well as the dark, brooding calculations of her father.

“Give ground and feign weakness when we hold all the cards.” Carlos let out a low whistle in response. “I got to hand it to you, Mrs. Korolev. It’s a hell of a plan.”

I couldn’t agree more.

“So,” Elia said, hands on her hips. “Are we in?”

“Fuck it.” Carlos laughed. “I’m in.”

“Good.” She drew in a breath, glancing at me, relief dancing in her eyes at the agreement that rose up from each man. “We will need help from everyone. Who is willing to head up each side?”

“I will, Elia Ludovicovna.” Boris stepped forward, nodding to her. “Don’t even think about leaving me out of this fight.”

“As will I, Mrs. Korolev.” Carlos stepped forward, placing his fist over his heart.

“Remember,” I added, looking at the two of them. “This is the start of an official alliance. So do your best not to murder each other.”

“Yes,” Elia said softly, sliding her hand in mine. “We either work together on this or we *all* end up sharing a prison cell. Understood?”

“Understood.” Carlos nodded. “And what will you do, Mrs. Korolev?”

“Me?” she answered, squeezing my hand. “I’m going to call Lana Keller.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Elia

I didn't breathe until we were on our way back to the penthouse, my insides one big screwy mess. I thought that this whole leader thing would get easier, but now I didn't know if I wanted to laugh or cry or puke.

Maybe all three at once. That would have the same feeling of release.

Aleksey sat next to me, quiet ever since we left from the meeting. I didn't know what he was thinking about, or how he felt about my plan. I had expected more pushback than I received, and it shocked me how quickly everyone agreed to it.

I supposed desperate times really did require desperate measures.

We were running out of options quickly, and we needed to be one step ahead of the Bogatyr. She'd been able to predict our moves and outmaneuver us at almost every turn.

But she wouldn't see this coming at all.

"That was impressive," Aleksey finally said as the car weaved its way through traffic. "You know that, right?"

I swallowed the pride ballooning in my chest at his encouragement and kept my eyes focused on the back of the seat in front of me.

“Well, getting them all to accept the plan was the easy part,” I replied. “But putting it into action is going to be much more difficult. It’s one thing to *say* that we’ll continue to give ground, but it’s another thing to see it through.”

“Because you’re sending men to their deaths,” I added. “And they know it.”

“Exactly.” She nodded grimly. “The more I think about it, the crueler it seems.”

Aleksey took my hand, flooding my cold fingers with his warmth. “This is what it means to lead. You must care about your men, but you must also be ruthless when the situation demands it.”

“Luca told me that,” she muttered. “Not in those exact words, but with the same intention.”

“He taught you well.” His hand found mine and he laced our fingers together. “You were brilliant back there.”

My face warmed. “You are making me blush.”

“It’s the truth.” Aleksey brought our joined hands to his lips and pressed them to my hand. “This alliance couldn’t have happened without you, Elia. You were magnificent. Don’t ever forget that.”

A thrill shot through me at his words. Aleksey had likely been in meetings with the strongest men in both New York and Chicago, yet he was letting me know that I had held my own.

Not only that, he was willing to publicly yield to me without prompting. It felt like for the first time since he'd slipped his ring on my finger, we were truly equals.

We were partners.

And he had no idea how happy that thought made me.

“About Lana,” he started, placing our joined hands on his strong thigh. “How do you know she’ll accept this offer?”

“I don’t,” I answered truthfully. “But it doesn’t hurt to try.”

The thing was, Lana would know that this would be the ideal outcome. Berkowitz would get what he wanted. She would save her career. *And I will get what I want*, I thought, my heart suddenly racing at the thought.

That was something I hadn’t brought up to Aleksey yet, even though I suspected he had an inkling of it. If the Bogatyr and her allies thought we were dead, then this was the one chance we had to leave this life for good.

But somehow, I felt that if I were to tell him outright, he would reject it.

Aleksey looked at me pointedly, and for a moment, I wanted him to ask that question of what would happen once this was all over. But instead, he gave my hand a gentle squeeze and remained silent as we went home.

After we arrived home, Aleksey cloistered himself on the balcony and I walked into the bedroom, stripping my clothing for a long, hot shower. When I pulled open the drawer to the vanity in the bathroom, I saw my brother's demon-faced pin. Slowly, I reached for it and held it in the palm of my hand.

"They listened, Luca," I whispered to the pin. "They listened to me. God, how I wish you were here to poke holes in my plan."

But the demon-faced pin just grinned at me in silence. Sighing, I placed it back into the drawer and stepped into the shower. Warm water slid over my bare skin and I turned to face the warm stream. Sooner or later, I had to call Lana. Sooner or later, I would need to tell Aleksey of the hidden part of my plan. Both tasks felt so simple. Yet now that I was on the verge of doing both, they felt insurmountably large.

Tarallos are made of stronger stuff.

As warm water rolled down my body, my mind turned back to the meeting, to my own words. I remembered the way my final intention against the Bogatyr and her allies had come so effortlessly near the end.

Once they're in prison, with nowhere else to run, that's when we silence them for good.

I didn't plan on saying that; the words just fell out of my lips, driven by the thrill thrumming through me as everyone's eyes were trained on me. I shuddered at how *good* I felt saying those words. There was power behind them, and I *liked* that power.

Water continued to cascade down my body, and the weight of what I was trying to do pressed down as well.

My chest caved as I mulled over those words. Aleksey was right. I was changing. The monster in me demanded its share of blood and violence. I closed my eyes and pressed my face into the water, and for a moment, I imagined myself pressing the gun against the Bogatyr's head. For a moment, I imagined myself pulling the trigger.

The monster in me purred at the thought, and a dark, twisted pleasure snaked its way through my body.

My eyes flew open and I took a trembling step away from the shower, my heart pounding in my throat.

Tears burned in my eyes as I picked up the loofah and soap, working up a lather. I had spent my entire life wishing that I was never born into this violent world, and wishing that I could escape it. I had gone so far as to dream that I was adopted and that I didn't actually belong to my father.

But in recent days, every feeling that passed through me was a mocking reminder that I was 100 hundred percent the daughter of Ludovico Tarallo.

Cruel. Vicious. Heartless.

The monster extended its tendrils inside of me, and I could feel the girl that had been Elia Tarallo screaming helplessly at its advance. But there was nothing that I could do to stop it. A

coldness settled deep inside of my core, and nothing—not even the hot water—could chase the feeling away.

It frightened me.

Quickly I turned the water off, feeling the cool air echo the coldness I felt inside as I stepped out.

When I opened the door to our bedroom, I found Aleksey waiting for me. My entire body flushed at his intense gaze and I instinctively clutched the towel tighter, even though all I wanted was his hands on my body.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“I am,” I said slowly.

He reached up and handed me my phone. “Then do the honors, Mrs. Korolev.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Aleksey

One day later

“Elia,” Lana nodded as soon as she stepped through the elevator doors to the penthouse. Her eyes turned to me and softened slightly. “Aleksey.” She took a breath. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

I nodded, accepting her condolences, but nothing more than that.

Last night, Elia had called Lana and explained that she had a plan for how everything could proceed in a way that was acceptable to Berkowitz, and she told Lana that any further details would have to be discussed in person.

To my surprise, Lana had agreed to those terms, and now she was here.

I had Boris and Carlos check the surroundings for anyone who might look like they were law enforcement, just in case. But so far, it looked as if Lana was being true to her word. She had come alone, and she had come with an open mind.

At least for now.

“Lana,” Elia said, offering a chair for her. “I’m glad you came.”

“You didn’t exactly give me much of a choice, El,” Lana replied. “What’s this plan of yours that’ll get everyone what

they want?”

“First things first,” I said. “Lift up your shirt.”

“Excuse me?” she scoffed.

“I need to make sure you’re not wearing a wire,” I said.

“Aleksey,” Elia reached out. “We don’t need to do that.”

“Yeah, we do,” I retorted. “I haven’t forgotten who she is and what she represents. And since she was kind enough to not let me know that her boss was taking orders from the FBI when we started working together, I have a hard time trusting her right now.”

“Fine.” Lana rolled her eyes as she lifted up her shirt and did a full turn in front of both of us. “Get a good look? Is that what you wanted?”

“And your phone.” I ignored her jab and extended my hand.

She muttered something under her breath but complied. I turned it off, and then, for good measure, threw it into the fridge.

“Now we can talk,” I said, and nodded at Elia.

Without waiting any longer, Elia immediately started laying out the details of everything that she had said at the meeting between the two organizations. She kept out details about the

alliance, of course, and focused primarily on how law enforcement and the FBI would move in against the Bogatyr and the Korolev Bratva once it had been stolen out from under me. Lana listened with the same rapt attention as the men had. Occasionally, she would ask a question, but otherwise, she remained silent. When Elia finished, Lana blew out a breath.

“Well, that’s certainly a plan,” she said. “With a lot of parts that can go wrong. And a lot of assumptions. I won’t lie to you, El. When you told me you needed to discuss this in person, I didn’t think it’d be about something like this. This is one hell of a mess you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“I know,” Elia agreed. “But it’s the best course of action, given everything else that’s happened. This is the only thing I can think of that won’t drown Chicago in a river of blood.”

“Just one question,” Lana started. “How exactly does Glazov plan to take control of the Korolev Bratva?”

“When I die, of course,” I answered lightly, flicking a piece of lint off my sleeve.

Lana let out a harsh laugh. “Somehow I doubt it’s going to be as easy as that. You have an uncanny ability to survive even the worst possible things, Aleksey.”

“You’re hiding something from me, aren’t you?” She turned her attention back to Elia. “Because in all of this, I fail to see what happens to the one thing that *my* boss is concerned about. His one demand before he even considers the possibility of providing the two of you amnesty.”

“The Tarallo Mafia,” Elia said.

“Exactly.” Lana leaned forward. “What’s going to happen to them?”

“They’re not going back to New York,” Elia replied. “I have their word.”

“Their word.” Lana scoffed. “And you trust their word? I know you were born into this life, Elia, with the idea that there might exist some form of honor among thieves. But I’ve seen the ugly side of reality when it comes to criminals and their word. They’ll break their promises the moment they think it’s advantageous to do so. I’m going to need something more concrete than that.”

“I—” Elia started, her hand tightening on my arm.

I cast her a quick, furtive glance and she stopped herself. I knew what she was about to say, and if she said it, then there was no way that Lana would *ever* agree to a deal with us.

“You what?” Lana narrowed her eyes. “Talk to me, Elia.”

“I made them swear an oath,” she lied. “To the memory of my brother and father.”

I held my breath and kept my eyes trained on Lana, searching her face for a reaction. To her credit, Lana also did her best to keep her expression neutral.

“You’re lying,” Lana finally said, sighing. “I know you, and I know when you’re not telling me the truth.”

“If I tell you the truth,” Elia whispered. “You have to promise that this doesn’t go on the record.”

“Elia, no!” I said. “You can’t trust that she’ll honor that promise!”

“This is her decision to make, Aleksey!” Lana scowled. “Not yours.”

“Lana,” Elia said calmly, ignoring me. “Promise me that this doesn’t go on the record. Promise me that this won’t change your mind or affect everything else that we’re going to discuss.”

Lana took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “I promise, girl. Now tell me how you know the Tarallo Mafia won’t just return to New York when this is all over.”

“Because I made them swear their loyalty to me,” Elia said. “And I ordered them to stay.”

Lana’s jaw dropped. Her lower lip quivered as she searched for the right words. When she found nothing, she looked past Elia at me, disgust rising in her features.

“This was your idea, wasn’t it?” she hissed. “You should be in handcuffs for everything you’ve done to her.”

“And what exactly would putting me in handcuffs accomplish at this point, Keller?” I asked her.

“Nothing.” She shook her head. “But it’d make me feel better.”

I couldn’t help but smirk at her answer.

“What do you mean, you made them swear their loyalty to you?” She turned her attention back to Elia.

“I’m the last Tarallo,” Elia replied. “Heir to all my father left behind. Including his men.”

“Your father’s assets are going to be seized,” Lana said, her voice rising with every word. “And his men arrested. Why would you do this to yourself, Elia? I can’t argue amnesty for you if you’re now the *head* of the Tarallo Mafia!”

“But I’m not going to be the head of the Tarallo Mafia, just like Aleksey won’t be the head of the Korolev Bratva when this is all over.”

I looked at her. This was it. This was what I wanted to question, but couldn’t bring myself to ask. I wanted to hear her explain this final hidden plan that she couldn’t explain in front of the men. In some ways, I already knew what she would say. But I still wanted to hear the words for myself.

“What are you talking about?” Lana asked. “Do you think these men will just let you walk away?”

“Svet—the Bogatyr is not going to stop.” Elia shook her head sadly. “She and Glazov, and the monsters who pledged themselves to her, are already working to carve up this city in their image.”

Elia continued. “From everything that you’ve told me, I’m guessing that Berkowitz’s involvement was never targeted at the Tarallo Mafia. Everything was always directed at the Korolev Bratva. Tell me I’m wrong, Lana.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“Aleksey and I are handing you that victory.” Elia nodded. “All I ask is that you help give us an exit.”

“You’re just replacing the Korolevs with the Tarallos in Chicago,” Lana pointed out. “How is that an improvement?”

“For forty-five years, the Korolev Bratva defied Chicago,” Elia explained. “For just as long, my father defied New York. As long as society exists, so will organized crime. You can’t destroy it. You can only manage it.”

“I don’t know what happened in the time that I was gone, but you’ve changed, Elia,” Lana replied. “The Elia I knew would’ve never said this.”

“The Elia that you knew is nearly gone,” she replied sadly. “But you can save what’s left.”

I felt my own heart seize up at those words. *Svetlana is dead.* Those words reverberated like a siren in my head.

“Lana.” Elia took her friend’s hand. “Berkowitz of all people should know what happens when you create a power vacuum in organized crime. When Felix Cardona and the Citta Nostra were shattered overnight, New York turned itself inside out.

You do the same with the Korolev Bratva without a designated successor, and you'll only cause the same mayhem.”

“She’s right,” I interjected as I remembered what the nurse from the ICU told me when I visited Boris. The one who looked at the tattoos on my hand with hatred in his eyes and told me about his cousin. “You dismantle the Korolev Bratva and some other asshole is just going to step in and fill our shoes. How it happens is up to you. You can either do this cleanly, with a designated successor organization, or you can let chaos reign until someone picks up the bloody crown from a mountain of corpses.”

Lana stared at us, her chest rising and falling as her breath quickened. She knew that we were right. She just wasn’t ready to admit it yet.

“I know you have nothing but good intentions.” I decided to twist the knife. “But the road to hell is paved with good intentions. You see us in black and white terms, good and evil. But we exist in a world tinted in different shades of gray. You tell your boss that the Tarallos will never return to New York, that we will hand you everything you need to know about how to take down the Korolev Bratva, and you let there be a successor so that nobody is fighting for it.”

“This is the cleanest option, Lana.” Elia’s free hand found its way to mine. “It’s not the option you wanted, but it’s the cleanest option available to us.”

“What’s in it for you?” she finally asked. “What are you really driving at, Elia?”

“Amnesty.” Elia closed her eyes and took a trembling breath. “And anonymity.”

Lana inhaled sharply. “Witness protection.”

And there it is. I knew the gut punch was coming, yet the knowledge didn’t diminish its impact. I knew what it meant: I would be forced to abandon everything and everyone that I knew. I would leave Chicago behind forever. I would lose everything. My money. My influence. The very essence of who and what I was.

Deep within my heart, the ghost of Fyodor Korolev screamed for me to stop this madness before it was too late. But that voice was drowned out by the soft whispers of my mother, my sister, and my uncle. Each one of them had told me—in their own way—what was most important. And it was only through their loss that I had realized the truth: what my father wanted and what I wanted were never the same thing.

It was time to leave Fyodor Korolev’s legacy in the same place as him.

Dead in the ground. Buried forever.

I would no longer be a Korolev, but I would still have Elia. We would still have our child. And most importantly, I would finally be able to give her the life she always wanted.

A chance to be ordinary.

I squeezed Elia’s hand gingerly and then looked at Lana. “Can you do that for us?”

Lana narrowed her eyes, her mind seemingly still not ready to accept what the two of us were asking for.

“Is that what you’re really willing to do?” she asked me.
“After a lifetime of knowing nothing but this?”

I looked at Elia. Our eyes locked. And in her eyes I saw the possibilities of a whole new life and world unfolding before me. *Let’s fly away together, Elia. Just you and me.* The fires of a new resolve began to burn. Without ever looking away from my wife, I gave my answer.

I spoke to Lana, but I confessed to Elia.

“For her?” I said softly. “Anything.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Aleksey

An hour later, we had hashed out what Lana needed to tell Berkowitz, as well as what we would provide her. We escorted her down the elevator to her car waiting on the curb. Neither Carlos nor Boris looked like they had seen anyone else show up from law enforcement. That was good.

“I will be in touch,” Lana said as we walked her to the front entrance of the building. “And we will move forward.”

“Thank you, Lana,” Elia stated, opening her arms for a goodbye hug.

I watched as Lana returned the gesture. When they broke apart, she cleared her throat and turned her eyes on me. There was more than the familiar bitter hatred. For the first time, I felt like she finally saw me as a human being and not just her enemy. And for a moment, so did I.

“You are the reason for all this,” she said to me. “If it hadn’t been for you, none of this would have happened.”

“I—” I started, not sure what to say about any of it. Was this an accusation or praise? I couldn’t tell anymore. And as much as I wanted to retort that Elia and I had been forced together, I realized that it didn’t matter *how* we came together.

What mattered was having her in my life. She was the single most important thing that had happened to me. And I didn’t care whether that was what Lana meant in her parting words.

“Don’t,” Lana interrupted before I could pull my thoughts together. “Whatever you were going to say, I don’t want to hear it. I only hope that you’re happy at what you’ve done to my best friend.”

And without another word, she walked away.

“Come on,” I whispered as I took Elia by her arm. She looked like she had a few words she wanted to say too, but there wasn’t any time. Lana needed to get back to New York and explain everything to Berkowitz. And he needed time to stew over the decision before he passed a final verdict.

As soon as Lana’s car drove away, Carlos and Boris gave us a questioning look, but I waved them off. I needed this private moment with my wife.

Elia remained quiet as the elevator took us back up to the penthouse.

“How are you feeling?” I found myself asking as my fingers laced with hers and I placed a gentle kiss on her temple.

She sighed, her fingers squeezing mine. “I don’t know.”

I stared at her in surprise. “Why?” I asked carefully.

Elia looked at me, her mouth tight and unyielding. “I wasn’t lying when I told Lana that the Elia she knew was almost gone.” A hollow laughter escaped from her lips, and its very sound sent a fissure cracking through my heart. “I’m not the same person that you married.” Her entire body shuddered, as if someone or something had crawled over her very soul. Her

voice became quieter. “I’m different. And nothing can bring back the same girl you married. I don’t think she exists any longer.”

There was a finality in her words, and a dark reminder of what the Bogatyr said to me. I didn’t want to believe it. Elia was still good. She still had her good qualities, the ones that nothing, not even the blood that I had put on her hands, could take away from her.

She wasn’t a bad person. She wasn’t a monster.

She quickly wiped away a tear that had rolled down her cheek.

“But her dream still lives in you, Elia.” I squeezed her hand as I pulled her close to me. “And as long as that dream lives, then so does the woman I married.”

The elevator doors opened, and we stepped back into the familiar penthouse. I stopped her as she started down the hallway to the bedroom. “Elia.”

She turned and I placed my hands on her arms, pressing my lips to her forehead.

“I’m so fucking sorry,” I sighed. “For everything.”

“Aleksey.”

I shook my head, wrapping my arms around her small form. “No, listen to me.” I needed her to understand. “I’ve ruined your life.”

“But you also saved it,” she interrupted, clutching her hands against me. “Without you, I wouldn’t have love in my life. I wouldn’t be pregnant with a child that I can’t wait to meet. I wouldn’t be here without you. Even after everything that happened.”

After everything that happened. The words sounded so simple, so easy, but behind them was a world of meaning. My throat closed as I thought about our families. Both of us were the last of our families. We had nothing else left but each other.

So many lives lost ... And for what?

I clung to her and finally accepted that all I ever wanted was for it all to just go away. I wanted to save what was left, cherish what I had, and give both her and our baby a means to not have to worry about looking over their shoulders the rest of their lives.

Fyodor Korolev would have called me weak. But I didn’t care. I understood what truly mattered on this earth. And without Elia or the little family that we were building, I had nothing in the end.

She drew in a deep breath. “When will it all finally end?”

“Soon, my love,” I told her, hoping that I was telling the truth. “I promise, I will give you what you deserve the most. As long as we have each other, everything else will be okay.”

With her by my side, we could do anything.

“Do you mean it, Aleksey?” Elia pulled back to look me in the eye, emotions swirling in their depths. “Is that really what you’re willing to choose? A life without ...” she swept her gaze around the penthouse before her eyes found mine again. “Without all this?”

I cupped her cheek, the desperation in her voice tearing at me. “Yes,” I said. “It is.”

I brought my other hand up to frame Elia’s face, lowered my lips to hers, and gave her a soft kiss. “Today was the first real step,” I murmured. “The first real step for our future.”

She placed a kiss on the corner of my mouth. “A future that both of us want.”

She was right. I didn’t realize how much I wanted that future until today, when it seemed so close to reality. I wanted to have that ordinary life with her. I didn’t want our child to grow up like I had—forced into a life without a chance to decide for itself.

I wanted it to have a future, one that it had a say in.

But the closer that future came to becoming a reality, so did the fear that followed in lockstep with it. The fear of losing Elia. I had tried to do this once before in my life, and it had resulted in nothing but endless torment.

This time will be different, I told myself. So, I bent down and captured Elia’s mouth in a soft kiss, making sure to cover every inch of her soft lips with mine, coaxing her until she opened her mouth and gave me access. Her hands found my

sides and they remained there, holding me in place as I ravaged her mouth.

This was all that mattered. This thing between us was far more powerful than anything else in the world.

Finally, I broke the kiss, our harsh breathing mingling with each other's. "You should go and rest," I told her, reluctant to let her go.

Elia surprised me by stepping back, her hand drifting away from my side. I forced a tight smile anyway, knowing she needed her space. It was the right thing to do.

But instead of walking away, she held out her hand, a small smile on her lips. "Only if you'll come with me."

My heart skipped in my chest and warm relief flooded me. My cock swelled against my pants, eagerly rising at the prospect of joining her.

"All right." I placed my hand in hers and squeezed it gently. "Lead the way, Mrs. Korolev. And wherever you go, I will follow."

Her smile grew softer, and my heart felt like it was going to explode in my chest at the sight of it. This was what I wanted to see in her life.

This was my mission—my vow—to her.

To cherish her and protect her. To give her the happiness she deserved.

Till death did us part.

Chapter Thirty

Elia

I drew a shaky breath as I led Aleksey to the bedroom, my heart fluttering with each step. Stopping by the bed, I glanced up and found Aleksey watching me carefully.

“What?” he asked softly, his voice holding a trace of concern. “What is it, Elia?”

I shook my head, sliding my hand up to caress the back of his neck. “Nothing. I just want to keep looking at you.”

Aleksey shuddered, literally shuddered under my touch, and I stepped back, knowing what I wanted to do. I wanted to love him so that when we were done, there was no question in his heart about who and what we were.

“Take it off,” I rasped, unable to find my voice.

He arched a brow. “Take what off?”

“Everything.”

A slow smile crossed his lips and my insides quivered. “Is this what you want, Elia?” he asked in a low, sensual voice as his hands reached for his jacket.

“Slower,” I said, watching him strip off his jacket and lay it on the chair. “Make me watch.”

I doubted I would ever get over watching him, and while I felt like a frumpy pregnant woman, he was polished.

Dangerous.

Sexy.

All those things wrapped up in a nice little bow that was all mine. Aleksey was mine, and no one could take that away from me.

No one would take him away from me.

Aleksey's fingers found the buttons on his shirt and he started to unbutton it, his eyes never leaving mine. With each exposed patch of skin, I felt my mouth watering at the sight.

"You are perfect," I whispered.

He paused; his shirt gaped open to show most of his chest. "I know."

A laugh escaped me and I closed the distance between us, placing a hand in the middle of his chest. His heart pounded under my touch and I smiled, undoing the rest of the buttons so that I could push the shirt off his shoulders.

"I thought I was doing this," he murmured, his nose brushing my temple.

“I changed my mind,” I mused, allowing my hands to roam over his chest lightly. My hands slid over a deep scar carved into the groove of his shoulder. “Even your scars are perfect.”

When I pressed my lips to his scar, he shuddered. “You have suffered so much,” I whispered against his skin, moving onto the next one that ran along his ribs.

“Elia.” My name came out like a prayer. I did that to him. He begged for my touch.

I owned his body, his heart, his very soul.

Before I could drop to my knees, he caught me under my arms and pressed me up against his chest, his hand fisting into my hair. “What you do to me,” he growled, his lips pressing to my pulse. “No one can match it, and nothing can describe it. It can only be shown.”

I gasped, feeling his teeth graze across the sensitive skin. “Then show me.”

He grinned against my throat. “Are you ready?”

“Maybe,” I said as his free hand slid down my spine, sending shivers in its wake.

He ground into me, letting me feel his hard length. “This is what you do to me,” Aleksey growled, nibbling on my neck. “You make me want you at all hours of the day. You make me crave your touch.” He slid his hand under my shirt, touching my lower back. “And that’s just the start.”

I arched against his hand, urging him on to touch me more. He had no idea what he did to me. He made me feel like I was the most important person in his life. It was more than just a feeling. It was a deep-rooted conviction that Aleksey and I were perfect for each other.

“I thought I was the one taking the lead.”

“You are.” His husky laugh reverberated in his chest. “I would be lost without you.”

Aleksey released me and reached for his pants, sliding them down his hips slowly. I watched as his cock came into view, hot and heavy for me.

For me. No one else. I wasn't a jealous sort, nor had I ever coveted anything for myself before, but with Aleksey, I would do that and more.

His hand brushed over his cock and he grinned lazily. “Is this what you've been craving, Elia?”

I couldn't find the words. This was all mine for the taking.

Boldly I stepped forward and replaced his hand with mine, seeing his eyes flare in intensity. “I like it better when it's inside me.”

Aleksey grinned, bringing his hand up to cup my chin. “In time.” He rubbed his thumb over my bottom lip. “I love being inside of you. But more importantly, I love you.”

I nipped at the pad of his thumb. “I don’t think I will ever get tired of you saying that.”

“It’s the truth,” he said softly, his expression growing tender. “I ... Elia ...”

I drew in a breath, pressing my lips against his. I didn’t need to hear what was in his heart. Aleksey moved quickly with his mouth, commandeering our kiss. I got lost in his taste, winding my arms around his neck to pull him closer. His arms cradled me carefully and when he broke the kiss, I fell against his chest. “I want you,” he breathed into my ear. “I need you.”

“I need you too,” I confessed.

He pulled back, looking at my clothing. “Time to get you undressed, Mrs. Korolev.”

Gladly. I stepped back and pulled at my clothing, watching as his pupils dilated as my bare skin came into view. “You’re fucking gorgeous,” he breathed once the last bit of clothing fell away.

Embarrassed, I looked down. “I’m not so sure that this is gorgeous right now.”

His finger hooked under my chin and brought my gaze to his. “You are carrying my fucking child. There’s nothing more beautiful than that.” His lips brushed across mine and he backed me up to the bed, where Aleksey lowered me to the comforter. “Tell me.” He kissed my jaw. “What you want, love.”

I melted all over again, my hands sliding over his hard shoulders. "I want you, my heart."

He halted, pulling back so his eyes could meet mine. "That was stupid," I said immediately, my cheeks heating. "I'm sorry."

Aleksey shook his head, a small, quiet smile crossing his face. "No," he answered. "It wasn't."

His smile grew wider before his lips closed on mine and his hand drifted lower, brushing over my breast. I moaned into his mouth, goose bumps skittering across my skin. "I love your mouth," he murmured, his hand moving from my breast to my abdomen. "I love everything about your body."

His fingers brushed lower, until he was delving between my slick folds. "You are so wet."

Oh, the way he touched me! His lips moved down my body, following his hand, and before I realized it, my strong, powerful husband was kneeling between my legs. "I want to feel your wetness on my lips."

"Aleksey," I said in a strangled tone as he pushed my legs apart, revealing the very core of my body.

"Shh," he said, pressing his lips against my inner thigh, moving up toward the area that ached for him. "Let me take care of you."

So I let him, my hands clenching into the comforter as his tongue found my clit, swirling around the bundle of nerves.

Every nerve in my entire body was on fire for him, wanting his hands all over me.

With each stroke he took me higher, my body clenching in anticipation of what he could do to me, how he could make me feel. My breathing came in shallow pants as the knot tightened in my lower stomach, the orgasm I had been holding out on starting to build. "Aleksey, please," I begged as he ravished every inch of me.

He didn't hold back and I cried out as my orgasm overtook me, shattering my very soul. My body floated above the bed and I was vaguely aware of my husband standing up, positioning himself between my legs. "Mine," he growled, his cock probing my entrance.

I met his gaze, grabbing at his arms to pull him into me. "Mine."

A feral grin crossed his face before he pushed into me, his length filling my entire body. "God," I breathed as he sat himself inside me. "You are."

"Amazing," he murmured, his hands gripping my hips. "Elia, you are everything to me."

He was everything to me as well. I loved him. I loved the way he made me feel, the things he did to my body. Everything about Aleksey was right for me.

He started to move, his hands gripping me tight. "Come for me, Elia. Come for me."

It wasn't hard. I came easily, my walls clenching him as he took me to a higher place, stars exploding behind my lids as I rode the orgasm he took me to. Repeatedly he assaulted my body until I couldn't feel anything other than the bliss he brought to my life, so by the time he groaned and came inside me, I had a dreamy smile on my face.

Aleksey fell on the bed beside me, his chest heaving and his gorgeous body glistening with sweat. "Fuck me."

I lay there, looking at the ceiling with a stupid smile on my face. "Yeah." Rolling over to face him, I pressed my lips to his salty skin. "I hope you know that I love you."

His grin was genuine, his eyes crinkling in the corners, and for a moment everything was right in our lives. "I know," he replied, his voice soft. "And I hope you know that I love you with everything I have, Elia. Nothing, and I mean nothing, can ever change the way I feel about you."

Tears pricked my eyes. "Aleksey."

He brushed his thumb over my cheek, rising to one elbow. "It's true. You are my entire fucking world."

His words warmed my soul and I scooted over until I was breathing in his scent. "Everything I am is because of you."

He rolled over until I was on top of him, straddling his hips. I could already feel his erection pressing against my ass, my body started to react to him once again. "I don't want this to end," I told him, my hands stroking his abdomen. "I don't want us to go through anything else. Can we just disappear?"

Aleksey chuckled. “I would like to, my love, but too many things are riding on this plan. We have to see it through.”

I sighed. “I know.”

He gave me a squeeze. “Come on. I want to do something with you.”

I arched a brow. “What’s that?”

“You will see.”

Fifteen minutes later, we were both dressed in comfortable clothing and sitting outside on the balcony, the gas fireplace roaring and a pizza from down the street sitting on the table. The stars were out in full force tonight and I breathed in the chill in the air, swaddled in one of Aleksey’s sweatshirts. “This is beautiful.”

He came up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me up against his chest. “You are beautiful.”

I reveled in his touch, a huge smile on my face. “I think you have stolen my husband and replaced him with a man I don’t recognize.”

“Because I’m not shooting someone?” he replied, pulling my hair aside to press his lips to the side of my neck. “There’s so much more of this waiting once this is over, Elia. I’m going to give you everything you deserve.”

Turning in his arms, I wound my arms around his neck, playing with his hair. “And I am going to give you everything *you* deserve as well.” Aleksey deserved happiness. We deserved happiness. After everything that had happened to us.

“You already have,” he responded. “That is why I need to protect you. I would do anything to protect you.”

“Anything but give your life,” I reminded him. “I can’t bear to lose you, Aleksey.”

“You won’t.” He blew out a breath, resting his chin on my head. “And I will destroy anyone that comes close to doing harm to you.”

I believed him. I knew that Aleksey would put everyone on the line to keep me safe. But it couldn’t be at the cost of his life. Nothing short of him by my side was going to be acceptable for the future, and I would do whatever I could to make that happen.

“Let’s enjoy this night,” I finally said, motioning to the sectional near the fireplace. “We can figure the rest of it out later.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Aleksey

Two days later

I drummed my fingers on the counter. “Is this everything?”

“Not everything.” Boris thumbed through the printed photos. “Schubert is still going through the rest of what I picked up. These are just confirmations that Glazov is indeed rewriting some of the succession clauses.”

I pushed out of my chair and moved to the bar to pour myself a glass of whiskey. It was late afternoon. Sunlight streamed through the windows of the penthouse and I had been up since dawn, trying to collect as much evidence as possible of what Glazov had already taken.

To do that, I’d had Boris break into Glazov’s office and find any documents that were still left in his office.

It wasn’t easy. Boris didn’t exactly have a lot of experience reading legalese. And if I were being honest, none of us really did. To help us parse them, I had him coordinate everything with the Tarallo lawyer—Mark Schubert—just so that he would at least know what the hell he was looking for.

Without Schubert, there was just no way that we could even uncover a quarter of everything that had been discovered. But from what we could see, almost every bit of the Korolev empire built up by my father and uncle over the last forty-five years was going to end up in the hands of Gregor Konev, the other traitorous brigadiers who went with him, and Glazov himself.

They'd left almost nothing for the Bogatyr.

She hadn't been lying when she claimed that she didn't have a choice with the alliance that Gregor forced her on. But it was hard for me to feel any sympathy for her.

But there were still plenty of documents left to go over, so maybe things could still change in the Bogatyr's favor.

"Found some other stuff as well," Boris continued as he put more documents on the island. "Looks like Gregor and his merry band of idiots are as subtle as elephants. So, it was also pretty easy to pick up the tracks for his hired guns and the money that goes along with them."

"Good, but it's not enough," I growled, clenching the glass. "It's a good start though."

"And then there's this," Boris pulled out another file. "Figure this is what the FBI would probably want. Does that name look familiar to you?"

I set aside my glass and peered at the name at the top of the file and my eyes opened wide when I realized who it *actually* referred to—a well-known arms dealer who'd made a killing in the last thirty years, whose real name was Viktor Bukharin.

He had even garnered an appropriate nickname for himself over the years: Blood Reaper.

But what interested me wasn't so much his name, but the fact that it looked to be a deal that was in the process of being

inked in the last forty-eight hours.

“The balls on them all,” I muttered. This was exactly the type of information that the FBI wanted. “They’re playing with fire if they think they can buy from him.”

Viktor Bukharin was someone that even my father wasn’t insane enough to deal with. The man had funded insurgencies all across the world, and there were rumors that he could sell you a nuclear warhead for the right price.

Whatever the hell Gregor and the Bogatyr were planning, they were prepared to shell out some serious dough in exchange for what could only be some heavy firepower.

“Just one problem.” Boris tapped the signatures on the bottom of the pages.

I followed his finger and felt my blood run cold when I recognized my own signature next to Bukharin’s.

“Those bastards ...” I breathed. “This must be an insurance play they’re putting in their back pocket.”

Boris nodded. “Frame you for what’s about to happen?”

“Exactly,” I said. “We need to forward this to the FBI as soon as possible.”

“So far that’s everything we’ve found,” Boris said as he slid the rest of the documents to me. “I’m going back in tonight to dig through more.”

“Keep yourself safe,” I reminded him. “I don’t like how they’re playing the Bukharin angle right now. If they catch you in the act, there’s going to be a lot more shit coming down the pipeline. And you’re not as spry as you used to be.”

“Spry enough.” Boris smirked as he stepped back into the elevator. “I’ll be in touch soon, Aleksey Fyodorovich.”

Alone, I thrust a hand through my hair and thought about how complicated everything had suddenly become. Elia had warned me about this exact scenario: if the FBI found any connection between me and Russia, there could be terrorism charges.

And I was holding that very evidence in my hand at this exact moment.

My mind logically knew that I should forward this immediately to Lana so that there would be no misunderstanding. But another part of me was terrified of what might happen as soon as the FBI got their hands on it.

They could very well just decide that I was the one who signed this anyway, and move in to arrest me immediately now that they had good cause.

I didn’t like any of this. I didn’t like being forced to work with law enforcement instead of just evading them. I didn’t like the fact that my own lawyer was now my worst enemy.

The past had been so much simpler.

Pouring another drink, I downed it before I could think about the burn of the liquid. It did me no good to keep thinking about what the past had been. The only thing I had to focus on now was to move forward.

I was still deep in thought when Elia emerged from the bedroom, her dress clinging to the small bump. It was only when I caught a whiff of her floral-scented shampoo that I realized she was in the same space as me. I looked up, and my heart skipped at the sight.

Every time I saw her—every time I saw that she was carrying our child—I felt humbled. I might have put that little person in her stomach, but she was doing all the hard work, including trying to run a Mafia to save our future.

“Hey,” she said as she walked up to me.

I poured a glass of water and handed it to her. “Hey yourself.”

She dropped onto the stool in front of the island, rubbing her head. “Are those the documents Boris brought back from Glazov’s office?”

I leaned against the island. “They are.”

“And?” she asked expectantly.

“Some good, some not so good, and some just downright horrifying.”

“Tell me.”

I slid the paper with my fake signature on it over to her, explaining the significance of who Viktor Bukharin was in the process.

“You have to get this to Lana ASAP,” she said as soon as I was done talking.

“But what if the FBI moves after me as soon as they get this information?” I asked.

Elia bit her lower lip and dipped her head slightly in thought. A moment later, she met my gaze again. “If Lana holds up her end of the bargain, then your status as the man on the inside will still matter. In that case, this deal that you’ve signed with this Viktor Bukharin is just more evidence that we can pin on the Bogatyr and the rest.”

I let out a breath as I reached for my whiskey and threw it back. The slow burn seeped through my body and I soaked it in.

“It’s risky,” I said.

“Nothing ventured,” she started.

“Nothing gained,” I finished.

“Then let’s put it all together,” Elia finally said. “And get it ready for Lana. This should be enough to convince Berkowitz that an agreement is a win-win for all of us.” Elia slid off the stool and walked over to me, taking my hands in hers. “It’s enough, Aleksey. I know it is.”

It had to be. This was all that we had.

That evening, I rubbed a hand over my face as Elia finished going over the details of the plan one more time. She had already called Lana and set up a meeting for the following afternoon. Lana had also confirmed that if we could prove a connection between the Korolev Bratva and a well-known Russian arms dealer, then Berkowitz would do his damndest to ensure witness protection for us.

There was nothing else for us to do but hope that our plan would work.

“Okay,” Elia sighed, sitting back on the sofa as she set aside her phone. “I think we are good to go.”

I looked over at her. “Short of killing the Bogatyr and her allies by ourselves.”

“I know,” she replied. “But you know that’s not an option anymore. We have to trust that Lana and the FBI will be able to handle this.”

I blew out a breath as Elia slid over on the sofa, tucking herself under my arm. “It’s going to be okay, Aleksey. This is the right thing to do.”

“I know.” I pressed my lips into her hair. “But could you imagine telling me this when we got married?”

“When we first got married.” She laughed, pressing her cheek to my chest. “I don’t think I could’ve ever lasted this long with you.”

Grinning, I rubbed my hand over her arm and I felt my cock stirring to life at her closeness. “You don’t think you’d be able to last long?” She saw the devious glint in my eyes, and the same glint lit up in hers.

She looked up at me, grinning. “Is that a challenge, Mr. Korolev?” Her hand reached over and gripped my already-hard cock.

“That depends.” I let out a quiet, trembling hiss in response and pressed her down into the sofa, brushing my lips over hers. “Do you think you’re up for the challenge, Mrs. Korolev?”

Her fingers threaded through my hair as her legs wrapped around my waist, giving me a hint of the warm, wet heat separated from me by the thin fabric between us. She kissed the corner of my mouth, the edge of my jaw, placed her soft lips next to my ear, and whispered, her voice heavy with want,

“For you? Always.”

Hours later, I woke up in a cold sweat, my heart beating rapidly in my chest from a familiar nightmare where Elia was ripped away from me. But this time, I saw something worse. The gaping wound in her stomach. The blood that was

congealing on the floor. And the horrifying empty sensation of when I pressed my hand against her belly.

It took a moment for me to remember where I was and realize that Elia curled up on her side next to me. Her breathing was slow and even.

I threw back the covers and stood, slicing my hand through my hair as I made my way to the kitchen, where I grabbed a bottle of water. My hands shook. The vividness of the nightmare remained with me. I had seen Elia dead and our child gone, carved out of her like a horror movie.

It was exactly what the Bogatyr had threatened to do.

I raised the water to my lips again, only to realize that it was already empty. *Fuck it.* I placed the bottle aside. I needed something stronger.

I walked over to the bar instead, picked up the bottle of whiskey, and carried it out to the balcony.

The whiskey went down easy, but the uneasiness lingered even after I had taken a few deep, cleansing breaths of the chilly night air. It took a few more minutes before my heart rate slowed to something reasonable.

Blowing out a breath, I dangled the bottle between my fingers and stared out into the night. My eyes quickly darted toward the Sears Tower. Was the Bogatyr still watching us from there? A moment later, I decided that it didn't matter if she was.

All that mattered was our plan coming to fruition. We were so close, I could taste it.

But if this plan didn't work, then I was going to do things the hard way. If the law took too long, then I would have to take the law into my own hands. The Bogatyr and her allies weren't going to walk away from this.

A grin crossed my lips. I knew that my wife was betting on Lana coming through for us. But we needed contingencies in place. Which meant that at a moment's notice, I needed to become the monster I used to be before she came into my life.

Just in case.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Elia

I clenched and unclenched my hands in my lap for the hundredth time, watching as Lana flipped yet another page worth of evidence over. She had been at it for over an hour, with several cups of coffee between us and an empty plate that had held a banana nut muffin that I had devoured.

From my vantage point I could see Boris standing guard at the entrance of the coffee shop where Lana had agreed to meet me. I knew there were also several Tarallo men nearby, just in case the Bogatyr made an attempt on me. While Lana had frowned when she had seen my entourage, she hadn't questioned it.

I doubted that she was here alone either.

Aleksey hadn't taken too kindly to me wanting to go meet her outside of the penthouse. And truthfully speaking, I had my own doubts as well. But we couldn't risk Lana coming by the penthouse so often anymore. Sooner or later, someone was bound to piece together that her presence here meant that there was a deal of some sort between ourselves and the New York DA.

And that was a risk none of us could take. Each day that the Bogatyr remained at large, the worse the inevitable blowback was going to be. And we had precious few cards left in our deck to play.

"Well," Lana said, sitting back in her chair and crossing her arms over her chest. "I have to admit, Elia, there's a lot more here than I expected."

“I took my homework seriously.”

“That’s true.” She shook her head, smiling. “You always did.”

I returned her gesture, my heart racing in my chest. “What do you think, Lana? Think the FBI can act on it?”

“Honestly?” She let out a breath, a pensive look on her face. “All of the info here is pretty damn convincing. I mean, once you add in the fact that you also have proof of documents from Glazov about taking over the Korolev Bratva, you could almost argue that it’s an open-and-shut case. You and Aleksey did a damn good job here.”

Pride filled my veins. “Really?” I had expected her to say that it would work or that, with a few more things, it would be good enough, but I hadn’t expected this.

Lana nodded, pointing to the file. “If we had to go to discovery by the regular legal methods, there would be months of paperwork that Glazov would dump on our desks to slow us down.” She arched a brow. “There’s just one problem though.”

I felt my heart sink. Problem? What problem could there be?

She managed to beat me to the punch. “The problem is that none of this is admissible in a court of law,” she said. “Because this is technically illegal evidence.” She thumbed through the stack of papers again. “And a good chunk of this could be argued as hearsay, or outright fabrications.”

And just like that, the pride deflated and dread pitted in my stomach again. “Are you sure you can’t use *any* of it?”

“Well,” Lana drew the word out. “Yes and no. Do you want the good news or the bad news first?”

“How about you start with the bad news and then cheer me up with the good?” I replied.

“The bad news is that the FBI will probably want to detain Aleksey in the short term while we straighten up *our* paperwork to confirm that he was our inside man,” Lana explained. “That’s a lot of paperwork for us to go through, especially since that deal literally did not exist until he threatened it out of me at gunpoint. For the record, I didn’t include that part when I told Berkowitz. But we’ll have to create that paper trail on our end, and that could take a while.”

Her words felt like someone punched me in the gut. “So what are you saying? That the FBI is going to arrest Aleksey?”

“Pretty much.” Lana sighed. “Look, El, you can’t have *not* seen that coming. I mean, the two of you literally handed me a sheet of paper tying Aleksey to an internationally wanted arms dealer. With his own signature on it! Fake or not, the FBI isn’t going to risk having him outside of their custody while they follow up on this lead.”

She was right, but it didn’t lessen the impact of her words.

“And the good news?” I asked gingerly.

“The good news is that this *is* a lead for the FBI to follow up on.” Lana pulled out the incriminating sheet—the one with Aleksey’s fake signature on it. “There’s a meeting place and time here. I’m willing to bet that Bukharin himself will likely send someone in his place. An arms dealer doesn’t survive for more than thirty goddamn years by showing up to hawk his goods in person like a shawarma cart.”

I nodded. “Makes sense.”

“But if there’s an intermediary that he dealt with,” Lana said, “then we can probably squeeze him. And if he can vouch for the authenticity of the deal, then it strengthens Aleksey’s argument that he was an asset for us.”

“Lana ...” I loosened a breath, almost wanting to pinch myself to make sure this wasn’t all a dream. Our plan was on the verge of working. But at a terrible cost! “I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything yet,” she warned, tucking the file into her bag. “I still have to talk with Berkowitz about this. He has enough misgivings already about what you’ve told me. If I tell him we’re going to have to create a bunch of paperwork proving Aleksey Korolev was our inside man for all this time ... I can tell you that he won’t be happy about doing that. But this is the first step of very real progress.”

“It’s enough for now,” I said softly. “I’m glad you’re willing to help us here on this.”

“Elia.” Lana sighed. “There never was a doubt that I wanted to help *you*. It was always Aleksey that I was iffy on. I know you love the man, but he’s got a rap sheet a mile long. I spent years reading up on the charges that he continuously managed to

evade. And if I'm being honest, sometimes I'm still having a hard time reconciling the fact that you're married to him and pregnant with his kid."

I mustered a weak smile and she returned one to me. It felt good to be able to share smiles again. It made me think that the walls that had sprung up between our friendship were starting to fall down, brick by brick.

Slowly, Lana's smile faded. "I'm still worried about you, Elia."

I wanted to tell her that I was fine, but the words died on the tip of my tongue. The truth was, I wasn't okay. There was nothing about my life that was remotely close to being okay. I'd fallen in love with the man who murdered my brother and who ordered the death of my father. I'd been kidnapped by his jealous ex, who had suffered more than anyone else I'd ever known. She'd threatened to carve my baby out of my belly. And I'd killed someone just to take over my father's criminal organization that I swore I never wanted.

It was lucky that I was still sane.

And the reality was that my future was still anything but certain.

"Elia," Lana started, dropping her voice to barely a whisper. "You know you can go through with amnesty for just yourself. You can let the FBI detain Aleksey for good. Arranging your witness protection status is going to be much easier to do than for him. As for the Tarallo Mafia, the New York DA office has enough information that we can easily pass it all along to the FBI so that those guys get rolled up at the same time as the Korolev Bratva."

I knew what was happening. She was dangling a tantalizing future in front of me. One where I was truly freed from the criminal life for good. She would protect me, and the child growing inside of me. My hand covered my bump and I took a small breath.

“Think about it,” Lana urged. “I can get you away from all of this, and no one would ever be able to find you. I can protect you and your baby too.”

My lips crushed together as my heart clenched tightly in my chest. I wrung my fingers as I momentarily pondered the terrifying possibility of Lana’s offer. *I could* just take up that offer. And this time, it would work. After all, wasn’t this what she had promised me from the very beginning? That if I just handed her the evidence, she would lock away all the monsters in my life?

Even the monster in my bed. The monster who stole my heart.

But could I steel my heart enough to accept that offer? Was I willing to bury the knife of betrayal deep in Aleksey’s heart to do so?

My hand reached down, felt the curve of my belly once more, and I knew my answer.

Aleksey and I were in this together. Our partnership and love were far more than anything else to me. Just the thought that handing this evidence to Lana meant that the FBI would place him in their custody for even a short while felt painful to me.

And now Lana was once again asking me to abandon him. And in the process, I'd also be taking our child away from him.

I breathed again. *Never.*

I couldn't just walk away from my heart. Aleksey *was* my heart. More than that, he was my soul, and the mere thought of leaving him to fend for himself made me feel sick inside.

I wouldn't do it. I couldn't do it. I refused to run at the first opportunity. "I won't leave him," I finally said to her. "I won't have my child grow up without a father."

"Elia." Lana's expression darkened, and her mouth pressed into a hard line. "What if Berkowitz won't argue for his amnesty and yours? What then?"

Tears pricked my eyes, and I blinked rapidly to make them go away. But Lana saw them anyway.

"Oh." Lana took my hand. "I didn't mean to make you cry."

"It's not you," I sniffed, pulling a napkin out of the dispenser on the table. "It's the hormones."

"And the stress of everything else, I bet," Lana added dryly, stroking the back of my hand with her thumb.

"Lana," I said, dabbing at my eyes. "I know you're looking out for me. I really do. But at some point, I need you to understand that I love Aleksey." I drew in a breath and looked

down at my stomach, my hand cupping the curve gently. “I need you to understand that he’s not the one you need to protect me from.”

“I understand,” she replied. “And I understand that you want a family. You want love. Hell, El, you deserve love. But is it really with Aleksey Korolev?”

“Yes.” I nodded as I dried my tears. “I want no one else. I have no one else. So please don’t do this to me, Lana. Please stop trying to take him away from me.”

Lana would never understand that Aleksey truly did love me. She could never see the good in him.

“I’m sorry,” Lana finally said. “I didn’t mean to make you upset. I just, I never imagined that you would be in this situation.”

“Me neither,” I admitted, sucking in a shaky breath as I reined in my emotions. “But that’s the direction my life has gone in, Lana. And that’s the direction that I have to move forward in. Aleksey is part of my life now, a part that I can’t just cut away anymore. I can’t lose him.”

“I see,” she answered, pulling away. She paused for a moment. “I just want you to be happy, El. Whatever that looks like for you.”

“I know,” I said softly as I took another deep breath. The tears had subsided for now, but there was no telling when they would come back again. “Promise me that once you get this info to the FBI, you’ll find a way to bring him back to me.”

She nodded.

“I mean it, Lana.” I said. “I want to hear you say it. Promise me.”

“I promise,” she said as she stuffed the documents into her bag. “I’ll keep both of you in the loop about what’s going to happen. But you have to let him know that the FBI is going to detain him for this.”

“I will,” I told her as I stood. “And if you need anything else, just reach out.”

Instead of responding, Lana wrapped me in a huge hug. “I’m so glad that we had this talk,” she whispered into my ear.

“Me too,” I answered, hugging her back. It felt like hope was starting to slowly find its way into my life again. And as we walked out together, I saw the first snowflakes of the year drifting down from the gray, overcast sky.

“Take care of yourself, will you?” she said to me. “And think about what I said. I’ll be in touch soon, Elia.”

I gave her a final squeeze and we parted ways. Boris opened the car door, and I waved one more time at Lana before I climbed in. Then the car moved into traffic and I could finally breathe. The finish line was in sight. It could all be over soon.

One final ordeal was all that remained.

Looking out of the window, I couldn't help but think about that ordeal. Would Aleksey be okay with it? Could he accept it from me? I wanted to think that he would, but I also knew that from a certain point of view, this could be viewed as a total betrayal.

And then there was the consideration for what happened once all of this was truly said and done. Could we really just walk away and disappear into witness protection? Would the men of either organization really accept a merger like this?

I couldn't fully believe it. But a cold drop of hope trickled down the side of my ribs.

Swallowing hard, I rested my temple against the cold window, rubbing my hand over my stomach as the thoughts warred in my head. Snowflakes continued to drift and swirl through the cold Chicago wind.

All I wanted was peace. I wanted to wake in the morning without having to look over my shoulder. That was what I was fighting for.

And it was so, *so* close.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Aleksey

“Was that all?” I asked calmly after Elia finished telling me the full contents of her conversation with Lana.

“That’s all,” she answered. “What do you think?”

Truthfully speaking, I didn’t like it. It felt like a trap. But at the same time, I knew that this *was* the best way we could use the FBI to our own advantage. And it did sound like Lana was serious about getting Berkowitz to convince the FBI that I was their inside man.

To hear that the FBI would likely detain me, even for a little while, left me rattled. Not because of the possibility that the detainment could go from a little while to a long time.

But because being detained meant that I wouldn’t be around to keep Elia safe from whatever the Bogatyr was planning next.

That worried me more than anything else.

“You’re not mad at me?” Elia asked, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“No,” I replied. “Of course not. Why would I be mad at you?”

She breathed. “I just thought that you might think I was betraying you.”

“Never,” I assured her. “This is our path forward. And if I’m being honest, it’s perfect, actually. Because it fits into our plan.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“If I’m detained by the FBI,” I explained, “then it theoretically clears the path for Glazov to enact the takeover plans. He’d have to start moving faster to make sure that the assets can be protected and moved out from under my name before the FBI can crack me for info. And I’m sure whatever contacts the Bogatyr has in the Chicago PD would happily leak the information that I’m in their custody.”

“Which means that the Bogatyr would get her chance to go after you,” Elia replied as she processed my logic.

“Or you,” I pointed out. “She wants something from you as well.”

Just like that, my nightmare returned. The Bogatyr’s threats had been clear. She wanted to take our child from us. What better time to strike than when she knew that I was in jail?

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “Boris and Carlos will be around to protect me. It’s you that I’m worried about. God forbid someone inside of Chicago PD decides to take a crack at you.” She shuddered. “Or if Gregor Konev decides to show up.”

“I can take care of myself,” I assured her. “And I doubt the FBI would be amenable to Chicago PD accidentally letting harm fall on their star witness.”

“Now who’s starting to put all their faith in law enforcement?” she teased, but worry still clung to her voice. Her arms wrapped around me and she pressed her face against my chest.

I laughed, and Elia joined me in laughter a moment later. But I felt her arms tightening around me. When our laughter faded, I looked down at her.

“I don’t want to lose you,” she said quietly. “Not now. Not when everything is so close.”

“You won’t lose me.” I looked down and our eyes locked. “I promise.”

“Don’t make a girl a promise,” she whispered, “if you know you can’t keep it.”

I felt my heart quivering at those words. The same words she had said to me before I raced off that night from the mansion. If I was being perfectly honest, I didn’t know that I could fulfill that promise. After all, my fate would be in someone else’s hands for the first time in my life.

But I would do everything in my power to make it back to her.

“I am yours,” I told her. “My life is yours. My heart is yours. I’ll come back, and then we’ll have the life that both of us always dreamed of.”

Without another word, she reached up with her hand to cup my face and pulled me into a deep kiss that I never wanted to break apart from.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Elia

It took some convincing for us to get Boris and Carlos on board. But they eventually came around once we walked them through every step of the plan. Both of them were still adamant that *someone* be allowed to accompany Aleksey into detainment, just in case. But Aleksey forbade it.

He wanted them around me instead, along with as many men as they could get.

It was shocking how quickly Lana managed to move once Aleksey and I informed her that everyone on our side agreed to the plan.

“I’ve gone over everything with Berkowitz, and we’re in the process of getting all the paperwork in order,” she told me on the phone. “Right now, an FBI team is coming to the penthouse, with Chicago PD leading the way. It’s going to be a very public arrest.”

“How public?” I asked.

“Put it this way.” I could see Lana’s wry smile on her face even through the phone. “The mayor of Chicago is definitely going to win his re-election, and he’ll have the perfect picture to go with it too.”

“This just feels too easy,” I told her. “Like it’s just falling into our laps.”

“You’re not out of the woods just yet,” Lana reminded me. “If the Bogatyr is really working on getting heavy firepower from a known Russian arms dealer, then we may still see quite a flareup of violence.”

“And you’re sure that Berkowitz will come through for us?” I had to ask again.

“Yeah, girl,” Lana replied. “I’m personally filling out all the paperwork myself to get it done ASAP. The two of you have done your part. Now let us do ours.”

“Lana,” I said, fighting to keep my emotions in check. “Thank you. Thank you so much for never giving up on me. On us.”

“Of course,” she said. “And once this is all over, you’re going to have to let me spoil your kid rotten.”

I laughed. “Wouldn’t have it any other way, girl.”

“We should be there in another twenty minutes or so. Just hang tight. If there’s anything else you want to say to Aleksey, now’s probably the time to say it.”

“Lana,” I said, the laughter fading from my voice.

“Yeah?”

“Please keep him safe. Please give him back to me once all of this is over, okay?”

She paused for a moment. “I will, El,” she finally said. “I promise.”

And with that, the call ended. I looked at Aleksey, who had an unreadable expression on his face.

“Are you ready?” I asked him.

“You know,” he said as he took my hand in his. His fingers were cold. “I felt a lot more confident about this plan last night.”

“What changed?” I cupped his hands in mine and kissed his knuckles possessively.

“The thought of being paraded out of this penthouse in handcuffs, mostly,” he replied. “You know I’ve spent my entire life trying to avoid that exact scenario.”

“I know.” I nodded.

Suddenly, I was gripped by a fear of the unknown and I didn’t want to let him go. This felt like goodbye, and I wasn’t ready—I doubted I would ever be ready—to say goodbye to Aleksey. I went over the plan over and over again in my head. We had dispatched men in a three-block radius to make sure that the Bogatyr wouldn’t be able to surprise us mid-arrest.

The elevator whirred to life, and I pulled Aleksey’s hands to me. My face pressed against his chest, and I felt his heartbeat rising in time with mine.

It was happening.

“I love you,” I whispered to him. “I love you. I love you. I love you.”

He kissed the top of my forehead. “I love you too.”

My nose stung, and tears filled my eyes. *This isn't goodbye, Elia*, I reminded myself again and again as I wrapped my arms tightly around Aleksey. His arms hooked around my body, and I let out a small whimper in place of the sob threatening to overwhelm me.

The ding of the elevator doors opening sounded like a clock-tower bell. I turned toward it and saw Lana walking through with several Chicago PD officers and two other men dressed in jackets with “FBI” emblazoned on them.

“You have to let me go now,” Aleksey said softly.

I looked up and saw the tears glimmering in his eyes. He didn't want to let go any more than I did.

“Come back to me, Aleksey,” I whispered, and slowly allowed my arms to fall to my side.

The Chicago PD officers immediately grabbed Aleksey and roughly shoved his arms behind him. I wanted to cry out at them, to tell them to be gentle with him, but Lana's arm draped over my shoulders and I knew that they would just ignore my protests.

One of the FBI agents, a tall, lanky Asian man, walked up to me.

“Mrs. Korolev,” he introduced himself in a thick Jersey accent. “I’m Special Agent Chang, and I’m heading this operation. We’ll take your husband in for questioning, and we’ll also dispatch a team to keep an eye on every location of interest that he tells us about. You can count on us, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Agent Chang,” I replied woodenly.

“You’re welcome, ma’am.” Agent Chang nodded, turned around, and followed everyone else back into the elevator.

Lana remained with me as the elevator doors closed in silence. I was grateful for her presence. I blinked and rubbed the tears away from my eyes.

Tarallos are made of stronger stuff.

But I wasn’t a Tarallo anymore. I hadn’t been for a long time. I was a Korolev now, and my husband was being taken away from me.

My hand drifted down to caress the bump in my belly, and I felt a sudden jerking motion inside. A small gasp escaped my throat. Our baby’s first kick ... and Aleksey wasn’t here to experience it.

“Are you okay?” Lana asked, worry in her eyes.

“I am,” I replied. “It’s just that ... I felt my baby kick.”

“Oh.” Lana’s expression softened as she pulled me in for a hug. “It’ll be over soon, Elia.”

She continued talking, telling me details of everything else that would happen in the coming hours. But I heard none of those things. The only thing I could focus on was the fact that Aleksey wasn’t here next to me. And the only thing I could feel was a gaping emptiness that widened with every second he was gone.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Aleksey

48 hours later

“Baseplate, this is Kilo One,” the FBI field team agent’s voice crackled through the radio. “Unknown vehicle is pulling up to the building now. Over.”

I sat in the makeshift field operations center the FBI had set up in one of the many backroom offices of the Chicago police department. It was funny. Normally, you’d think an FBI field operation center would be chock-full of big screens that showed the live feed of what each agent on the ground saw, and digital maps with real-time location tracking.

Instead, all I saw was organized chaos that was barely managed. Papers rustled, coffee was spilled, and everything seemed to be coordinated on nothing but radios and hand-drawn maps.

I rubbed my wrists and bit back the desire to laugh at the absurdity of reality versus expectation.

“Baseplate, this is Kilo One. I see three male individuals. Break. Second vehicle approaching. Wait, one.” There was a pause. “Update. Two additional contacts. The big one’s carrying a briefcase. Over.”

Gregor, I thought. Hope fluttered in my chest. If Gregor was there, then this could very well be exactly what we needed to bring all of them down.

“Roger that.” Special Agent Chang, who’d been there to take me in, growled into the radio. “Bravo One, this is Baseplate. Are you in position? Over.”

A new voice sounded. “Baseplate, Bravo One is in position. Ready to go on your mark. Over.”

“Copy, Bravo One. You are cleared to engage. I say again, you are cleared to engage. Over.”

The radio went silent. Whatever was happening, I wasn’t going to hear it. Seconds ticked by like hours. A bead of sweat rolled down my sides as my heart hammered against my chest. Blackness danced around the edges of my vision, and I forced myself to let go of the breath that I’d been holding this entire time.

The radio crackled to life again.

“Baseplate, Bravo One. Mission update. We’ve been engaged by hostile contacts. Break. Two hostiles down. We’ve sustained casualties. One KIA and one WIA. Over.”

One dead, one wounded.

My fists clenched. Whatever the hell was happening, the Bogatyr had been prepared for this. I knew publicizing my arrest was going to spook her. But there had been no way to talk the mayor down from doing that. He needed a victory after what felt like weeks of nonstop violence, and both federal and city authorities were more than happy to deliver that for him.

“Understood, Bravo One. SITREP on the status of remaining hostiles. Over.”

“Three remaining hostiles fleeing on foot northbound. They have automatic weapons. Over.”

“Roger that, Bravo One. Do not pursue. I repeat. Do not pursue. Over,” Agent Chang ordered. “Kilo One, this is Baseplate. Do you read? Over.”

“Baseplate, this is Kilo One. Read you five by five. Over.”

“Kilo One. Hostile foot mobiles moving into your sector. You are cleared to engage. I say again. You are cleared to engage. Over.”

“Understood, Baseplate. Kilo One engaging. Out.”

The radio went silent again.

I couldn't help but feel awe and dread at what I was hearing from the FBI ground teams. There was something terrifying about their ruthlessly calm responses on the radio, even as their own men were shot, wounded, and killed. Anyone who ever thought that they could just go up against the FBI was truly out of their mind.

Which was why it was so shocking that anyone was even shooting back.

But then again, I wasn't surprised that they chose the most insane option if Gregor was leading them.

A second later, the radio sounded again.

“Baseplate, this is Kilo One. Hostile foot mobiles have been neutralized. One down. Two in custody. RTB now. Over.”

A round of cheers rose up in the office. Agent Chang gave me a proud look before he turned around again. I felt a smile rising up on my own face. This had gone off without a hitch. Well, almost without a hitch. We still had to get our hands on Glazov before he had a chance to destroy any of the documents he had prepared for the takeover of the Korolev Bratva.

“Delta One,” Agent Chang activated the radio that connected the operations room with the team outside Glazov’s office.

“This is Baseplate. You are mission go. I repeat. You are mission go. Over.”

“Understood, Baseplate. Delta One moving into breach. Over.”

A few minutes later, we heard a reply.

“Baseplate, this is Delta One. HVT is secure. My men are moving to collect all evidence now. Over.”

“Outstanding, Delta One. We’ll have cigars and Woodford waiting for you when you RTB. Out.”

Another round of cheers rose up, and I felt relief flooding through me. I slumped into my chair and stared up at the white light in the ceiling. Someone was laughing in the room. A loud, bellyful laugh that reverberated off the walls. It wasn’t

until I saw the amused look on Agent Chang's face that I realized the person laughing was me.

Smiling, he held out a glass with a tall pour of whiskey. "Here. Couldn't have done it without you."

I accepted it. "So where does that leave me?"

"Well, preliminary paperwork from the New York DA office lines up with what they've told us about you," Chang replied as he clinked his glass against mine. "Safe to say that you're all squared away. I'd offer to let you celebrate with us, but I figure you probably want to see your wife."

The mention of Elia made my heart skip a beat.

"Yeah, I'd like that." I smiled.

Agent Chang looked longingly at the whiskey in his hand. "Well, I suppose this can wait. C'mon, I'll give you a ride home."

We drove on through the Chicago evening rush hour traffic in silence. Normally, I wouldn't think twice about the cars in the streets at the moment. But tonight, I felt anxious as we inched forward in the bumper-to-bumper traffic. I wanted to be back at the penthouse already. I wanted to hold Elia in my arms.

Just thinking about Elia sent another smile curling up along the edge of my lips. I took a breath to calm myself. There

would be plenty of time for us in the future. A few extra minutes weren't going to kill me.

There hadn't been any further updates from the FBI field teams since we left. The Bogatyr hadn't been at the scene. But she'd been dealt a heavy blow. The men that she sent to make the purchase from Bukharin, including Gregor Konev, were either dead or in custody. With Glazov out of the picture as well, and the FBI confirming that my name was cleared, it would only be a matter of time before she had nowhere else to go.

Flurries drifted all around us as Agent Chang fiddled with the radio, skipping from one station after another.

"What are you doing?" I finally asked.

"Just wanted to know if our little op tonight made any waves yet," he replied. "So far? Nothing."

"You're not from around here, are you?"

"What gave it away?" Chang looked at me and grinned. "My Jersey accent?"

"No." I chuckled. "The fact that you think this city gives a shit about a shootout or some criminal boss getting arrested. If it isn't the Cubs, the Bulls, or the Blackhawks, it might as well not exist. You've spent too much time in law enforcement, Chang."

He nodded appreciatively and stopped fiddling with the radio. "Fair enough. What's a good station to listen to?"

“I haven’t listened to a radio in decades,” I replied. “But you can’t go wrong with 102.7.”

To my surprise, Agent Chang did as I told him and tuned the radio to 102.7. The car scooted forward through traffic to the sound of R&B that filled the tiny space of the car.

“You know,” he said, breaking the silence. “I was assigned to the Korolev case for almost two years. But never made it out here to Chicago to do actual fieldwork.” He flashed me a quick look. “Until now.”

My ears pricked up at those words. It was a rude reminder that at the end of the day, he was still a federal agent, and I was still technically a wanted criminal. Even if he claimed that I was all squared away, there was always that instinctive unease I had being next to law enforcement.

“How’d you manage that?” I asked warily.

“No idea.” Chang shrugged. “But it feels good to be out here today. Felt like I made a difference, you know?”

I opened my mouth, but the words never made it past my lips.

A loud explosion suddenly ripped through traffic, and our car was flipped into the air. Glass and steel and plastic crunched in a din of noise. A familiar need to puke rushed through me as I scrambled to unbuckle my seat belt. My ears rang. I tasted blood in my mouth. A quick, muffled staccato of cracking rubber bands sounded somewhere in the air.

Someone's shooting at us, I realized.

The seat belt unbuckled, and I dropped unceremoniously out of my seat. Pain exploded across my temple, adding to my disorientation. My hand flew to my side for my gun, and panic gripped my heart when I grasped nothing but air. I looked over at Agent Chang and saw a thin red line of blood trickling out of his ear. I couldn't tell if he was alive or dead. It didn't matter. My eyes were focused on the holstered pistol at his side. Gritting my teeth through the pain, I reached.

Suddenly, hands hooked under my armpits and yanked me from the shattered window of the passenger seat. I struggled against my captor, but my movements were sluggish and slow. Something pricked my neck. An overwhelming warmth washed over my senses, sapped the strength from my legs, and forced me to collapse into the hands of the unknown assailant dragging me away from the car.

The world turned into a blurry, muffled mix of colors and sounds, and I could hear my slowing heartbeat echo against my skull. A grotesque figure walked toward me with a familiar lopsided gait. I tried to raise my arms and push her away, but my body refused to respond.

The Bogatyr knelt down in front of me. Her shredded lips split apart into a feral smile. That was the last thing I saw before consciousness faded and I slipped into dreadful inky blackness.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Elia

I stood on the balcony as the snow fell soundlessly into my hair. Normally, the sight of the city at night would calm my frazzled nerves, but not tonight. Lana was still inside, frantically speaking to the FBI agents on the phone.

Coldness had crept into my very soul when she got the initial call and her face went white. She had given me an imploring look to let me know that whatever she was discussing wasn't meant for my ears. But in the time that I walked out onto the balcony, I had caught a few words here and there.

Aleksey was missing, and so was Special Agent Chang. The FBI apparently had detained several people at the place where the Bogatyr's men were supposed to meet with Bukharin's representatives, but I hadn't heard any additional details. I had no idea if they'd even detained any of the traitorous brigadiers.

My one consolation was confirmation that Matvei Glazov was in FBI custody, along with all of the documents that proved his guilt. But the only thing I wanted to know about was Aleksey, and that was one piece of information that continued to elude me.

"Elia ..." Lana stepped outside. Snow was starting to stick. "You should come inside. And you might want to sit down. There's something you need to see."

Numb, I did as she said and sat down on the couch. Lana turned on the TV, where breaking news was filling the screen.

“As you can see behind me, it’s complete chaos,” the reporter was saying, pointing to the building. “The body was discovered less than an hour ago.”

Body? My heart seized up at that word. *No ... no, no, no!* I turned to Lana and stared at her accusingly. No words needed to be said. My eyes told her everything that was in my heart.

You promised!

The reporter clutched the mic, eyes wide with fear, as she continued to speak. “We’ve had numerous reports that, other than Mayor Trenton, there was no one else hurt at the mayor’s residence. However, the same could not be said elsewhere in Chicago, where eyewitnesses and video footage show what appeared to be multiple car bombs going off.”

I ran a hand through my hair, which was soaked by the melting snow. Dread snaked its way through my body and I watched helplessly as the video switched back to the studio, where solemn-looking broadcasters sat at their desk.

“We’ve also received some disturbing allegations that the incident is strongly related to the high-profile arrest of a local gang leader two days ago,” the male newscaster said. “Mayor Trenton had been heavily embroiled in a recent flareup of gang violence and was adamant on returning law and order to our streets. It seems that his hard attitude toward criminals has provoked what can only be described as retaliatory measures. Police Commissioner Taft said the police are already hard at work determining a perpetrator, and they urge citizens to step forward with pertinent information that can speed up the investigation.”

Unable to listen anymore, I stood up from the couch and walked over to the kitchen island, hands shaking with every step.

“Elia ...” Lana approached me.

“No, Lana.” I shook my head. “Not now.”

“Elia, I know you’re worried, but we don’t have anything to go off just yet.”

“Yes, we do!” I snarled, acid dripping with each word. “This is her doing. It’s the Bogatyr. I know it.” My voice started shaking. “This was how she killed Aleksey’s mother. This is ...” I couldn’t force myself to say the words. I felt my resolve starting to crack.

The elevator whirred to life, and I turned toward it fearfully. My left hand reached back toward the knife block while my right hand shielded my belly.

Come for me, you bitch! I thought savagely as a tear rolled out of the corner of my eye. *I won’t let you take my baby from me! I’ll kill you!*

A small cry of relief escaped my lips when the elevator doors opened. Boris and Carlos stepped through with their guns drawn. The worried look in their eyes diminished slightly when they caught sight of me. I rushed over to Boris and hugged him tightly.

I’d never been happier to see him than at this exact moment.

For a second, he didn't seem to know how to act. But slowly, his hand rose up and patted me on the back.

"Where is he, Elia Ludovicovna?" Boris asked. "Where is Aleksey Fyodorovich?"

"I don't know, Boris," I stammered as I pulled away from him. "He went with the FBI, and he hasn't come back. Have you seen what happened?"

Boris nodded grimly. "Everyone in Chicago has seen."

I gave Carlos a quick look, and he dipped his head in acknowledgment as well. The two of them tucked their guns away and looked at me expectantly. Confusion swirled in my brain for a moment, and then realization struck me like a bolt of lightning.

They were looking to me to lead them.

They were waiting for me to give them their orders.

This wasn't the time for me to grieve for Aleksey or to break down in tears. I had to become the one thing that I had spent my entire life despising. I drew a shaky breath, and then another, and then another, until my breathing returned to its regular cadence.

"Gentlemen," I said, keeping my voice as calm as possible. "How many men can you mobilize in the next ten minutes?"

“Most of the Tarallo men are ready to go, Mrs. Korolev,” Carlos answered. “A couple of dozen at least.”

“Same for the Korolev men, Elia Ludovicovna,” Boris added.

“Good,” I replied. My lips were moving, but it was my father’s voice that I heard. “We need to put out this fire. The FBI is on our side right now, as are the Chicago police. What we do now is with the full backing of the law.”

“Elia ...” Lana raised her voice in protest. But a single murderous glare from me silenced her.

“The Bogatyr has made her move.” I turned back to the two men and continued. “For now, we can only assume that Aleksey is dead.” The words fell so easily from my lips and I felt my knees wobble at the admission, but I pushed on. “Order your men to pass along any leads they themselves cannot chase to Lana Keller, and she’ll pass them along to the police.”

Boris and Carlos nodded. But I wasn’t finished.

“Make no mistake, gentlemen.” The familiar savage thrill of power thrummed through me again. But instead of shying away from it, I embraced it. “This is a race against time and against law enforcement interference. If your men find the traitorous brigadiers before the police do ...” I clenched my jaw. “You make them suffer. You make them hurt. You make them beg.”

“What about the Bogatyr?” Boris asked softly. “What happens if we find her?”

“You bring her to me.” My fists clenched at my side, and I felt the scar on my face throb as a single tear slid down my cheek.
“Alive. So that I can make her beg me for forgiveness.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Elia

“What the actual fuck was that?” Lana rounded on me, yelling, as soon as Boris and Carlos disappeared down the elevator.

“You know you just threw your entire case for amnesty and witness protection out the window with that little stunt, right? Elia, you can’t just go around ordering criminals to go and *kill* people!”

“The fuck I can’t, Lana!” I shouted back. “That bitch murdered my husband, and I’m supposed to just sit here and not do a goddamn thing about it?”

“You don’t know that he’s dead, Elia!”

“And you do?”

“Elia . . . I’m just trying to look out for you,” she pleaded. “I’m trying to protect you.”

“All my life, that’s what people have always told me,” I scoffed. “I’m just looking out for you, Elia. I want what’s best for you, Elia,” I said mockingly. “But has anyone ever considered that maybe the person who could best look out for me is me? Or that the person who wants what’s best for me is me? I’m tired of other people making decisions in my life for me. If Aleksey is alive, then I will find him. If he is dead, then I will avenge him. It’s that simple, Lana!”

The words came out before I could even stop myself. And as soon as I said them, I knew that I had crossed a line of some sort. But it was the truth. I had spent my entire life being

dictated to by others. I had never had a chance to truly step into a life of my own. And just as I thought I was about to have that with Aleksey, this happened.

It was as if the entire universe had conspired to keep me powerless. And I was tired of it.

Lana recoiled at my tone, her expression slackened slightly, and she folded her arms.

“No.” She shook her head. “No, it’s not that simple, Elia. But I will not stand by and watch you ruin your fucking life like this!”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Lana,” I said. “My life is already ruined beyond repair. The Bogatyr killed the fucking mayor, Lana! My husband is dead for all I know. The FBI couldn’t even protect him. And you’re here trying to convince me that you can protect *me*?”

“Yes, I do believe that I can protect you! You can’t just forsake the law like this, Elia. You can’t. Without laws, we are nothing.”

“And where have your laws gotten us?” I took a step toward her. “Where is my husband, Lana? You promised that you would bring him back to me, and you broke that promise.”

“That’s not fair, Elia.” Her voice dropped.

“Life isn’t fair,” I spat. “I made my peace with that long ago, and I suggest that you do the same. Now, if you’re done getting in my way, I have a war to run.”

“No.” Lana pulled out her phone. “I’m not going to let you.”

“Don’t do it, Lana,” I warned her. “Don’t become my enemy.”

“Your enemy?” She stared at me, her mouth agape. “I’m your *friend!* I’ve always been your friend, even if you don’t see it that way!”

Suddenly, my hand gripped the handle of the chef’s knife that I had reached for before Boris and Carlos showed up. I turned back to her, snarling. “Give me the phone, Lana.”

“Elia, you can’t be serious.”

“I have never been more serious about anything else in my life,” I warned her as I shifted my weight slightly. “Give me the phone.”

Her eyes darted to the chef’s knife. “No.” And with that, she hit the call button and tossed the phone down the hallway.

I watched helplessly as the phone careened away, bounced on the floor, and spun out of reach. I saw the three numbers on the screen and heard the faint voice of the dispatcher speaking on the other end. I knew that even if I could reach the phone now, there was no way that I could stop the call from being transferred to the right department. The knife clattered from my hand, and I felt the final bit of strength holding me up ebb from my body.

Lana rushed over and caught me right before I fell. Slowly, I became aware of what I’d almost done, of what I was prepared

to do. My hands shook and I started hyperventilating.

“I’m sorry,” I stammered. “I don’t know what came over me. Oh God, Lana, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it. I—”

“Shh.” She ran her fingers through my hair as she cradled me in her arms. Tears fell from her eyes as she continued to hold me. “I understand, El. It’s okay. It’s okay. I’m going to stay here with you. And when the police arrive, I’ll go with you as well.”

Half an hour later, the elevator door opened and revealed two police officers, along with another FBI agent. Lana stood up and walked over to the FBI agent. The two of them exchanged some hushed heated words as the police officers looked down at me. I remained on the floor, hugging my knees to my chest as I stared blankly ahead. When Lana and the agent were done talking, he came over and knelt down in front of me.

“Mrs. Korolev?” he said gently. “We’re taking you with us. We’ll keep you safe.”

But I didn’t want to go with them. I wanted to stay here. It was an unreasonable thought. But somehow, I thought that as long as I stayed here, I stood a chance of maintaining some kind of control in my life. More than that, if I stayed here, then I might get to see Aleksey walk through those elevator doors with his familiar grin, his handsome face, and the way his eyes lit up each time he saw me.

The moment I left, all of those possibilities would be gone.

“I’ll take her with me,” Lana offered. “She’s been through a lot today; we all have. And the last thing she needs is to be put

into the back of a patrol car like a criminal when she's done nothing wrong."

I looked up at her from where I sat on the floor, gratitude flowing through me. The FBI agent looked at me, an unreadable expression on his face as he thought about it.

"Please." Lana placed her hand on the agent's arm and insisted.

"All right," the FBI agent agreed. "She can go with you. It's probably safer that way. We'll run escort for you guys as we accompany you to the special operations center."

"Thank you," Lana said. "And can you do us one final favor?"

"Sure."

"Can you make sure that you don't turn on the sirens until we're at least a couple of blocks away?" she asked. "It's just, again. I don't want her to feel like she's a criminal."

"Fine." The FBI agent nodded. "We'll be downstairs. Take a few minutes and get everything that she needs. I have a feeling that things are about to get a lot worse before they start getting better."

Lana took his hand in both of hers. "Thank you. That means a lot."

"Don't take too long," he said. "This city's already on edge as it is."

The FBI agent made a gesture, and the two cops walked with him back into the elevator. The doors closed and I was alone with Lana again.

She knelt down and took my hand. “Is there anything you want me to grab for you? Some clothes? Maybe some snacks?”

“Just some clothes, thank you,” I whispered. “They’re in the closet.”

“Okay.” She sighed and walked away to the bedroom.

I wasn’t sure I could bear to bring myself into the bedroom and see the bed that I had shared with Aleksey. The bed where we made our child. The bed that might never feel his familiar weight again. I squeezed my eyes shut as a shudder rolled through me.

A few minutes later, we descended in the elevator. The guards that had been posted nodded at me as I walked after Lana. I couldn’t help but feel grateful for her requesting that I go with her. In doing so, she had allowed me to walk out of the penthouse with a shred of dignity left. If the guards had seen me walk out in handcuffs or being led away by either Chicago PD or the FBI, then all hell might have broken loose.

I slipped into the passenger seat, and for a moment, the two of us just sat there. Finally, I broke the silence.

“Thank you, Lana.”

She nodded and started the car. “You know,” she said as she checked her mirrors. “Every time you’ve gotten into a car with me in Chicago, something has always gone wrong. Terribly wrong.”

I smiled half-heartedly. “I can still get out if you’d like,” I offered.

“Well, third time’s the charm, right?” She returned my smile. “C’mon. Let’s go.”

We pulled out onto the street and drove off. In the side mirror, I saw the police car follow us a few seconds later. We rounded the corner, and an unmarked black SUV drove up alongside. My heart rate picked up slightly. A few blocks later, it turned on its sirens in sync with the police car. I breathed out.

They’re just escorting us to the FBI operations center, I reminded myself.

Adrenaline slowly dissipated from my system as we drove. Snow continued to fall all around us. My hand drifted to my stomach, and I felt the baby kick again. I closed my eyes to hide the tears that welled from them, praying silently that Aleksey was still alive.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Aleksey

Pain swirled around my head as consciousness slowly returned. There was a throbbing sensation at my temples. I tried to move, but the only thing I felt was the bite of the rough ropes that held my arms and legs to the chair. Water dripped somewhere in the distance, and the musty scent of damp earth filled my nostrils.

Where am I? I struggled against the restraints. Nearby, I heard a faintly muffled scream. The metallic taste in my mouth was nauseating. I tried to say something, but the only sound that I managed to make was a hoarse whisper.

The sounds all around me slowly morphed. The scream no longer sounded faint or muffled. It sounded close. My vision was clearing, and with it, my heart started to race. Pain exploded across my body as I picked up my head with great difficulty.

Suddenly, everything rushed back. The explosion. The bullets. The hands that pulled me out of the car. My eyes flew open, and my eyes were blinded by the light. I realized that I wasn't the only one here.

Special Agent Chang sat across from me. His mouth was gagged, and his face was swollen and bruised. Cuts and lacerations covered his skin. There were deep burns along his arms and legs. His chest rose and fell with each labored breath.

It was a marvel that he was still alive.

“Welcome back, Aleks.” A familiar voice, cold and menacing, greeted me.

I snapped my head toward the source of the sound and saw the Bogatyr’s monstrous visage swim into view. Her lone green eye burned with hate as she stared at me. In her hand was a cruel-looking knife, still ruby-red with what I could only assume was Special Agent Chang’s blood.

“What have you done?” I whispered. “Do you have any idea who he is?”

The Bogatyr’s hand rose up and held Chang’s ID in front of my face. “Special Agent Alvin Chang, FBI. I was very thorough.”

“Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re going to be in,” I huffed, “when they find out what you’ve done to him?”

“You mean.” She tapped the tip of the bloody blade against my nose. “If they find out, my dear Aleks.”

She stood up and limped away to where Chang sat. He jerked as she came closer and struggled against his restraints. The wounds that covered his body started opening up with each frantic movement, and blood began to ooze from them.

“I have to hand it to you and your pretty bitch, Aleks.” The Bogatyr traced the knife along Chang’s chest, drawing a fresh red line behind it. Chang screamed into his gag, his body shaking from pain. “The FBI. That took some balls. That was unexpected.”

“Stop it!” I snarled. “Just stop it! He’s not your enemy. I am! Let him go and you can do whatever you want with me!”

“And just what is it you think that I want to do with you, Aleks?” the Bogatyr pulled the knife away and asked innocently.

“Torture me? Kill me? I don’t fucking know. But I know that he isn’t a part of this sick game that you’re playing!”

“Sick game?” She feigned shock. “How dare you, Aleks?” She grabbed a handful of Chang’s blood-matted hair and yanked his head up so that I could look upon his disfigured face and swollen eyes. “This isn’t a game. Who came up with the idea to work with law enforcement? Was it that pretty bitch? Was it her fucking friend? Answer me!”

“No,” I lied. “It was my own idea.”

“Stop lying to me!” the Bogatyr shrieked as she plunged the knife into Chang’s chest with every word. “Stop! Lying! To! Me!”

“Stop it!” I yelled. “You’re killing him!”

“Good!” she screamed as she buried the knife deep into Chang’s throat and started sawing. “Can’t you see that I’m protecting you, Aleks? Can’t you see that? The FBI will cast you aside the moment you’re of no use to them! They’ll betray you and lock you away, and I can’t lose you again! I won’t lose you again!”

Blood poured from Chang's wounds, and his face took on a waxy appearance. The Bogatyr released her grip on his head, and it slumped forward at a sickening angle. His chest wasn't moving anymore.

He was dead.

"What have you done?" I breathed.

She limped toward me, her lone green eye shining as tears welled from it. "Come fly away with me, Aleks. Just you and me," she begged. "This is our chance now. Just say you will and we can disappear forever."

I shook my head. "I can't."

"Why?" she knelt before me, begging. "Tell me why."

"Because my heart belongs to Elia, not to you," I said. "Not anymore."

"It's because I can't give you a baby," she said softly. "Isn't it?"

For a moment, the Bogatyr was gone and all I saw was Svetlana. Hurt and pain flitted across her face, as if she was still struggling to come to terms with what she had suffered because of me. She looked at me with a mixture of sadness and disappointment, and I felt overwhelming guilt crash against me.

“No, Sveta.” I shook my head. For a moment, I was foolish enough to believe that I’d gotten through to her. “It’s not that at all. It’s because of what you’ve become. The things that you’ve done.”

Shock, disbelief, and anger battled across the ruins of her face.

“I did those things for you.” Her shredded lips trembled. “I did everything for you. You hated your father, so I killed him for you. You needed someone pretty in your life, so I found her for you. You wanted to fly away with me once, but you couldn’t do that with your father’s Bratva dragging you back, so I destroyed it for you. Everything I did, Aleks, I did because it would bring us together. Because I still love you, even if I kept lying to myself that I didn’t.”

“You killed my mother, Sveta,” I whispered. “You caused the death of my baby sister.”

“No.” She shook her head, crying. “No, it was the Bogatyr. The Bogatyr is the monster who did those other things. Not me. Not Svetlana. Please, Aleks. Can’t you see that? I would never hurt you.”

“But you could and you did,” I said. “You’ve hurt me more than anyone else has ever hurt me. You have to let me go now, Sveta. You can’t keep living in the past. You have to move on.”

“No.” she whimpered. “No, I just got you back. I just saved you. I can’t ... I won’t.”

“You must.”

“No.” She shook her head again, but her tone was changing. Something shifted across her face, and just like that, Svetlana was gone again.

The Bogatyr returned.

Rising to her feet, the Bogatyr looked down at me. “You’re lying to me, Aleks.” Her voice was cold and distant. “And for that, you must be punished.”

Her hand reached into my pants pocket and pulled out my cell phone. She held it up to my face to unlock it and then dialed a number.

“What are you doing?” I asked, dread rising in my throat as the phone started ringing.

“Something I should’ve done the moment I had your pretty bitch in my hands.”

Panic washed over me as I realized what she was implying. “Please don’t do it.” I shook my head, struggling against the ropes as images from my own nightmare surfaced to haunt me. “Please don’t hurt Elia. Please! She has nothing to do with any of this!”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” The feral, vicious smile curled on the Bogatyr’s shredded lips. “That pretty bitch took you away from Svetlana. She’s the one who made you forget about the one who truly loves you. She and that baby growing in her belly.”

“Svetlana failed.” She took a deep breath, leaned forward, and tapped the tip of the knife softly against my cheek, whispering. “So now, it is up to me. I will do what she cannot. And nothing you do or say will stop me.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Elia

By the time we arrived at the police station where the FBI had set up their operations center, it was hard for me to make out the building through the swirling snow and wind. Flurries had turned into a blizzard, and it was hitting Chicago with full force. I wrapped my scarf tightly around my face as I stepped out of the car, thankful that the walk was short.

Lana led me down the hall toward the FBI's special operations center that had been set up earlier in the day, and there was a foreboding sense of grimness that hung in the air when I entered. Agents huddled together and whispered in harsh voices. I smelled stale coffee. But what caught my eye was the unfinished glass of whiskey on a nearby table. It looked like someone had just poured it out of celebration. Beside it were two empty seats.

My heart skipped a beat. Did Aleksey sit in one of those seats? Was this the last thing that my husband would leave for me? I clenched my fists at my side, refusing to succumb to the sea of emotions roiling inside of me. I had to be strong.

"Hello, Mrs. Korolev." An agent walked over and extended her hand in greeting. "Agent Veronica Diaz. Thank you for coming. We're still chasing any leads that we can find about your husband and Special Agent Chang. But weather's making things hell for us. Is there anything I can get you?"

"An update on what has happened would be nice," I said. I had to do something that took my mind off the fact that Aleksey was gone. I knew that I would crumble if that was the only thing I could focus on. "As much detail as you can share, please."

Agent Diaz looked at me for a moment before she nodded and offered me one of the two empty seats.

“We followed up on the information your husband provided us,” she said. “And deployed two tactical teams to intercept the transaction between Bukharin and the Korolev Bratva. At the same time, we deployed another tactical team to detain Glazov and seize whatever evidence he had in his office.” She cast a pensive glance at the untouched whiskey before continuing.

“We took down three of the men at scene and apprehended two of them,” she said. “We also have Glazov in custody, and agents are going over the paperwork we seized from his office.” She paused and pulled out her notebook. “We recovered about two million dollars cash from the suitcase at the scene, a number of explosive precursors, as well as several modified recreational civilian unmanned rotary aircraft.”

“I’m sorry,” I interrupted her. “I don’t understand what that means.”

“Basically,” she explained, “Bukharin was providing the Korolev Bratva with recreational drones, the same kind that you can buy at a mall. Simple stuff that even a kid can operate. But they were modified to be able to drop explosives whenever someone pressed the button to take a picture. In other words, Bukharin’s representative sold them the means to drop bombs whenever and wherever they want. And you can control it all from a phone.”

My blood went cold, but Agent Diaz wasn’t done talking.

“There’s quite a bit of discrepancy between the cash and the items we recovered.” She sighed deeply. “And based on some of the documents we recovered from Glazov, it seems that the cash was the final payment for what had been several prior shipments of explosives and drones. Forensics teams sent to the sites of the explosions have also submitted reports that the residues match the chemical profiles of the precursors that we recovered.”

“I won’t lie to you, Mrs. Korolev,” she said grimly. “If the numbers from Glazov are anything close to the truth, then the Korolev Bratva has enough firepower to turn this city into a war zone.”

“All the more reason we need to stop them,” I said. “That’s why my husband was so prepared to offer his assistance in the matter.”

“And we appreciate that.” She nodded. “I shudder to think what could’ve happened if we didn’t have that information.”

“What can you tell me about the two other men you took into custody?” I asked, changing the subject slightly.

I wondered if I would recognize any of them and whether the Bogatyr had sent brigadiers or just foot soldiers to conduct the exchange. If what the agent told me was true, it wouldn’t be prudent for the Bogatyr to send foot soldiers to make such an important purchase.

“We have photos from intake,” Agent Diaz answered. “Would you like to see them?”

I nodded.

She stood up, grabbed a manila folder, and handed it to me. I opened it and gasped when a familiar face sneered back. The shiny scalp, the tattoo of a cross that peeked out from behind his ear, the worm-like lips, and the beady eyes that spoke of an unbridled talent for violence.

Gregor Konev.

The other person had a pointed face like a rat. Unkempt facial hair grew in random patches on his face, and there were bruises around his eye. Presumably from when he was tackled to the ground. I didn't know who he was.

“So far, neither of them is willing to talk,” she said. “No IDs either, so it's a bitch and a half for us to pull the records on them.”

“I know who he is.” I pointed to Gregor. “He's one of the brigadiers of the Korolev Bratva. His name is Gregor Konev.”

Agent Diaz quickly wrote down what I said and gestured at me to continue.

“He is the one who conspired with Glazov,” I said. “He's a murderer, a rapist, and he cannot be released.”

“Believe me, Mrs. Korolev,” she said. “We have no intention of releasing him. He shot at FBI agents, was found in possession of illegal explosives, and had a literal suitcase of money for a known Russian arms dealer. There isn't a lawyer in the world who can pry him out of jail.”

“I want to speak with him.” I stood up.

“I don’t advise that, Mrs. Korolev.”

I pursed my lips and felt anger boiling inside of me. What I really wanted to do was put a gun against Gregor’s head and kill him. That was the only justice a monster like him deserved. Selfishly, I also wanted to believe that he might be able to tell me where Aleksey was. Or if Aleksey was alive.

But there was a third reason that I needed to speak with him.

“I insist,” I said, a tremor hinted in my voice. “This man threatened my husband and me in our home. He won’t talk to law enforcement because he’s a career criminal. But he will taunt me. And that’s where he might slip up and offer some useful information.”

Agent Diaz looked down at her notebook, thinking deeply. Finally, she nodded. “Follow me, Mrs. Korolev.”

Chapter Forty

Elia

I felt myself shaking when I walked into the interrogation room where Gregor was held. Even though he was cuffed and chained against the table that was bolted to the floor, his size made the chains look like linked paperclips. He looked like he could rip the chains free if he wanted to. The door behind me clicked shut with a loud *thunk*, and I clenched my fists at my side as my heart raced.

I was alone with him.

Gregor turned his head toward me. His beady eyes didn't look at my face but at my chest. His worm-like lips shifted, and he made a lewd kissing noise at me.

"You look good, Elia Ludovicovna." He licked his lips. "I could gobble you up." He snapped his fingers. "Like that."

Tarallos are made of stronger stuff, I reminded myself as I sat down across the table from him. As soon as I did, he sat up just a little straighter so that he looked down at me, leaned forward, and took a deep breath.

"Oh, you smell good too," he purred. "I bet if I pry those legs apart, you'll taste just as sweet as you smell."

"You don't scare me."

Suddenly he jerked his hands toward me. The table rattled. The chain pulled taut with a loud *pop!* But it held. Yet I had

jumped back already. Gregor chuckled—a low rumbling sound filled with malice.

“Looks like I do,” he said as he raped me with his eyes. “Why are you here, Elia Ludovicovna? Are you the good cop of this good-cop-bad-cop routine? I’ll tell you the same thing that I told the real cops. I want my lawyer.”

“Glazov is locked up too,” I said, smoothing my hands over the table as I fought back my urge to shrink back from his gaze. “You’re shit out of luck.” I clenched my jaw. “Where is my husband?”

“How should I know?” Gregor leaned back. “I hadn’t seen him since that night at the warehouse.”

“The night you killed Alya,” I reminded him.

“Now, now.” He pointed a fat, wagging finger at me. “That’s not fair. *I* didn’t kill her.”

My hand slammed against the table. “You kidnapped her. You tortured her! It doesn’t matter if you weren’t the one who pulled the trigger! You gave the order!”

“Technically,” Gregor snarled, “I gave no orders. If you remember, Elia Ludovicovna, it was supposed to be a trade. Your husband didn’t honor the terms of the trade, and poor Alya paid the price for his deceit.”

“You piece of shit,” I snapped. “Alya was completely innocent! You just wanted to hurt Aleksey.”

“Well, yes.” He nodded. “He broke our one code. He started working with law enforcement. What’s more, he wasn’t willing to punish the cunt who took you.”

“Don’t call her that.” I shook my head in fury. “You have *no* right to call her that.”

“You know what your problem is, Elia Ludovicovna?” Gregor smirked. “You are so eager to forgive your enemies when you should be crushing them. She kidnapped you. She threatened to cut your baby out of you.”

I couldn’t keep my expression neutral at the reminder, and Gregor seized the moment.

“Oh yes, she and I had a long talk.” The dark rumbling laugh rose from his throat again. “We talked about all the good times we had.”

“You mean when you raped and mutilated her?”

“The point is, Elia Ludovicovna.” Gregor’s smile faded a little. “You are soft. Just like your *petukh* of a husband. You’re not willing to do what is necessary. You’re not willing to put blood on your hands to show that you will not back down.”

I shook my head at him. *If only he knew*. But I wasn’t here to convince Gregor of what I was. I had come here for information from him.

“Because I’m not a monster like you,” I said. “And neither is Aleksey.”

“Oh, that much is true.” Gregor nodded. “I had high hopes for that boy. I thought he’d be Fyodor Yevgenievich’s spitting image. But I was so wrong.”

“Is that why you conspired with Glazov?” I asked. “Is that why you wanted the Bratva for yourself?”

“Someone had to respect Fyodor Yevgenievich’s legacy,” Gregor replied. “Someone had to ensure that the Korolev name still commanded respect. Still commanded fear. Do you have any idea how many of the boys laughed at your darling Alyosha behind his back?”

“Fyodor Korolev’s legacy deserves no respect,” I told him. “And Aleksey is an infinitely nobler man than his father.”

“Noble or not, Alyosha couldn’t hold this city together the way Fyodor Yevgenievich did.” Gregor shrugged. “And if he couldn’t do it, then somebody else had to.”

“Someone like the Bogatyr?”

Gregor laughed loudly. “You think the boys and I were going to let that bitch come anywhere *near* the Bratva?” He leaned forward menacingly and the chain pulled taut again. “No, Elia Ludovicovna. We took it for ourselves. As far as we see it, the Korolev name is just that: a name. But it has always been *us*, the brigadiers on the ground, who enact the pakhan’s will. So why shouldn’t we rule ourselves for ourselves?”

“Then why did you free her from jail?” I asked.

“Because we could control her.” The evil smile grew wider and wider on Gregor’s face. “All we had to do was touch her shoulder, and she folded like a wet napkin. We needed her to be the one who would take the blame for everything. And even though she’s not much of a looker anymore, she’s still a screamer.”

The thin links of the chain strained as Gregor pulled himself closer to me until I could smell the stench of his breath.

“And I like screamers,” he snarled and gave the chain one final hard tug.

To my horror, the metal snapped apart and his large meaty hands came flying toward my neck. I pushed myself back from the table, toppling over the chair, but not before I felt the tips of his fingers brushing the front of my clothes.

The door flew open, and police officers rushed in just in time, along with Agent Diaz and Lana. The officers pushed a pair of stun batons into Gregor’s neck while Lana and Agent Diaz pulled me back from his reach.

Gregor roared in pain as the shock blasted through his body, and then he fell face-first into the table, twitching as more officers poured into the room.

Chapter Forty-One

Elia

“That was stupid, Elia,” Lana said as she handed me a mug of tea. “Do you have any idea how close he came to hurting you?”

“A bit, yeah.” I took a sip from the tea, savoring its warmth.

The sensation of Gregor’s fingers dragging along the front of my clothes was still fresh in my head. But he was now sedated and put back into his cell. A guard kept watch on him with a gun in hand and had orders to shoot if he so much as twitched the wrong way.

“Then why’d you do it?”

I took another sip. “Because I needed him to confess,” I said. “He wasn’t going to do it to the FBI or Chicago PD. But he would by taunting me.” I turned to Agent Diaz. “You got everything he told me, right?”

“Yep.” She nodded. “You did a damn good job there, Mrs. Korolev. At great personal risk, too, I might add. My boss isn’t going to be happy that I put a civilian in potential danger, but she won’t pass up more self-incriminating evidence from a known criminal. And trust me, what you got him to say is enough for us to nail him on a litany of charges.”

I smiled weakly and breathed a sigh of relief. At least I was able to help exact some degree of justice. But there was still one problem. I had made no progress in finding out Aleksey’s

status. But if what Gregor told me was true, then he didn't know either.

Which meant that the only person who might know was the Bogatyr.

“Damn shame you didn't get a chance to ask him about what else they're planning to do with the drones,” Agent Diaz said. “But I guess we can thank God for this blizzard right now. It's going to be damn hard for anyone to try and fly those things in this mess.”

“We'll take whatever wins we can,” I said.

“Damn right.” She nodded. “Look, I'll leave you two to it. I'll see about scrounging up some food. You girls hungry?”

“No,” I replied. “Just exhausted.”

“I bet.” She smiled. “Well, I'll grab you two some pizza just in case.”

As Agent Diaz walked away, Lana sat across from me and stared at me as silence descended between us once more. I continued to sip at the tea in my hand as my mind turned back to Aleksey. Speaking with Gregor—as unnerving and terrifying as it was—helped keep my mind from those spiraling thoughts.

The fluorescent light above me buzzed as I stared blankly ahead.

I glanced around the room, trying to focus my attention on something else. *I should've asked Diaz if there were any updates on Aleksey while I was talking with Gregor*, I thought. But at the same time, I was sure that if there were any updates, she would've told me immediately.

“Elia ...” Lana started.

I looked at her. As much as I welcomed her attempt to distract me from my thoughts, I wasn't sure if I was in much of a mood for small talk. So, I shook my head and took another sip of my tea.

“Elia.” Lana tried again, more forcefully this time.

“What?” I finally set my tea aside and looked at her.

She pointed to my purse. “Your phone. It's ringing.”

Heart racing, I fumbled for my purse. My hand shook with anticipation. I reached in and grabbed my phone but kept my hand inside the purse. It was still ringing. *It's probably Carlos or Boris*, I told myself. *They're probably just updating you on what's happening*. I wasn't sure if I was ready to hear any updates from them either. But I couldn't just duck their calls.

I took a breath, pulled it out, and my heart stopped when I saw the name.

Aleksey Korolev.

Racing to press the phone against my ear, I answered.
“Aleksey? Oh, thank God, you’re okay! Where are you?”

But instead of Aleksey, a different voice answered.

A voice that knocked the breath out of me when I heard it.

“Hello, pretty bitch.”

“No!” Lana exclaimed a few minutes later. “Absolutely not! You are not going by yourself.”

“Lana, I have to,” I said. “She’s going to kill him if I don’t.”

“And you think she won’t kill you?” Lana threw her arms in the air. “Elia, the woman is insane! I won’t let you walk into the most obvious trap in the history of traps.”

“I agree with Ms. Keller,” Agent Diaz said. “The FBI cannot in good conscience just let you go to her alone. If you give us some time, we can put together a tactical response team and have them cover you.”

“No, her terms were clear,” I reminded them both. “Just me. No cops. No FBI.” *No brigadiers or capos either.*

“And there’s nothing we can say to convince you otherwise,” Lana said. “Is there?”

“Unfortunately not,” I replied. “This is what it was always going to come down to, Lana. Just the three of us.”

“This is the Bogatyr that was mentioned in the interrogation room?” Agent Diaz asked.

I nodded.

“And what exactly are you going to do once you arrive?” Lana took me by my shoulder. “Talk to her in the hopes that she’ll just let the two of you go? That bitch told you she was going to carve your baby out of her. She’s literally forcing you to make a choice that you should never have to make.”

“I don’t know.” And that was the truth. I had no idea how she would react to me. I had no idea if she would even consider the possibility that I would ever be allowed to leave once I showed up. Most likely not. But what other option did I have at this point?

“Wait a moment,” Agent Diaz said. “I have an idea.”

“What is it?” I asked her.

“She said you had to go alone, right?” she started. “But she didn’t say anything about what you’re allowed and not allowed to bring.”

I nodded.

“Our field agents have a tracking chip in their phone cases,” she continued. “I’m sure we can bend the rules just a little and

lend you one. This way, we can keep an eye on you and have a tactical ground team in the vicinity to respond as needed.”

“That could work,” I said.

“Then it’s settled.” She clapped her hands together. “I’ll go do some sweet talking and get everything ready to go.” She reached over and squeezed my shoulder. “You’ve done a lot of good today, Mrs. Korolev. We’ll get you and your husband home safe. I promise.”

Don’t make a girl a promise ... I opened my mouth to say the words, but stopped myself. “Thank you, Agent Diaz.”

“Please.” She smiled. “Call me Veronica.”

Chapter Forty-Two

Aleksey

The ropes that bound my arms and legs to the chair chafed against my skin, and my shouts were muffled against the gag in my mouth. When the Bogatyr sent her demands, I raged and struggled against the ropes to no avail. I couldn't even yell out to Elia that this was a trap and that she should stay away.

For what felt like forever, the Bogatyr taunted me. She described in aching detail the unspeakable things she was about to do once Elia arrived. I stared through her the entire time, focusing my attention on Special Agent Chang's lifeless body near the empty seat across from me.

Angry wounds covered his body, and his pistol stuck out uselessly from the holster by his side. I kept my eyes focused on the pistol.

If only I can get to it... I thought as I struggled against my restraints again. But it was useless.

"Oh, I almost forgot to show you this," the Bogatyr said as she pushed my phone in front of my face again to unlock it.

A few swipes later, she booted up what looked like a live feed from a drone. I immediately recognized the dilapidated industrial complex that was the Damen Silos. A puff of snow blew past the camera and the image wobbled. She swiped the feed and it changed to another view. This time, it overlooked the entrance. She swiped through one feed after another.

“Here’s the best part.” The Bogatyr walked behind me, leaned forward, and whispered in Svetlana’s voice. “It sends me a notification the moment a drone picks up movement. We’ll know immediately if your pretty bitch is on her way.”

I tried to say something, but the gag prevented me from forming words. The Bogatyr smirked, reached up, and removed my gag.

“And what happens,” I coughed, “if every single one starts sending you notifications because Elia brought both mine and her father’s men with her?”

“Oh, I didn’t think about that.” She mocked surprise. “Oh, I suppose I would have to surrender.” She extended her arm and showed me the screen. “Or I could do this.” She tapped the button to take a photo on the live feed.

Something small fell away from the picture, spiraling in the air. It disappeared into a puff of snow on the ground. A second later, it exploded.

“And I have it rigged so that if I don’t acknowledge the notification in two seconds, it automatically makes a drop.” A gleeful smile unfurled across her shredded lips. “So you were saying?”

My heart sank. Elia was walking right into a trap, as was anyone who was coming to rescue her. Suddenly, my phone chirped. The Bogatyr’s lone green eye lit up.

“Oh my!” she exclaimed as she tapped the notification.

A new video feed appeared. A lone car pulled into the entrance. It stopped, extinguished its lights, and the driver's door opened to reveal Elia.

No ...

“We have a visitor, Aleks!” she said.

Despair gave way to terror. I'd never felt so helpless as I did right at this moment. I was completely at the Bogatyr's mercy. *Elia* was about to be completely at her mercy. *And our unborn child ...* That very thought shattered my heart. I was on the verge of losing one, if not both, of them. I had to do something. I had to protect them.

I struggled against the ropes again, but it was no use.

“Please,” I begged. “Please. Not Elia. Not her. Not our baby. I already told you. You can do whatever you want with me, but not to them! Please!”

She hooked her finger under my chin and forced me to look at her.

“Oh, Aleks,” she cooed. “I know you can beg better than that. Now, sit tight. I'm going to let in our guest.”

I heard the sound of a metal door being wrenched open somewhere in the distance. Frigid air blasted from the outside, and then the door squealed close again. I closed my eyes. *No ... Why'd you have to come for me, Elia? You were safe.* Something was on the verge of breaking inside of me. I didn't

want her to see me like this. I didn't want this to be her or my last memory of us.

"Honey, we have a guest!" the Bogatyr announced.

I forced my eyes open and felt all strength drain out of me at the sight. Elia was standing behind the chair opposite me.

The cold wind had added a touch of rosy red to her cheeks. Her hands were laced together, cradling the bump in her belly. Her long dark hair fell over one shoulder, just like it had that night I first saw her outside of the bar in Williamsburg. I had saved her that night.

I couldn't save her now.

"Elia," I choked. "Why?"

"Because I can't leave you, Aleksey." She blinked away the tears that threatened. "Because a world without you is not a world that I want to be in. Because I love you!"

"I love you too," I said. "But you shouldn't have come."

"But she's here now!" The Bogatyr stepped behind me.

She grabbed my head and jerked my head up to expose my throat. The cold bite of the knife rested against my throat.

"Let him go," Elia said, pain and desperation in her dark eyes. "Please. Let him go and this will all be over. We won't come

after you. We won't turn you in. Please."

"Oh," the Bogatyr chuckled. "What an offer, pretty bitch. But unfortunately, that's not what I want."

"Elia, don't worry about me," I said. "Just get out of here while you still can."

"Please don't take him away from me," she said. "The way that he was taken away from you."

"How dare you lecture me, you pretty bitch!" the Bogatyr pointed the knife toward her. "How dare you compare yourself to me! You haven't even suffered as much as a tenth of what I suffered! If you want to save him, then you'll give me what *I* want! That child growing in your belly!"

"This baby can't live outside of me," Elia said with tears in her eyes. "He's too young. He won't make it. Please don't do this."

"I don't care if your baby lives! I care that you suffer like I did. That you'll spend the rest of your life with the knowledge that you will *never* be a mother! Give up your own womanhood, or I'll slit his throat from ear to ear!" the Bogatyr shrieked. "You think I won't slit his throat, pretty bitch?"

"ELIA! DON'T!" I begged.

This couldn't be happening! I couldn't let her do that for me. Not for me! I had to find a way to stop this before it was too late! I struggled against the ropes again, trying to free myself

so that I might be able to stop the Bogatyr myself. But it was no use. All I could do was scream and rage helplessly.

Elia gave a small perceptible nod, and I screamed until my throat was raw.

“Get in the chair, pretty bitch!” the Bogatyr spat.

Elia took a tentative step forward and suddenly doubled over, gasping out in pain as she dropped to one knee.

I struggled against my restraints again.

Just then, Elia reached over and yanked out Special Agent Chang’s pistol from the holster still on his body. She racked the slide with practice. A torrent of power surged through her dark eyes. I felt pride wash over me at the sight of the determination in her eyes as she aimed the pistol calmly at the Bogatyr.

I felt a sharp stab of pain as the Bogatyr dragged the knife gently along my neck. Enough to make me bleed, but not enough to kill. I felt the warmth of her body come closer as she hid herself behind my body from Elia.

“Go ahead, pretty bitch.” I could hear the smile in her voice.
“Take the shot.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Elia

“Go ahead, pretty bitch,” she taunted. “Take the shot.”

I held the pistol calmly in my hand and stared at the Bogatyr. She was hunched over behind Aleksey, exposing only a sliver of herself to me. Her lone green eye peeked out from behind Aleksey. In one hand, she held his head, and her arm was wrapped against his body. The edge of the blade pressed dangerously to his throat. It looked possessive, and in that moment, I felt both pity and rage rushing through me.

Pity, because I knew that was how she must've once held him. Without the knife, she could be cradling his face in her embrace. It was a gesture that I was intimately familiar with.

And hatred, because she was touching him the way that I would have. But underneath the surface of the jealousy I felt, I remembered the sickening image of Alya falling backward in her chair at the warehouse. I remembered how cold Uncle Misha felt as he gave me one final hug before he greeted his end at the mansion.

I remembered the way Aleksey whispered at his mother's headstone before gently kissing the cold, unfeeling stone in the rain. I remembered the way he couldn't let go of the dirt over his sister's grave.

The Bogatyr had ripped every one of them out of his life. And for that, I hated her. I hated her for hurting him.

Whatever love she might have once held for him all meant nothing after that.

I stepped to the side, and the Bogatyr moved in sync to keep Aleksey between the two of us, making sure there was no way I could shoot her without hitting Aleksey in the process. Her green eye stared daggers at me.

“Well, well,” she taunted behind Aleks. “Looks like you can’t risk hurting Aleks to kill me.”

“Let him go,” I said. “And I’ll let you live.”

“Never!”

I continued to step to the side, putting myself into the blind spot where her useless eye couldn’t see me. When I had moved far enough, she shifted. And that was when I saw my opening. I squeezed the trigger. The pistol jerked in my hand. My ears rang from the sound, but I could still hear the Bogatyr cry out in pain as she crumpled behind Aleksey.

I made my way toward them both. The Bogatyr lay on her back and cried out in pain. Her hand covered her side, and a pool of dark red was spreading beneath her.

I leaned over to look for the knife, and that was when she pushed herself up from the ground. The silver arc of the knife rose up and I squeezed the trigger again. The Bogatyr screeched in pain, but the knife was already on its way down.

White hot pain exploded in my leg as the knife slashed away at my thigh. I turned away to keep the baby out of harm.

Dropping to one knee, I pointed and fired one final time.

The knife finally slipped from her hand and clattered to the floor. Quickly, I grabbed it and started cutting away the ropes binding Aleksey's right hand. As soon as I freed it, I handed the knife to him so that he could start working on the other hand.

Soon, he was free and he rushed toward me. The adrenaline started to fade from my system, and my knees turned rubbery. I collapsed, and he caught me in his strong arms.

"Aleksey ..." I breathed.

"You're okay," he stammered. "You're okay."

Without another word, he pressed his lips to mine and helped me over to the other seat. The gun suddenly felt heavy in my arm, and I let it slip from my fingers. Something warm was running down my leg.

"You're going to be okay," he said to me.

Suddenly, I heard the loud *bang* of something exploding somewhere far away. And then there was another *bang*.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Aleksey looked back at the Bogatyr on the ground. She was still writhing in pain. Aleksey's phone was still in her hand, but she couldn't unlock it. Notification after notification flashed across its screen.

“The drones!” he gasped. “She rigged a bunch of drones ...”

“... to drop explosives,” I finished. “Yeah, the FBI caught me up on all of that.”

“They’re coming,” the Bogatyr said, her voice hoarse and weak. She raised his phone up at him.

Another *bang* went off in the distance.

“Who is coming?” Aleksey asked as he made his way over to her. “The brigadiers?”

She nodded. “I’m sorry,” she muttered as her face turned pale. Her voice started trembling. “I’m sorry, Aleks.”

“Elia!” He turned toward me. “Check Chang’s body for extra magazines. We’re going to need those soon.”

I nodded and bent to my task, rummaging through Chang’s pockets. But all I found was a single extra magazine. Another *bang* went off in the distance. I heard the sound of men shouting somewhere.

I looked over at the two of them and froze when I saw that Aleksey was cradling her in his arms. Tears were running down her face, and she clung to his shirtsleeve. Her shredded lips trembled. A gasp of pain escaped from her lips and she shivered, crying out softly as the last traces of the Bogatyr disappeared from her face.

“I’m sorry, Aleks.” She trembled. “I’m so sorry for what I did. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t—”

“Hush.” Aleksey shook his head as he held her. “Save your strength. We’re going to get you out of here.”

“No,” she said. “No, you’re not.”

I walked over to the two of them, pain flaring in my leg with every labored step. She didn’t look at me. Instead, her lone green eye was fixated on Aleksey. The hatred that I had grown so accustomed to seeing in it was gone. In its place was the endless depth to a sea of emotions. Emotions that she once felt and lived in before the Bogatyr consumed them all.

“Oh, Aleks.” She cupped his face. “Let me look at you one last time.” Her hand fell away and left a streak of her blood behind. “Before I go.” A weak smile curled upon her face. “I’m sorry.” Her eye started closing.

Aleksey said nothing; he just nodded.

“Please don’t let me wake up,” Svetlana whispered, dying. “Please don’t bring me back to this world.”

Chapter Forty-Four

Aleksey

I looked down at Svetlana's face as I felt her life slowly fade from her. Relief and sorrow battled inside of my soul. She had suffered unimaginable things because of me. I continued to hold her in my arms even as her body started to grow cold. With her eye closed, she finally looked like she was at peace. My nose stung, and my vision blurred as tears threatened my eyes.

A hand gently touched my shoulder. I turned, took a deep breath, and looked up at Elia. She looked pale, and her dark eyes were wide. Reality came crashing back, and I heard the sound of men shouting somewhere outside.

I pulled myself out from under Svetlana's body and gently laid her down on the ground. We would have to come back for her later. But right now, we needed to get out of here.

I stood up and reached out for the pistol. "Get behind me," I said as soon as I took the pistol from her.

She nodded and did as she was told. A man burst through the door, and I fired the pistol three times in quick succession. He crumpled to the ground, and his rifle fell away from his grip.

I threw Elia a quick glance before I dove for the rifle, bringing it up just in time as another man rushed through. I held the trigger down, and the gun screamed at the would-be killer.

"They're on their way!" she shouted at me. "Twenty minutes."

“That’s longer than we might have,” I grunted as I slid the pistol over to her. “Here!”

Falling to one knee, I shouldered the rifle and fired at the first man I saw. There didn’t look to be anyone else.

“Let’s go!” I went back, grabbed Elia’s hand, and practically dragged her out the door into the cold air. The car! We rushed toward it. But just as we got close, I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket.

Oh no!

The drone buzzed overhead as I reached into my pocket, hoping to get to the notification before the drone dropped its explosive.

One.

Two.

Something plopped into the snow next to us. Quickly, I shoved Elia behind the open car door, grabbed the bomb, and hurled it away before I threw myself over her. A loud *bang* rose up in the cold air and knocked the breath out of my lungs. Something searing hot peppered my back, and I screamed out in pain.

“Are you okay?” Elia asked.

“I’ll be fine,” I coughed. “What about you?”

“Just my leg,” she said. “But otherwise I’m still okay.”

I held up my phone to my face to unlock it and then handed it to her. “Here,” I said. “If you see a notification pop up for the drone, tap on it. If you don’t do it in two seconds, it’ll drop a bomb.”

She nodded and held the phone. I looked at the car and saw that it had taken the brunt of the explosion. But its tires were flat. Smoke rose from the engine block. There was no way it could drive anymore, let alone drive through the snow. We were stuck here until Lana could get to us.

The metallic taste rose in my mouth again and I coughed. I tasted something warm and salty.

“Aleksey!” Elia screamed.

I reached up and touched my mouth. When I pulled my hand away, I saw bright red blood. I coughed again, and more blood came up. The strength went out of my legs and I slumped down. My breathing became ragged, and I was aware of just how tired I felt.

My back felt cold, wet, and raw. Elia’s hands reached over to touch it and came back red with blood.

“Oh,” I said as I stared at her bloody fingers.

“Aleksey, you’re bleeding.” Her voice was shaking. “You’re bleeding a lot.”

“Yeah,” I grimaced. “That’s definitely what it feels like.”

My vision blurred momentarily as a dizziness overtook me. I looked up at Elia. Tears swam in her dark eyes, and they looked even more like the ocean at dusk.

“You can’t die,” she cried. “You can’t. Help is coming! They’ll be here soon.”

Metal and salt coated the inside of my mouth. But even then, my fingers found their way into hers. I pressed her hand to my lips. But when I pulled them away, they came away red with my blood.

“I don’t think I’m going to make it.” I closed my eyes. “That’s a lot of blood.”

I felt her other hand slapping me awake. “Don’t say that! You’re going to make it. You’re going to make it, and you’re going to be a great father. And we’re going to have more than one child. We’re going to have so many kids. More kids than you’ll know what to do with.”

“Sounds loud.” I smiled at the image. “But if that’s what you want.”

“Yes, that’s what I want,” she sputtered, laughing nervously through her tears. “That’s why you can’t die! Don’t leave me alone in this world without you! Aleksey!”

“Is that your order, my dear wife?” I asked, grinning as coldness seized me. In my deliriousness, I could’ve sworn I heard sirens somewhere in the distance.

“Yes!” she cried, nodding her head fiercely in the cold. “Yes, that’s my order, my stubborn husband!”

“Oh good.” I closed my eyes. “If that’s the case, then I’ll try my best not to die.”

Chapter Forty-Five

Elia

I paced the floor of the hospital hallway, nervously chewing my nails with every step as my shoes echoed on the linoleum floor.

Aleksey had fallen unconscious when the FBI tactical ground team arrived. Without another word, they sped away toward the hospital. En route, they bandaged up my leg enough so that I could put weight on it. But Aleksey didn't look good. His face was pale, and his skin felt clammy to the touch by the time we arrived at the hospital.

The emergency room staff immediately wheeled him away as soon as we came in. The FBI team stayed with me as I called Lana. And now, the only thing I had to do was wait.

He'll be okay. I leaned against the wall. Fear and hopelessness waited on the edge of my mind. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying my best to push the negative thoughts away.

“Where is he?” a familiar voice roared.

I looked up and saw Boris rushing in with Lana in tow.

“He's still in surgery,” I said to him.

“But he's alive?” Boris asked.

I bit my lower lip and nodded. “For now.”

“Good.” He breathed out a sigh of relief, gave the FBI team a quick suspicious look, and then sank into a nearby chair.

“How are you?” Lana rubbed my shoulder, her eyes drifting toward my leg.

“I’ll be fine,” I said.

“And the Bogatyr?” she asked.

“She’s gone,” I replied curtly. There was so much more that I could say. But none of it was meant for Lana’s ears.

“So,” Lana started as she walked me over to a chair next to Boris. “It’s all over?”

I nodded. “I think so.”

“Oh, Elia.” Relief found its way into her eyes. Unable to come up with the right words, she drew me into a tight hug.

We stayed in the emergency room, waiting until sunlight peeked through the clear morning sky. The wind blew snowdrifts over the cold clear air, and a nurse gently shook me awake.

“Mrs. Korolev?” she asked gently.

“Yes?” I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

“Your husband is awake now.” She smiled. “Would you like to see him?”

“Yes!”

“Come with me, then.” She helped me up and led me to the room where Aleksey was waiting.

As soon as I saw him sitting up in bed, I felt a wave of relief washing over me. My worries and anxiety faded completely when he smiled at me. I had been terrified that I was about to lose him.

But now, as I looked at him lying there, I felt a sense of happiness and joy coursing through my body. The monitor beeped by his side, and there were still tubes attached to his body. But he was alive, and that was the only thing that mattered to me.

I walked over to him and took his hand in mine as our eyes locked. Emotion welled in my chest as I stared into his eyes. For a moment, neither of us said anything, content to just look at each other. Finally, a small smile rose up on his face, and my heart melted at the sight.

Leaning down, I kissed him on the forehead and sat down in the empty chair next to him. I looked over at the nurse. “Can we have some privacy, please?”

“Of course.” She smiled, drew the curtain, and left us to ourselves.

I didn’t let go of Aleksey’s hand, letting the sense of happiness and contentment wash over me in one successive wave after another as I held onto him.

“Hey,” I whispered.

“Hey, yourself,” he replied, the smile never leaving his face.

“Guess what?” I asked him gently.

“What?”

“We won,” I told him. “We did it, Aleksey. Gregor. Glazov. The Bogatyr. The Korolev Bratva. It’s all over.”

He finally closed his eyes and rolled over to his back. “It’s over,” he repeated after me as his hand squeezed mine.

Suddenly, the curtain pulled back. I turned and saw Boris and Lana looking at the two of us. Relief glimmered in both their eyes.

Boris’s face split into a wide smile, and a string of Russian poured out of him as he spoke to Aleksey. I looked at Lana. She smiled and gave me a curt nod. I turned my attention back to Aleksey and he did the same to me. Our hands remained intertwined. We’d been through hell and back, but we’d been through it together.

And no matter what course the road of life ahead of us took,
we would face it together.

Chapter Forty-Six

Elia

One week later

I led Aleksey into our bedroom, which had been empty for the last week while he recovered in the hospital, my hand refusing to let him go. He had finally been allowed to come home this morning. Boris had been kind enough to bring him a fresh change of clothing to replace the bloody and torn ones from his captivity. In his sharp suit and freshly laundered shirt, he looked every bit the powerful pakhan who stole my heart.

When I turned back to him at the edge of our bed, I caught the tenderness in his eyes.

“Off.” He stroked my face as he spoke. “I want it all off.”

My entire body thrummed in anticipation and need. “Who are you to be giving me demands?” I teased lightly.

“I’m your husband, Elia.” The need in his gaze burned as he looked at me. “And if you don’t take it off, I am more than happy to do it for you.”

“And you think I’m going to comply?” I smirked at him. “You think I’m just going to roll over and do what you want?”

“Yes, Mrs. Korolev.” He cupped my face. “That’s exactly what I expect you to do.”

I giggled and slowly pulled the sweater over my head, and then took my time as I peeled off the leggings.

We had all the time in the world now. And there was nothing that could distract us from our happiness.

“All of it,” he said hoarsely as he looked at my underwear. “I mean it, Elia.”

Slowly, I reached back to unclasp my bra and it dropped away a second later. Aleksey pulled in a sharp breath as he stared at my breasts, heavy from the pregnancy. He stepped closer and hooked his strong finger through the loop of my underwear.

I gasped involuntarily as the sensation ran down my body from his touch. Oh, I’d missed this. His hand slowly rolled the flimsy material off before roaming around to squeeze my ass. The tip of his finger dipped between my legs deliciously, and I heard a low growl escape his throat.

“Looks like you’re soaking wet.”

I bit my lip as his large hands gave me another sensual squeeze. My skin prickled in the cool air, and I reached up to unbutton his shirt. “Well,” I said softly. “What next?”

His thumb brushed over the bottom of the bump in my belly. “I’m going to devour you,” he said, pressing his searing hot lips against my neck. “Until there is no one else on your mind.”

As if there ever could be. He had consumed me from the first moment he stood in front of me outside of the bar in Williamsburg that night. In just a few short months, he’d become all that mattered in my life. I gasped when his hands

traveled upward to my breasts, covering them completely before he drew another tremulous gasp out of my throat with a gentle squeeze.

His lips descended my neck, traced the line of my collarbone, and then closed around a sensitive nipple. White hot heat shot through my gut, and I felt my knees weaken. He lit my body on fire. My hand rose up along his back, where the shrapnel of explosives had added new scars to his already scar-riddled body.

I clung to him, gasping, as his tongue lashed my nipple. I felt control slipping. I'd wanted this the moment I saw him smile at me in the hospital. And I had gone to sleep every night next to him, only to wake up soaking wet, dreaming of what he would do.

And now that he was doing it in person, I was helpless against his mouth. In his hands, I was a snowball in hell, and Aleksey Korolev was my personal devil. Each slow, teasing brush of his tongue peeled away another layer of resistance.

This was exactly what he wanted. And it was exactly what I wanted too.

Cool air breezed over my exposed flesh as he moved to the other nipple, giving it the same torturous attention.

"Please," I begged, gasping as he gently lowered me into bed. I reached for his pants, fingers fumbling to unbuckle him.
"Please."

He lifted his head, pulling away as he took my hands in his.
"This is my time, Elia," he mumbled. "You need to wait your

turn.”

I curled my toes at his words. God, I wanted him so badly. It wasn't *fair!*

“I hate you,” I teased him softly. “Have I told you that lately?”

“In that case.” A rumble of laughter shot through him as he planted one searing kiss after another on my body. “Let's see how much you hate me after this.” He crested the bump of my belly, his lips leaving behind a wet trail as he positioned himself between my legs.

He dropped to one knee and slowly opened my legs. I propped myself up on my arms and stared at him as he massaged the insides of my thighs. All thoughts other than lust and desire crumbled away. “Oh, Elia, Elia, Elia,” he said, his fingers trailing along my thigh, probing closer and closer to my soaked sex but never touching it. “I'm going to enjoy playing with you.”

“You are talking too much,” I panted, feeling his lips follow in the wake of his finger.

Aleksey pressed his lips where his fingers were, the warmth of his breath on my skin. “Nonsense.”

I bit my lips and threw my head back as each squeeze and kiss sparked jolts of pleasure across my body. A moan punched out of my throat and I felt my hips gyrating in need of his lips, his tongue, his kiss. He was doing this on purpose.

“Aleksey,” I breathed.

He lifted his head, a stupid grin on his face. “Yes, love?”

“Stop talking, please.”

His husky laugh warmed my insides, and he finally brought his finger to my aching wet slit. Another long moan rose up when his lips pressed into my very center. His tongue slipped between my folds and found my throbbing clit, and I bucked against the touch.

“Oh God,” I breathed, clutching the comforter. This was much better than any dream I could’ve had. He was drawing me back like a slingshot. Each swirl of his tongue against my clit built up another bit of tension that demanded release.

I started to tremble, forcing myself to focus on what he was doing to me. Whimper after whimper, each one higher pitched than the last, tumbled out with each laborious breath. My heart raced when he slipped a finger between my folds and touched me in a place that was reserved only for him.

Please, I begged silently as my back arched off the bed.
PLEASE!

“Come for me,” he breathed as he feasted between my legs.
“Elia.”

A wave of pleasure ripped through me, and I could feel my orgasm fighting to break through the surface. My body shook and trembled. My fingers gripped the comforter for life, and suddenly, the slingshot snapped.

I shrieked out in pleasure as my breath left my lungs. Sanity slipped away from my mind, and I existed in a world of nothing but sensations. Desire burned its way through my body, from the depth of my core to the very tips of my hair. I was helpless in his hands, reduced to moaning one lusty cry after another as he drank in every drop of my pleasure.

My hips pushed against him, and my hands fisted in his hair to pull him closer. I wanted more. I needed more. I wanted him to fill me, to use me, to hold me in place as he emptied himself inside of me.

“Aleksey,” I begged, sobbing his name as the aftershocks rippled through my body. “Please ...”

“Please, what?” He rose up above me and kissed my forehead. I heard the unbuckling of his belt and felt a new wave of heat rolling between my legs.

“Please fuck me,” I panted, opening my legs wider. “Fuck me like you own me. Fuck me like I’m your whore.”

“Such a dirty little mouth.” A slow, secret smile that I knew was only reserved for me crossed his lips. “Maybe I should fuck that mouth instead.”

“No,” I whimpered, shaking my head from side to side. “Fuck my pussy. Please. I need you to. You have to. Please, Aleksey!”

Aleksey gripped one of my legs and brought it to his chest, aligning our bodies together on the bed.

“Well, since you asked so nicely.”

Thick and hot, he entered me slowly. I shuddered and felt my heart skipping in desire and relief. *Yes ...* I felt tears welling in my eyes. This was what I wanted. He pushed deep past my folds, past my wet core, and didn't stop until he was buried to the hilt.

“I love you,” he said hoarsely, the teasing nature in his voice now replaced with something far more personal.

“I love you too,” I replied. “I love you so much.”

His expression softened and he began to move. I wrapped my legs around his lean waist, and he pressed firmly against that spot deep inside of me that marked me as his. I never pulled my eyes from his, arching my back to give him better access until there was no room left for him to go. I never wanted him to pull out.

I clung to his waist, urging him on until the bed was squeaking beneath us and I was wrapped up in his thrusts. Each thrust took my body higher than before. He groaned loudly in my ear as he fucked me in steady strokes that lit my body on fire once more. With each stroke, he drew out another husky moan from me.

Beads of sweat dotted his forehead, fell to my body, and blossomed into flowers before intermingling with mine. His hands found my hips. His mouth closed around mine. And white-hot pleasure speared through me again. I was being overwhelmed by my senses. The sound of our bodies slapping against each other. The scent of our desire and arousal. The taste of his tongue.

“Come for me,” he grunted, beads of sweat starting to break out on his forehead as another climax built deep inside of me. “I want to hear you scream my name.”

“Yes ...” I moaned. A moan became a cry. A cry turned into a scream. A scream into a long-sustained shriek. “Yes, Aleksey, yes!”

His hand slid between us and the moment he touched my clit, I fell apart, screaming his name as he drilled into me. I didn’t have to wait long for his release. With a loud roar, he flooded my center. A moment later and he collapsed into me.

For a while, we just lay there together, savoring the feel of our bodies against each other while we panted harshly from the exertion of what had just taken place. We were safe at last, and nothing could ever rip us apart.

His hand found mine, and he brought it to his lips for a soft kiss. “Are you all right?”

“I am,” I said. “But I might not be able to walk for a little while.”

He chuckled. “Just what every man wants to hear.”

“Welcome home, Aleksey.” A stupid smile crossed my face and I finally rolled over, cupping his cheek with my hand. “Ready for round two?”

“For you?” He pressed his lips to my cheek, kissing the scar on my face. “Always.”

Chapter Forty-Seven

Elia

Days later

Aleksey and I sat across the kitchen island from Lana as she pulled out a heavy stack of paper from her bag. When she'd called me the other day about wanting to talk, I had assumed that maybe Berkowitz was about to renege on the deal, before she assured me that she had nothing but good news.

"The evidence you turned over was good." Lana sipped from her coffee as she pulled out a sheet of paper. "The FBI has more than enough evidence to pin almost every one of the Korolev Bratva's crimes on Gregor Konev."

"And I have to hand it to you, Elia." She grinned at me. "Carlos and Boris had enough discretion to direct most of their attention to passing information on brigadiers to the FBI while they dealt with the foot soldiers. Which meant that we ended up with almost every one of them in custody."

"So, I'm guessing Berkowitz is satisfied with how everything turned out?" I asked.

"More than satisfied." She nodded. "In fact, he's so satisfied that he went and arranged the documents himself, notary and all." She turned to Aleksey. "Honestly, I didn't think that he was going to agree to it, but he did."

"And what about Bukharin?" Aleksey asked. "What's the FBI doing about him?"

“As luck would have it.” Lana looked at me. “The person that you couldn’t recognize? Turns out, he’s one of the guys that Bukharin frequently uses to help make transactions. More importantly, his phone had a whole mess of crypto keys that Bukharin used to help move money right under everybody’s noses without detection. I’ve talked to Agent Diaz about it, and she says that the FBI is making great headway in untangling his accounts.” She paused to take another sip of coffee. “That’s really the last part they needed to bring charges that’ll stick.”

“Does that mean we’re in the clear?” I asked. “It sounds like Berkowitz is agreeing to the terms of amnesty for us.”

“That’s pretty much it,” Lana said. “As long as you could guarantee that the men of the Tarallo Mafia don’t plan on returning to New York in a criminal capacity, Berkowitz had no problem signing this document.” She slid the piece of paper over to us.

Both Aleksey and I leaned forward and read the contents of it. It was an official document from the office of the New York district attorney that stated how the two of us had played an indispensable role in ending the threat of a major criminal organization and that we had done so at great personal risk.

I released a sigh of relief and laced my fingers with Aleksey’s. “You’re free,” I said to him. “We did it. We really did it.”

He looked back at me and smiled. “Because of you, my love.”

“Gross.” Lana shook her head, but she couldn’t hide the smile curling on her lips either. “There is one more thing that we need to discuss. Namely, the status of your witness protection program.”

I looked back and felt my heart sink slightly at the mention of that. Right, the witness protection agreement. We had pushed for that when we didn't know what the future would hold for us. But now, with the traitorous brigadiers having been arrested, with Svetlana no longer a threat, and with Gregor Konev out of the picture as well ...

It almost felt like witness protection would be overkill.

"I've been talking to Diaz about it," Lana said. "And she agrees with me."

My heart raced.

"Neither of us feels that it's necessary at the present time," she finally said. "But, if you guys still want it, well, the offer is on the table."

"That all depends on whether or not Gregor has a chance of getting out," Aleksey pointed out.

"Trust me." Lana held up her hand. "There's no way in hell that the FBI is about to let that bastard out of their sight. It's one thing to be a part of a criminal organization, but it's a hell of another thing to buy enough weapons from a known Russian arms dealer to equip a small army. And given the type of stuff that he was caught in the act of buying, I don't think he's looking at anything less than solitary confinement at a SUPERMAX facility."

Aleksey turned to me and I hugged him tightly, tears crowding my eyes.

“Again,” Lana said. “If you really want to push for witness protection, I can help draft the papers and push that out for you guys. But it doesn’t look like there’s really much of a threat against your lives.”

I nodded.

“Of course,” Lana added dryly. “You do need to make sure that you wash your hands of whatever it is that you guys built up during this time. This alliance of Korolevs and Tarallos is bound to cause trouble for the two of you down the line at some point, especially if you don’t rein in the illegal side of the business.”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Aleksey assured her as he pressed his lips against my temple. “I already have a plan for that.”

“You do?” Lana and I both asked him at the same time.

“Yes, I do.” Aleksey never took his eyes off me. “I promised that I would give you what you deserve the most, and you’ve made it clear from the day you married me that what you deserve is a life of peace, away from the legacy of our fathers.”

My heart leaped to my throat. *Did he mean to say what I thought he was about to say?*

“Which is why,” he continued. “I will put the leadership of the new organization to a vote. I’ve already spoken with Boris and Carlos about it, and neither of them is opposed. Whatever new

organization will come out of the Tarallo-Korolev alliance, it will exist without us at the helm.”

“Do you really mean it?” I asked, tears welling in my eyes as I stared at him. The possibilities of the life I dreamed of—normality, mundanity, and simplicity—flashed before my eyes. “Are you really about to give up all of this? Just for me?”

“If not for you.” He cupped my face, smiling. “Who else would I give it up for? Let’s walk away from this together, Elia, and spend the rest of our lives together. Just you and me.”

We spent the rest of the day going over every little minor detail and answering questions that Lana had. There were certain things that we weren’t able to tell her. Not because we didn’t want to, but simply because we didn’t know. By the time the sun painted the winter clouds brilliant red on its westward descent to the horizon, Lana had gotten all the information she wanted.

I gave Aleksey a quick peck and walked Lana to the elevator. “I’ll be just a minute.”

He nodded and walked back outside to the balcony to give us our privacy.

“You look happy,” Lana said. There was relief in her eyes. “Looks like you found what you were looking for at last, Elia. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, girl.” I closed the gap between us and hugged her tightly. “He’s everything I could’ve wanted. Even if it took some time for me to realize that.”

“And you’re sure that you want to stay here in Chicago?” she asked when we pulled apart. “Somehow, I can’t imagine seeing you pretending that a casserole is a pizza for the rest of your life.”

I giggled. “I’ll manage.”

“Look, don’t be a stranger, okay?” She squeezed my shoulders. “Promise me that you’ll come visit. Both of you. And the moment that he doesn’t make you happy, let me know so I can nail his ass to the wall.”

“I will.” I laughed and pulled her in for another hug. “Safe travels, girl. And I can’t wait for you to meet the third member of our little family soon.”

Lana nodded and released me, only to rest her hand slightly on my bump. “I am going to spoil this kid rotten.” She grinned. “You know that, right?”

“Of course.” I laid my hand on top of hers. “I expect nothing less from their godmother.”

Her eyes glazed over with tears and I gathered her against me once more, glad that we could close this chapter in our lives at last and start writing the next one.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Aleksey

Months later

I paced the halls of the hospital and rubbed a tired hand over my face. “How long does this take?”

Earlier in the night, Elia had woken me up with the news that her water broke and that our baby was coming. I tried to remain calm, of course. But my heart fluttered at the thought that I was about to hold our son or daughter in my hands soon. We had decided against finding out our baby’s gender, wanting it to be a surprise on the day of.

Hell, we hadn’t even picked out a name yet.

I thought I could handle the birth of my child. After all, I’d handled much worse throughout my life.

But it was like that old saying: everybody had a plan until they were punched in the mouth.

And waiting around without any information about how everything was going sure felt like a million different punches to the mouth. I never liked having things out of my control, and this ...

This was just about the ultimate thing that I exerted no control over, and I hated it. The funny thing was, it wasn’t even the doctor who kicked me out. It was Elia herself. I didn’t blame her. I was telling the doctor how to do his job, to the point that she outright yelled at me, telling me that if I wasn’t going to pull the baby out of her myself, then I could just wait outside.

Boris yawned, leaning against the wall next to the door as he watched me pace. “Would you relax? They’ll be fine.”

I stopped and glared at him. “It’s not my fault that the doctor didn’t know what he was doing.”

“Is that right?” Boris arched his brow and guffawed. “Since when did you become an expert on birthing? And as a reminder, googling it for about eight hours doesn’t count. Just relax, Alyosha.”

I looked away, swearing, and resumed my pacing. Whether I liked it or not, Boris was right.

In the couple of months since we finally received our amnesty papers, the new alliance of Korolevs and Tarallos had agreed to the succession plan that would allow me and Elia to step away for good.

To everyone’s surprise, Boris was elected by the men as the new don. When I had asked him about it, he shrugged, telling me that Carlos had gained a begrudging respect for him and was willing to vouch for him. I didn’t disagree. And truth be told, if there was one person who I trusted more than myself or Elia to lead this new organization, it was going to be Boris.

I felt nothing but gratitude when he showed up at the hospital to offer his support for me as I waited. But right now, I didn’t want any of his sass. There was enough for me to stress about without him adding to it. A million different scenarios ran through my head as I thought about how things could go wrong. Each one worse than the last.

“You’re right.” I forced my panic down, took a deep breath, and slowly pulled myself together. “You’re right; they’re going to be fine. I’m just panicking for no reason.”

“Well.” Boris smirked. “Not for no reason. Look, when my sister went into labor, I was just as nervous as you. But you have to let the professionals do their job. All you have to do is just get out of the way.”

“Shut up, Borya.” I shook my head, and the words slipped so naturally out of my mouth. “*Eto moi prikaz.*”

Boris laughed again. “You know that you have to be a pakhan to make those words mean something, right?”

I stared daggers at him, but he didn’t wipe the shit-eating grin off his face.

“Look,” Boris replied, clearly not believing me at all. “If you’re really worried and you want to be there for her, I’m not going to stop you. But Alyosha, for once in your life, try not to control everything and trust that things will work out.”

He kept talking, but I wasn’t listening anymore as I rushed down the hallway back to the door. I reached out, my heart thudding with trepidation. *You can do this*, I reminded myself. *Just go in and welcome your child to the world. Oh, and shut the fuck up so Elia doesn’t kick you out again.*

I could do this.

Drawing in a breath, I opened the door and stepped inside, leaving behind my cool mask of indifference as I made my

way to the bedside. Elia was red-faced and gasping in pain. And when she saw me, a mixture of emotions rose up on her face. Whether that emotion was relief, disbelief, or a mixture of both fueled by frustration and anger, I'd never know. The only thing I could do was walk up to her and take her hand in mine.

“What do you need me to do?” I asked her.

“I need you to shut the fuck up!” she yelled, shaking her head. “And just let me do what I need to do! Can you do that for me?”

I bit back whatever other words I had formed in my mind. Out of the million different things that I expected out of her, that wasn't it. I looked over to the other side of the bed and caught Lana Keller smirking at me. Annoyance flared up, then faded, when the smirk transformed into a reassuring smile.

“Relax,” she said. “El knows what she's doing.”

She wasn't wrong. But it didn't mean Elia was in any less pain, and I hated seeing her in pain.

“You're doing great, Elia,” the doctor said. “You're almost there.”

“JUST GET THIS KID THE FUCK OUT OF ME ALREADY!” Elia shrieked.

Everything after that felt like a blur. The only thing I could still remember was Elia squeezing my hand so tightly that it felt like my bones were breaking from her grip. It reminded

me of the day Uncle Misha presented the two of us before our wedding. We'd squeezed each other's hands—out of anger more than anything else—as we stared at the sea of guests before us. But now, it was just the four of us.

I felt my vision slowly going black around the edges and reminded myself to breathe. Elia shrieked once more in pain, and the sound tugged at my heartstrings.

Suddenly, I heard another sound. A baby's cry, loud and piercing.

“It's a boy!” the doctor called out. “Congratulations, Mrs. Korolev!”

Elia gasped with happiness. Tears and sweat were smeared across her face. I felt my own heart squeeze in joy against my chest. A boy. A son. *We have a son!*

“Oh, Aleksey!” Elia replied, laughter in her eyes as relief slowly overcame her. “Can you believe it? A boy!”

“Would you like to cut the umbilical cord?” The doctor looked at me and offered me a pair of scissors.

With shaking hands, I accepted the tool, and under the doctor's guidance, did my duty. A few minutes later, our son—wriggly and pink—was placed in Elia's arms. I looked down at him with her, at a loss for words. My throat was choked with a hurricane of emotions that I couldn't decipher, even if I wanted to.

The only thing I could think of was: *so this is what it feels like to be a dad.*

Not a father, like Fyodor had been to me or Ludovico had been to Elia. But a *dad*. One who would love and cherish his children. One who would be there for every scraped knee, every birthday, every celebration. And in time, see them get married and raise families of their own.

My vision blurred at the thought. *I'm a dad now ...*

It wasn't for another half hour or so, until the doctor did all the necessary post-birth checkups and blood work, and the room cleared, that I finally was able to breathe. I watched as Lana and Elia cooed over our son.

I didn't even notice Boris had stepped inside.

"Look at that!" he laughed, clapping me on the shoulder. "A son! Good work, Alyosha."

Elia's eyes met mine, and I saw happiness mixed with exhaustion. Her face was flushed. Her hair matted to her forehead. But she'd never looked more beautiful than she did now.

"What should we call him?" she asked. "We didn't exactly come up with a lot."

Boris winked. "I like Boris. Good strong name."

“Vetoed.” Elia laughed. “What about naming him after one of our fathers?”

I paled. “Absolutely not. Fyodor?” Stepping closer, I rested my hand on his head, still not believing that we had made this little guy. “It should be something that people can actually pronounce.”

“I guess that takes my father’s name out of the running too.” Elia closed her eyes, the smile never leaving her face.

I brushed my finger over my son’s soft cheek, and another name came to mind. “What about after your brother?” I suggested. Luca had been the most important person in her life, after all. It seemed only appropriate that he be honored.

Elia looked up, her eyes tearing. “Do you mean it?”

“I do,” I answered, brushing away the tear that rolled down her cheek. “Luca is a fine name.”

“What about Luke?” she suggested softly. “He can carry his uncle’s name but also make his own path.”

I looked at our son, testing the name out in my mind. “Luke is fine with me.”

“Luke.” Elia gazed at the baby in her arms. “Luke Korolev.”

Elia knew how to hit me right where it mattered the most. I watched as the most important people in our lives gathered

around the bed to get a better look at little baby Luke, and my heart swelled.

I would protect them with my life, this close circle that we had found. For my wife and my son, I would die.

A while later, Boris and Lana left to get some coffee, and I carefully took my son in my arms, marveling at how small he was.

“He’s so tiny,” I said hoarsely. “And so delicate. I’m afraid I’m going to hurt him.”

“No, Aleksey.” Elia laughed from her bed, her eyes shining.
“No, you won’t. You are going to be a perfect father.”

Epilogue

Elia

Autumn

The sun shone down from the clear blue Chicago sky. Orange and yellow leaves floated on the crisp autumn breeze. There was a hint of winter in the air, but the warmth of the sun chased away the cold as soon as the breeze halted.

Hand in hand, Aleksey and I walked through the quiet lawn of the cemetery until we found ourselves standing in front of the three gravestones that bore the names of his mother, uncle, and sister. Little Luke was still asleep in the baby carrier in front of Aleksey.

The graves were still immaculate. Boris had sent someone to clean them every week and place a set of fresh flowers on them as well. I carried something in my hand as well. The demon-faced pin that once belonged to Luca.

Gingerly, I took Luke from Aleksey so that he could bend down and pay his respects to the dead.

He stopped first at Raissa's tombstone, traced his finger sadly along the name, and muttered Russian words that rippled and shifted like a hushed liturgy as he confessed his love in the ways that only a son could to his mother. I didn't know what he said, but I understood the intent.

Then, he switched to English. "I did what you told me to." A tear rolled down his face. "I walked away from the life of bloodshed and violence. Just like you said. I found what matters most in this life. And I'm sorry you weren't around to see it."

Slowly, I knelt beside him as he rested his forehead against the tombstone. His body shook as great drops of tears fell, hard and fast, against the cold stone. He looked at me before he turned back to his mother's grave and placed a ginger kiss upon it.

I did the same, laying down a brilliant white carnation before it. "Thank you, Raissa Antonovna," I whispered. "Thank you for bringing Aleksey to this world. Thank you for trusting him with me." And with that, I added my own kiss.

We made our way to the next grave, where Uncle Misha was. This time, I knelt first and laid down the pink carnation on it, and along with it, Luca's demon-faced pin. "Thank you, Uncle Misha," I said. "For arranging it so that Aleksey was mine. Thank you for giving us the chance that we had. And thank you for saving us."

Sniffing, I kissed the stone and brushed away a speck of dirt from the stone. Aleksey poured a shot of vodka and placed it atop the tombstone as he spoke to his uncle.

Finally, both of us knelt down by Alya's grave and placed a bouquet of delicate yellow daisies that reminded us of her innocence. My throat bobbed and the tears came. Aleksey's hand reached over and pulled me in close as he spoke.

"Hey, *malyshka*." Tears streamed down his face. "I'm sorry it's been so long since our last visit. You would've loved a day like today. And you would've loved your nephew. I'm sorry I couldn't keep you safe. I'm sorry I couldn't save you. I'm sorry I wasn't the protective big brother you needed me to be."

He paused for a moment to gather himself.

“But, *malyshka*,” he said. “You were right. You were right about Elia. You were right about me. You were always wise beyond your years. I wish you were here with us.” He looked at the other two gravestones. “I wish you all were still here with us. There’s so much that we never told each other. There’s so much yet to tell. It’s not fair that you were all taken away.” He turned back to Alya. “Especially you, *malyshka*. But I know you’re in a better place and that you’re watching over me. Watching over Elia. And watching over little Luke.”

My hand slipped into his, and he gave it a gentle squeeze.

“I love you,” he whispered. “I love all of you. I’ll never forget you, and I’ll never stop missing you.”

The two of us placed one final kiss each on Alya’s grave. Our respects paid, we slowly stood up, brushed away the leaves and dirt from our clothes, and walked to a different corner of the cemetery, where one final grave awaited us.

Unlike the other three, this one was smaller. It wasn’t as well-kept as the others. And even though a layer of dirt covered its surface, the name on it was still visible.

Svetlana Artyomovna Yefimov.

I stood back to give Aleksey the space that he needed. He knelt down in front of it, laid down a brilliant red peony, and ran his hand across the name, mouthing words silently before he started to clean the grave. Slowly, I knelt down beside him and lent my hand to help.

Svetlana had suffered the most out of all of us, and she had paid the heaviest price of them all. The mark she'd left on my face would never fade, but I didn't want it to. She'd loved Aleksey as fiercely as I did. She'd fought to keep him as fiercely as I would have. As much as the two of us were enemies, I understood her heart. I understood her pain. The only thing I felt for her now was the hope that she was at peace.

“Sleep well, Sveta,” Aleksey finally said as he stood up, his voice trembling. “No one will ever hurt you anymore.”

The sun continued to shine as we walked out of the cemetery. My hand took Aleksey's and gave it another squeeze. In the baby carrier, little Luke was stirring awake. Slowly, his eyes fluttered open and his face split into a wide smile as he looked up at us.

Aleksey reached down and wiggled Luke's nose, drawing a gurgle of glee from our son. I leaned into his arm as the tears slowly dried on my face, losing myself in the laughter of the child we made together.

Extended Epilogue

Six Years Later

Want to see Elia and Aleksey, where they've ended up, and how they've built up their lives six years later? Check out the exclusive extended epilogue!

[CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD](#)

OTHER BOOKS BY BROOK WILDER

SUVOROV BRATVA

[DARK PROMISE](#)

[WICKED VOWS](#)

[CORRUPTED OATH](#)

BELAYA BRATVA

[CONQUERED BRIDE](#)

[BROKEN BRIDE](#)

[SINFUL BRIDE](#)

MARCHETTI MAFIA

[SAVAGE LIES](#)

[HATEFUL TRUTH](#)

[CRUEL DECEPTION](#)

D'AGOSTINO MAFIA

[BROKEN INNOCENCE](#)

[CHAINED POSSESSION](#)

[WOUNDED REDEMPTION](#)

CAVAZZO MAFIA:

[HEARTLESS PRINCE](#)

[MERCILESS KING](#)

[RUTHLESS ANGEL](#)

FALIERO MAFIA
CAGED PRINCESS
BROKEN QUEEN
SHATTERED EMPRESS

KRYLOVA BRATVA
CAPTIVE
PRISONER
POSSESSION

IVANOV BRATVA TRILOGY
TAKEN BY THE BOSS
OWNED BY THE BOSS
HELD BY THE BOSS